WESTERN BALKANS

EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM

LITERATURE REVIEW 2017 – 2018:
VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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CONTENT

1. WHY THE LITERATURE REVIEW (II)

Up until 2016, research on violent extremism in the Western Balkans was not thoroughly grounded in evidence-based research. It especially lacked rigor and comprehensive analyses of case studies for the entire region. This essentially gave birth to British Council's Extremism Research Forum (ERF)[1], which aimed at identifying and addressing research gaps on violent extremism for the entire region. In early 2017, through its ERF project, the British Council published its first literature review[2] on the topic of violent extremism in the Western Balkans.[3] The aim of the Literature Review (I) was to take stock of research findings on violent extremism that were published up until late 2016 / early 2017. The ERF Literature Review (I) noted that "first-hand research from the Western Balkans [was] scarce, especially within the radicalized communities".[4] It was also noted that knowledge about the topic of violent extremism until then was mostly based on non-empirical policy papers, opinion pieces, news articles, and some critical analyses. Thus, primary research was needed to build an evidence base as a first step to inform policy makers and other stakeholders on the drivers of violent extremism, in order to develop appropriate CVE policies.

Several aspects stand out from Literature Review (I) that are worth noting. First, until the end of 2016, research has been predominantly focused on very few case studies, notably on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, and to some extent Albania. As such, there was a significant gap in having a region-wide knowledge on violent extremism, and by implication, the possible transcendency of violent extremism across traditional lines of state borders. This brought with it another problem; as regional actors were attempting to boost cooperation to prevent and fight violent extremism, a regional comparative knowledge base was lacking among various stakeholders. Common (effective) solutions were impossible to build without this knowledge base.

Second, the limited research that existed was predominantly focused on the numbers of violent extremist individuals and the rankings of Western Balkans countries based on which of the countries comes first or last in housing violent extremists.[5] This approach often brought some hastened conclusions on the more substantive issues, such as the drivers of violent extremism and the realistic threats that it may pose to the region or even wider.

Third, among the limited more in-depth case studies that were produced until then, we had only some generalized views on the drivers behind the emergence of foreign fighter phenomenon,

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[1] Funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)

[2] Hereafter referred to as Literature Review (I)

[3] See: Edina Bećirević, Majda Halilović, and Vlado Azinović, "Literature Review: Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," Policy Report, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, 2017), https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_literature_review_2017_radicalisation_and_violent_extremism.pdf.

[4] Bećirević, Halilović, and Azinović, 5.

[5] Shpend Kursani, "Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," Policy Report, Occasional Paper (Prishtina, Kosovo: Kosovar Center for Security Studies, April 2015), http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report_inquiring_into_the_causes_and_consequences_of_Kosovo_citizens'_involvement_as_forei gn_fighters_in_Syria_and_Iraq_307708.pdf; Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, "The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent," Policy Report (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Atlantic Initiative, 2016), http://www.atlanticinitiative.org/images/The_New_Lure_of_the_Syrian_War__The_Foreign_Fighters_Bosnian_Contingent.pdf; Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, "The Lure o the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters'Bosnian Contigent," Policy Report (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Atlantic Initiative, 2015), http://atlanticinitiative.org/images/THE_LURE_OF_THE_SYRIAN_WAR_THE_FOREIGN_FIGHTERS_BOSNIAN_CONTINGENT/The_Lure_of_th e_Syrian_War_-_The_Foreign_Fighters_Bosnian_Contingent.pdf.

and violent extremism in general.[6] The main focus during the period, which the Literature Review (I) covered, has been on identifying the extent of the problem of foreign fighter phenomenon, i.e. the numbers of those engaged in conflict, and the push and pull factors behind it.

Lastly, Literature Review (I) makes it evident that both policy makers' and researchers' concerns were mainly focused on Islamist radicalization, leaving other possible forms of violent extremisms in the region lost in darkness. In the meantime, the context of violent extremism has already shifted, and researchers are now concerned with other forms of extremism and are calling for a wider and more inclusive focus on the problem.

The period that followed the publication of ERF's Literature Review (I) saw a significant mushrooming of research publications in the area of violent extremism in the Western Balkans. Within a short period of only two years (from early 2017 to late 2018), there have been no less than 60 publications produced by many local and international research institutes and organizations, whose main focus has been the issue of violent extremism in the region. While there have been only a few academic publications that came out in the meantime, most of the research continued to be published in the form of policy reports, research papers, and essays.

Given the magnitude of this ensuing work, as well as the continued concerns by national and international policy makers in the Western Balkans with the problem of various forms of violent extremism in the Western Balkans, the British Council's ERF initiative aims to assess the new literature that came out in the period between early 2017 and late 2018.[7] The ERF Literature Review (II) intends to summarize and assess the updated knowledge produced by subsequent research, and to help researchers and policy makers alike in better understanding the new findings, trends, and patterns of violent extremism in the region. This review will be also of interest to the international donor community who would be interested in funding research projects on violent extremism in the Western Balkans. This review aims to also map out new avenues of research, and it does so by identifying gaps that remain in current literature, as well as some shortcomings in existing research.

The Literature Review (II) continues as follows. First, it recaps the gaps that were identified by Literature Review (I). Second, it assesses the literature that followed since the beginning of 2017 up until late 2018. This part takes stock of the gaps that the new literature has covered, and the ways in which it has done so. Third, the review continues to point at the general shifts that have taken place on violent extremism; it especially discusses the research that has expanded beyond Islamist radicalization in the meantime. Fourth, it provides some general overview on the progress that Western Balkan countries have made in their policy framework (if any), and the way policies have been implemented within the period which this review covers. Lastly, and before providing its concluding remarks, this review identifies and discusses some gaps in knowledge that may still remain. It also engages critically with current approaches and provides some recommendations on how we might move forward.

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[6] Adrian Shtuni, "Breaking Down the Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters Phenomenon," Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal 98, no. 4 (2015): 460–77; Gjergji Vurmo, Besfort Lamallari, and Aleka Papa, "Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania," Policy Report (Tirana, Albania: Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2015), http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf; Azinović and Jusić, "The Lure o the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters'Bosnian Contigent"; Kursani, "Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq"; Azinović and Jusić, "The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contigent."
[7] Hereafter referred to as Literature Review (II)

2. SUMMARY OF GAPS IDENTIFIED BY THE LITERATURE REVIEW (I)

The Literature Review (I) had identified a number of gaps that existed up until late 2016 / early 2017. Most notably, it suggested that we have very little knowledge on how the specific individual characteristics may play a role in radicalization process. This was a notable gap, as most of the studies produced until then have drawn only some general hypotheses, such as economic conditions, education quality, corruption, and other political issues on country levels, providing very little grounded individual-level knowledge in the process of radicalization.

Another issue raised in Literature Review (I) was the fact that no data existed on the ways in which online platforms could be an effective tool for radicalizing individuals. It rightly noted that there has been ample debate around the impact of internet on radicalization processes, and Literature Review (I) suggested "a systematic content and discourse analysis of Salafist videos posted [on] YouTube and social media is largely non-existent"[8]

Furthermore, one important issue that remained until late 2016 was our limited knowledge on the aspect of gender differences in the radicalization or deradicalization efforts. Most, if not all, of the studies until then were focused on violent extremism as a homogenous aspect of individuals, without taking stock of the possible differences in radicalization process between men and women. This was perhaps understandable as information with regards to gender differences on the topic of violent extremism began to emerge only later. Nonetheless, the Literature Review (I) suggested that little was known on how women participate in extremist movements in the Western Balkans, or the motivations behind their participation; a puzzling question was posed, on why women in the region adhere to more conservative and/or violent forms of Salafist interpretation of religion.

The issue of Salafism has been haunting many researchers and policy makers in the region – and it can safely be said that it continues to do so to this day. While there is plenty of detailed analyses on the issue of Salafism in the western academic and non-academic literature, very little knowledge existed on Salafism in the Western Balkans until late 2016. Notable exceptions include some books that homogenously and problematically discuss Salafism in the Balkans from a security lens, raising (often amplified) alarm bells with regards to its role in radicalization and violent extremism.[9] Nonetheless, the Literature Review (I) was right to note that very limited knowledge continued to exist on the role that Salafism may have played in the rise of foreign fighter phenomenon, and to violent extremist thoughts in general.

Another gap in knowledge that existed, as the Literature Review (I) was being written, is the role that the returned foreign fighters serving prison sentences may play in influencing other inmates in prisons. This SHOULD not have been a surprise, as the previous review was being written during

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[8] Bećirević, Halilović, and Azinović, "Literature Review: Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," 27.
[9] See: Christopher Deliso, The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), http://ebooks.abc-clio.com/?isbn=9780275995263; John R Schindler, Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qa'ida, and the Rise of Global Jihad (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007); Shaul Shay, Islamic Terror and the Balkans (Herzliya, Israel; New Brunswick, NJ: Interdisciplinary Center : International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism ; Transaction Publishers, 2007).

the period when law enforcement agencies in the region were continuing to prosecute individuals charged for their involvement in terrorist organizations and other aspects of violent extremism. The Literature Review (I) rightly suggested that "[a]cross the region, there also seems to be little to no information on the impact of prisons on the spread of violent extremism".[10] Therefore, the previous review advised that analyzing "not only whether returned fighters maintain their earlier levels of radicalization, but whether they attempt to radicalize other prisoners [...] will be important as more fighters return to face prosecution".[11]

One important note that the Literature Review (I) made on our knowledge gap about violent extremism that certainly deserved extensive research is the role of Diaspora of different communities in the Western Balkans. Not only could the Diaspora be a potential source of funding for violent extremists' wellbeing or attempts to travel abroad to take up arms in a foreign war, but it can also be a source of ideological connection.[12] In the context of Western Balkans, the role of Diaspora in violent extremism processes is a credible concern for two reasons. First, all the Western Balkans countries have large Diasporas abroad, situated mainly in Western countries, and in Europe in particular[13]. Second, living as minorities abroad means that they live "outside their original identity corpus" and can easily blame the majority communities abroad for "imagined injustices".[14] In 2005, Bougarel claimed that in contrast to other Muslim populations present in Western Europe, "the political mobilization of Balkan Muslims [in Europe] has been marked by the crystallisation of distinct national identities and nationalist projects".[15] Yet, just like some Muslims in their respective kin states in the region, the Western Balkans Muslim Diasporas have also engaged in recent conflicts in the Middle East.[16]

Lastly, the Literature Review (I) asked some important questions, such as: what strategies are effective for radicalization prevention efforts in the Western Balkans? What roles could different professionals play in preventing radicalization? These questions were important, as it has been rightly noted in the Review (I) that de-radicalization programs were discussed only in futuristic terms. This has been indicated in the context when at the time the problem of violent extremism prevention was almost entirely subject to repressive measures and criminalization.

We now turn to the next section and assess what the ensuing publications have covered; the extent to, and the ways in which the above gaps have been addressed; and lastly turning to the contribution of ERF's own reports on violent extremism in the Western Balkans.

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[10] Bećirević, Halilović, and Azinović, "Literature Review: Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," 29.
[11] Bećirević, Halilović, and Azinović, 29.
[12] See more discussion on: Bećirević, Halilović, and Azinović, 29.
[13] Abdulmenaf Sejdini, "Brain Circulation and the Role of Diasporas in the Balkans – Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia" (Tetovo: Regional Research Promotion Programme: Western Balkans, 2013).
[14] Bećirević, Halilović, and Azinović, 29.
[15] Xavier Bougarel, "Balkan Muslim Diasporas and the Idea of a "European Islam"," in Balkan currents: essays in honour of Kjell Magnusson, ed. Tomislav Dulić (Uppsala: Centre for Multietnic Research, Uppsala University, 2005).
[16] Daniel Glaus and Lorenzo Vidino, "Swiss Foreign Fighters Active in Syria" (CTC Sentinel, July 30, 2014), https://ctc.usma.edu/swiss-foreign-fighters-active-in-syria/; Ebi Spahiu, "Militant Islamists, Organized Crime and the Balkan Diaspora in Europe," Policy Brief, Terrorism Monitor (Washington DC: The Jamestown Foundation, December 2, 2015).

3. GAPS COVERED BY THE ENSUING LITERATURE

The research projects and publications that were made in the period following Literature Review (I) have made progress in tackling some of the earlier discussed gaps, as well as some new areas which broadens our knowledge about the problem of violent extremism in the Western Balkans. Not all of the previously identified gaps have been covered sufficiently, and there is still significant room to scratch the surface of some hypotheses or initial indications provided by the new research produced after 2016. Before we continue, it should be stated that all the post-2016 research on violent extremism in the Balkans took place in a rapidly changing context, where the pace of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans travelling to Syria and/or Iraq slowed down and the numbers of those travelling to Syria eventually came close to zero.[17] The decline in foreign fighter traffic to Syria/Iraq is generally attributed to the following factors: (a) the efforts to criminally prosecute aspiring fighters and returnees; (b) an escalation of fighting in the conflict zones; and (c) the shrinking number of the enthusiasts from the region willing to participate in the conflict.[18] To a great extent, this reflects also the findings of, and conclusions from, the research conducted as part of the ERF, which is discussed in latter sections.[19] The main areas which the new literature focuses on mostly include the issue of returnees and the associated threats, and it continued to be focused on the drivers of violent extremism.

3.1.   DRIVING FACTORS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Research on the drivers of violent extremism continued throughout the period which this literature review covers, and there continues to be a general agreement among researchers that there is no single overarching factor that can explain the phenomenon.[20] This means that a complex interaction of several conditions, and possibly, various pathways may explain the emergence of the foreign fighter phenomenon. When analyzing drivers of violent extremism, many studies on the Western Balkans often seem to not be in dialogue with each other. There are often repetitive claims that are advanced, and they are not used sufficiently to build cumulative knowledge from one another. Despite these shortcomings, there still are some findings that can lead to a better understanding of the emergence of the phenomenon in the Western Balkans.

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[17] Vlado Azinović, "Western Balkans Report," Policy Report, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, June 2018), https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_report_western_balkans_2018.pdf; Shpend Kursani, "Kosovo Report," Policy Report, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, April 2018), https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/erf_report_kosovo_2018.pdf.

[18] Vlado Azinović and Edina Bećirević, "A Waiting Game: Assessing and Responding to the Threat from Returning Foreign Fighters in the Western Balkans" (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Regional Cooperation Council, November 2017), https://www.rcc.int/pubs/54/a-waiting-game-assessing-and-responding-to-the-threat-from-returning-foreign-fighters-in-the-western-balkans; Mentor Vrajolli, "Solving Foreign Fighters Problem in Kosovo," Edited report, Returning from Violence: How to Tackle the Foreign Fighters' Problem in the Western Balkans? (Budapest, Hungary: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018), http://europeum.org/en/articles/detail/2208/returning-from-violence-how-to-tackle-the-foreign-fighters-problem-in-the-western-balkans; Redion Qirjazi, "Albania," Edited report, Returning from Violence: How to Tackle the Foreign Fighters' Problem in the Western Balkans? (Budapest, Hungary: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018), http://europeum.org/en/articles/detail/2208/returning-from-violence-how-to-tackle-the-foreign-fighters-problem-in-the-western-balkans.

[19] Azinović, "Western Balkans Report."

[20] Jelena Beslin and Marija Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies," Brief (European Union Institute for Security Studies, June 16, 2017), https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/balkan-foreign-fighters-syria-ukraine; Samet Shabani and Amir Kadri, "Working Towards Resilient Communities" (Skopje, Macedonia: Analytica Thinking Laboratory, 2018); Ana Orosz, "Returning from Violence: How to Tackle the Foreign Fighters' Problem in the Western Balkans?," Edited report (Budapest, Hungary: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018), http://europeum.org/en/articles/detail/2208/returning-from-violence-how-to-tackle-the-foreign-fighters-problem-in-the-western-balkans; Azinović, "Western Balkans Report"; Gerta Zaimi, "Religious Radicalization and Violent Islamist Extremism in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo," Selected Papers: Terrorism Experts Conference (Centre of Excellence: Defence Against Terrorism, February 2017).

Some researchers direct their argument about drivers of violent extremism more towards the general societal structure, such as the state of economy, poverty, unemployment, weak/fragile state building process, and political vulnerabilities. Beslin and Ignjatijevic suggest that a certain socio-economic patter or a mix of push factors can be identified.[21] Some of those include the **internal fragilities** inside the states of the region, coupled with the **jihadi propaganda** emanating from the Middle East in the fashion of individuals being empathetic towards the idea of "Muslim brothers" in the conflict zones.[22] These assertions also echo some of the ERF findings on Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Bećirević suggests that the state which is burdened with **internal fragilities**, coupled with other structural aspects such as the **presence of radical ideologies** and persistent **socio-economic problems**, exacerbate the potential of young individuals to radicalize.[23]

Zaimi also claims that it would be difficult to have a single overarching explanation about the emergence of violent extremism in the region.[24] Her study focused on the Albanian speaking areas in the Western Balkans and argues that areas most vulnerable to violent extremism are those in which **states have limited penetration**; where investment in **education remains weak**, **unemployment among young people high**, and **corruption almost endemic**.[25] In their most recent study on Albania, Vurmo and Sulstarova also offer a structural explanation to violent extremism, emphasizing the socio-economic, political, and cultural drivers.[26] They argue that these factors contribute to making specific groups more vulnerable to manipulation by **extremist ideologies**. Some of the political factors they mention include the political system which is controlled by well-connected elites fueling **pervasive disenfranchisement** among Albanians, regardless of their religiosity. Some of the economic factors that feeds into the problem of violent extremism include, **unemployment** – especially among **poorly educated** men, living in rural areas.[27] This is interesting, because some of these findings in the Albanian speaking areas of the Western Balkans resonate with Vurmo's findings as part of the ERF report on Albania. Vurmo highlights the fact that:

> „The combination of extremist religious ideology with other factors such as poor presence of the state, exclusion or perception of discrimination may create an enabling environment even beyond the "usual hotspots" reported by the media".[28]

There are those that problematize the general structural problems as an explanation. For example, in their study of violent extremism in Macedonia, Shabani and Kadri rank poverty and lack of education as a "myth" in explaining violent extremism, and that such an explanation is "not only incorrect but also might lead to inappropriate responses to the phenomenon of violent extremism". [29] While not completely dispelling the role of education in explaining violent extremism, they argue that more than the level of education, we ought to examine how

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[21] Beslin and Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies."

[22] Beslin and Ignjatijevic.

[23] Edina Bećirević, "Bosnia and Herzegovina Report," Policy Report, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, April 2018), https://www.britishcouncil.ba/sites/default/files/erf_bih_report.pdf.

[24] Zaimi, "Religious Radicalization and Violent Islamist Extremism in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo," n.p.

[25] Zaimi, n.p.

[26] Gjergji Vurmo and Enis Sulstarova, "Violent Extremism in Albania: A National Assessment of Drivers, Forms and Threats" (Tirana, Albania: Institute for Democracy and Mediation, October 2018), http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Study_Violent-Extremism-in-Albania-2018-_-web.pdf.

[27] Vurmo and Sulstarova.

[28] Gjergji Vurmo, "Albania Report," Policy Report, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, April 2018), 4, https://www.britishcouncil.al/sites/default/files/erf20albania20report202018.pdf.

[29] Shabani and Kadri, "Working Towards Resilient Communities," 8.

educational institutions engage with younger communities at schools and the kind of extra-curricular activities young people deal with. Shabani and Kadri conclude that:

> „Lack of school involvement in providing youth engagement through extra-curriculum activities, insufficient capacities and low interest in local NGOs let the violent extremist groups be active in this regard. Thus, building capacities for local high school to organize such activities is critical for creating preventive mechanisms in the community".[30]

This assertion stands, at least partly, in contrast to Stojkovski's and Kalajdziovski's ERF research on Macedonia, which suggests that education quality matters a great deal as one of the drivers of violent extremism.[31] Nonetheless, it should be noted that Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski speak more about the quality of education, especially the provision of equal access for different communities, and not necessarily, or only, about the level of educational attainment.[32] Shabani's and Kadri's problematization of the general structural explanation resonates more with Kursani's recent study on Kosovo as part of ERF.[33] By examining national and municipal level data on education and economic indicators, as well as through field observation, he suggests that the general structural explanations such as educational attainment or economic conditions of the country or of a particular municipality in Kosovo cannot directly explain violent extremism. This is because of the sheer low number of violent extremists in proportion to the total population of the country or a specific municipality, making the generalizations not entirely credible.

There are others who focus their explanation more on the individual or close community level of violent extremists. **Identity problems** and the associated **social alienation** at individual level seems to take a significant space as an explanation among some researchers. Petrović and Qehaja suggest that drivers of fragility in the region which may facilitate violent extremism include: **personal**, **societal**, and **religious factors**.[34] They claim that they are all equally important, but hint at violent extremists **societal alienation** as a prominent problem.[35] Sonja Stojanović-Gajić argues that among the several societal groups that are particularly at risk of radicalization are the young people, mainly in their twenties and thirties who attempt to prove themselves in search for their **identity**.[36] She suggests that these individuals are **relatively poor and deprived** who come out to turn into a "Salafi" overnight.[37]

Identity stands as a prominent issue also in Stojanović-Gajić's study. She further claims that individuals most vulnerable to violent extremism are those that are exposed or live in areas where identities are in in flux, and where societal surrounding are more heterogenous. Some examples include the Roma community in the Snadzak region of Montenegro and Serbia. This echoes also Qehaja's and Perteshi's research in Macedonia, which suggests that young Muslims living in Skopje are more vulnerable to embrace violent extremist ideas than those living the city of Tetovo in Macedonia for example.[38] The inter-ethnic character of Skopje seems to not be an

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[30] Shabani and Kadri, 50.

[31] Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, "Macedonia Report," Policy Report, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, April 2018), https://www.britishcouncil.mk/sites/default/files/erf_macedonia_report_2018.pdf.

[32] Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski.

[33] Kursani, "Kosovo Report."

[34] Predrag Petrović and Florian Qehaja, "Violent Extremism: Beyond Foreign Fighters and behind Numbers," Resilience in the Western Balkans (European Union Institute for Security Studies, August 2017), https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/resilience-western-balkans.

[35] Petrović and Qehaja.

[36] Sonja Stojanović-Gajić, "Security Issues in the Western Balkans," Civil Society Forum Series (Western Balkans Summit, April 2018), 4, http://wb-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/CSF-PB-05-Security-Issues-in-the-Western-Balkans-1.pdf.

[37] Stojanović-Gajić, 4.

[38] Stojanović-Gajić, 4.

issue per se; rather it is how **identity politics** is played by the political elite, which often exacerbates **inter-ethnic tensions** that can often make young people be alienated with the established societal structures.[39] The problems of identity, belonging, and alienation among young people stand prominently as one of the major factors driving young people towards embracing more violent and radical narratives in all of ERF reports. This is discussed further in a separate section on ERF.

Another important indication that gives fuel to individuals to join extremist organizations is their **close family/relative bonds**. Trust appears to be very important for individuals when they decide to either join an extremist group at home or participate in conflicts abroad. This has, to the knowledge of the author, first been hypothesized as a potential diver in UNDP's report on Kosovo.[40] It has been indicated that close bonds may have played a role in, at least, increasing the numbers of those who have joined conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The field work conducted in Kosovo as part of the ERF research efforts, has noticed trends that confirm such a hypothesis, and took the issue further. Thus, the documentary research conducted on Kosovo as part of the ERF project, confirmed these claims.[41] In fact, the ERF report on Kosovo shows that more than 70 percent of those who have joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq belong to those having very close family/relative connections.[42] Either trust among such close circles, i.e. when (usually younger) siblings join violent extremist groups together, or other family circumstances, such as pulling children and spouses into the conflict, does significantly increase the numbers of those that travel to conflict zones. Albeit not all members of a single family participate as active combatants in conflict, which usually include women and children.[43]

Another recurring, yet unsurprising, argument that is found in more recent literature, is the externally driven "re-Islamization" of the region in post-1990s conflicts, where more conservative and radical forms of Islam (Salafism/Wahhabism) were introduced. The **"re-Islamization"** argument seems to follow a linear pattern of explanation, whereby an individual "re-Islamizes", meaning s/he does not follow the traditional practices of religious non-practice; engages in a more conservative doctrine; and by derivation becomes vulnerable to radicalization. For example, Speckhard and Shajkovci argue that **Gulf funded organizations** operating in BiH, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania were involved in "re-Islamization" of the respective societies, mainly by funding and supporting education of local population in the Gulf countries, who then returned back home as more conservative or radical.[44] The same argument features in almost all the studies that followed in the Western Balkans.[45]

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[39] Stojanović-Gajić, 4.

[40] Behar Xharra and Nita Gojani, "Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo: Primary Interviews with Returned Foreign Fighters and Their Families," Independent Commissioned Report (Prishtina, Kosovo: United Nations Development Programme, November 2017).

[41] Kursani, "Kosovo Report."

[42] For more see: Kursani.

[43] Kursani.

[44] Anne Speckhard and Ardian Shajkovci, "The Balkan Jihad: Recruitment to Violent Extremism and Issues Facing Returning Foreign Fighters in Kosovo and Southern Serbia," Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal 101, no. 2 (2018): 79–109.

[45] Nóra Pákozdi and Nógrádi György, "Radical Settlements in the Balkan," Defence Review 2017/1 (Budapest, Hungary: Hungarian Defence Forces, August 2017), https://honvedelem.hu/kiadvany/64874; Petrović and Qehaja, "Violent Extremism: Beyond Foreign Fighters and behind Numbers"; Florian Qehaja and Skender Perteshi, "The Unexplored Nexus: Issues of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Macedonia - Reports" (Prishtina, Kosovo: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, March 13, 2018), http://www.qkss.org/en/Reports/The-unexplored-nexus-Issues-of-radicalisation-and-violent-extremism-in-Macedonia-1070; The more recent ones include: Vrajolli, "Returning from Violence"; Qirjazi, "Returning from Violence"; Stefanija Agrotova and Stojan Slaveski, "Dealing with Foreign Fighters – Returnees The Case Republic of Macedonia," Edited report, Returning from Violence: How to Tackle the Foreign Fighters' Problem in the Western Balkans? (Budapest, Hungary: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018), http://europeum.org/en/articles/detail/2208/returning-from-violence-how-to-tackle-the-foreign-fighters-problem-in-the-western-balkans.

While there is some merit to the argument, it should be recognized that these arguments are often supported by anecdotal evidences or dubious media reporting. This is often for good reason; accessing Gulf funded NGOs for interviews, or more conservative/orthodox believers often proves to be difficult. Be as it may, readers should remain careful when skimming through the "re-Islamization" argument to explain the emergence of foreign fighters or engagement in violence in general. The literature is also marred by many sweeping statements in this regard. For example, in the case of Albania, Qirjazi perhaps correctly notes that Albania's Islamic Community (AMC) has transitioned its mission from "love for the motherland" to "strengthen[ing] the Islamic faith among Muslim believers".[46] However, he then goes as far as directly linking the AMC's discursive transition, with the increase of the number of violent extremists who turned into foreign fighters.[47] Furthermore, some other claims that should be read with caution in literature are those that insist that Albania's hastened membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1992 opened the way to many foreign donors from the Gulf to invest materially and ideologically, which allegedly helped in spreading the Salafi/Wahhabi ideology.[48] Again, such causal claims between OIC membership on the one hand, and the spread of conservative or violent ideologies on the other is problematic. This is because, for instance, Kosovo has never been a member of OIC, yet similar ideologies are as present in Kosovo as in other Muslim majority countries of the region.

While sociological and anthropological literature on the heterogeneity of Islam in the Western Balkans is rich,[49] there has been a significant gap in exploring also the **heterogeneity of the very Salafi thoughts in the region**. Until recently, the majority of studies have viewed the conservative and/or radical Salafi thought homogenously, hence leading to many sweeping claims from anecdotal evidences by researchers. More recently, Kursani has investigated the manifestation of Salafi thought among Albanians in the Balkans; while recognizing that Salafis are quite heterogenous, he divides them into two prominent groups, namely the **"mainstream" Salafis** and the **"rejectionist" Salafis**.[50] He also suggests that the "rejectionist" Salafis who are the ones to also propagate violence has been embraced by a very small group of individuals compared to the embrace for the "mainstream" Salafis, who hold conservative non- and often anti-violent views on religious practice.

In the case of Bosnia, Babić also urges caution. While he discusses various forms in which Salafism has manifested in Bosnia, he notes that controversy arises when and which forms of Salafi thought result in exclusiveness, militantism, and radicalism in BiH.[51] Therefore, what remains unexplored is the nexus between Salafism and violence, and the conditions under which Salafism *may* lead to violence, as the new evidence suggests that this nexus may not be as linear

[46] Qirjazi, "Returning from Violence," 46.

[47] Qirjazi, "Returning from Violence."

[48] Qirjazi.

[49] For some reference see: Xavier Bougarel, "Islam and Politics in Post-Communist Balkans, 1990-2000," in New Approaches to Balkan Studies, ed. Dimitris Keridis, Ellen Elias-Bursac, and Nicholas Yatromanolakis (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2003), 345–61; Xavier Bougarel, "Bosnian Islam as 'European Islam': Limits and Shifts of a Concept," in Islam in Europe: Diversity, Identity and Influence, ed. Azīz Al-Aẓmah and Effie Fokas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ina Merdjanova, Rediscovering the Umma Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3055310; Cecilie Endersen, "Faith, Fatherland or Both? Accommodationist and Neo-Fundamentalist Islamic Discourses in Albania," in The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity, ed. Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 222–41; Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy, eds., The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); Isa Blumi and Gëzim Krasniqi, "Albanians' Islam(S)," in The Oxford Handbook of European Islam, ed. Jocelyne Cesari (Oxford University Press, 2015), 475–516.

[50] Shpend Kursani, "Salafi Pluralism in National Contexts: The Secular State, Nation and Militant Islamism in Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia," Southeast European and Black Sea Studies 18, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 301–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2018.1474548.

[51] Marko Babić, "Salafism in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (European Institute of the Mediteranean, April 25, 2017), 2, http://www.iemed.org/actualitat-en/noticies/el-salafisme-a-bosnia-i-hercegovina.

as the general literature proposes. In her ERF report on BiH, Bećirević maintains a similar stance, arguing that Salafism per se, does not necessarily lead to violence, but one ought to investigate the conditions under which it may be the case.[52] Some of the conditions she suggests include more structural aspects, such as the overall state fragility, state (i)legitimation, societal deprivation and some kind of identity crisis among young individuals.[53]

3.2. RETURNEES AND ASSOCIATED THREATS

Despite that the number of those travelling to participate in conflicts in Syria and Iraq significantly dropped, the issue of foreign fighter returnees became a significant concern both, for policy makers and for researchers. To this end, there have been a significant amount of assessments carried out with regards to the issue of returnees and the possible associated threats with them. The number of Western Balkans originating travelers to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq is estimated to be at around 1,000.[54] Of these, around 30 percent have already returned, and the percentage of those that returned is (more or less) proportionally distributed among all the Western Balkans countries.[55]

There is a near consensus among researchers, including the ERF reports on the Western Balkans,[56] that the often-media-induced alarming statements made about the possible threats emanating from the returnees is significantly exaggerated.[57] Azinović and Bećirević claim that:

> „Contrary to widespread expectations and a number of alarming predictions advanced by some political elites and media outlets, Western Balkans is unlikely to experience a massive influx of returning foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq. The flow of citizens from this region to these countries slowed in 2015, and almost completely stopped by early 2016." [58]

A number of other researchers offer similar assessments. Metodieva's recent extensive work on the returnees suggests that although some risks may exist, the returnees have not contributed to the threat of terrorism locally in the Western Balkans home countries.[59] She suggests three criteria to keep in mind. One is that the returnees vary significantly in their motivations when they travelled to Syria. The other is that they also come back for different reasons, indicating a high level of heterogeneity in foreign fighters' reasons to come back[60] Lastly, Metodieva suggests that one needs to take into account the gender differences of the returnees, whereby

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[52] Bećirević, "Bosnia and Herzegovina Report."
[53] Bećirević.
[54] Beslin and Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies"; Azinović and Bećirević, "Regional Cooperation Council | A Waiting Game."
[55] Petrović and Qehaja, "Violent Extremism: Beyond Foreign Fighters and behind Numbers"; Azinović and Bećirević, "Regional Cooperation Council | A Waiting Game."
[56] With slight exception of the report on Macedonia
[57] For a critical analysis on media coverage in Kosovo, see: Rita Augestad Knudsen, "Radicalization and Foreign Fighters in the Kosovo Context: An Analysis of International Media Coverage of the Phenomena," Working Paper (Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2017), /en/Publications/CRIStin-Pub/Radicalization-and-foreign-fighters-in-the-Kosovo-context-An-analysis-of-international-media-coverage-of-the-phenomena; Some critical notes on how the media covered the issue are also made in: Beslin and Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies"; Azinović and Bećirević, "Regional Cooperation Council | A Waiting Game."
[58] Azinović and Bećirević, "Regional Cooperation Council | A Waiting Game," 21.
[59] Asya Metodieva, "Balkan Foreign Fighters Are Coming Back: What Should Be Done?," Policy Paper (Bratislava, Slovakia: Stratpol, February 10, 2018), http://stratpol.sk/balkan-foreign-fighters-are-coming-back-what-should-be-done/.
[60] This resonates with Kursani's earlier claims back in 2015, in: Kursani, "Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq."

not all the returnees should be viewed as combatants or ready and capable to carry out any attacks.[61]

The issue of foreign fighter returnees is observed in similar light by other researchers in the Western Balkans featuring in Orosz's edited series that deals quite specifically with the question of how to deal with those returning from violence.[62] In the case of Kosovo, Vrajolli claims that there are no more than 40 to 60 adult males from Kosovo that remain in conflict zones, some of whom have already been captured by Iraqi, Syrian, Kurdish, or Turkish forces.[63] The prospects of these individuals returning back home, according to him, are "highly unlikely".[64] This also resonates with Xharra's and Gojani's report on Kosovo foreign fighters, where they suggest that a significant number of those that remain there are the trapped women and children in the conflict zones – whose numbers appear to be more than double of the combatants in the conflict zone.[65] In the case of Albania, Qirjazi also indicates that those who have returned to Albania are mostly non-combatants who have been in conflict zones only for 2-3 months before deciding to return, claiming that their potential to cause trouble is not meaningful.[66] Consequently, he asserts that there needs to be a distinction between "returnees" and "foreign fighter returnees", suggesting that the number of the latter is zero.[67]

Kursani arrives to similar conclusions with his database on threats gathered in the past ten years.[68] His historical analysis of threats suggests that Kosovo is more vulnerable against politically motivated threats than from religiously motivated ones. Even within the spectrum of religiously motivated threats that have been low overall, the majority came from those that never joined conflicts in Syria or Iraq.[69] Beslin and Ignjatijevic have, in similar tone, acknowledged that the threat from:

> „Terrorist attacks planned or inspired by Daesh in the Western Balkans should be neither exaggerated nor underestimated. Organised and coordinated attacks on 'soft targets' with a high number of civilian casualties, such as those perpetrated in Paris and Brussels, are unlikely to be carried out in the region. However, there is always a possibility of selective, small-scale attacks on state symbols such as the police, armed forces or religious institutions. […] International targets might also be at risk".[70]

In summary, while a relevant threat, it is widely acknowledged that chances for any major threat to the public from violent extremism in the Western Balkans remain relatively low. This is acknowledged and valid also for cases of foreign fighters (from both, Middle East and Ukraine) that have returned back to their home countries in the Western Balkans. ERF reports have inquired more specifically into this issue, and the summary of its findings are discussed in a separate section below.

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[61] Metodieva, "Balkan Foreign Fighters Are Coming Back: What Should Be Done?"
[62] Orosz, "Returning from Violence."
[63] Vrajolli, "Returning from Violence."
[64] Vrajolli, 68.
[65] Xharra and Gojani, "Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo: Primary Interviews with Returned Foreign Fighters and Their Families."
[66] Qirjazi, "Returning from Violence."
[67] Qirjazi, 48.
[68] Shpend Kursani, "Kosovo Risk Assessment Report Since Independence: February 2008 - June 2017" (Prishtina, Kosovo: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, November 2017), http://www.qkss.org/en/Reports/Kosovo-Risk-Assessment-Report-since-independence-February-2008-June-2017-1012.
[69] Kursani.
[70] Beslin and Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies," 4.

Before turning to the assessment of the ERF reports on the six country cases of the Western Balkans, it should be added that there have been a number of surveys conducted in the region which covered the issue of violent extremism. We do not discuss the findings of these surveys, but in an attempt to make them easily available to the readers we list them as an annex to this document. The reason why we do not immerse into discussing or synthesizing them is three-fold. First, these surveys were conducted not only separately in some of the countries of the Western Balkans, but they also use different methods of sampling and overall survey designs. Second, and as a result, the types of questions that are asked are highly diverse, as well as the type of answers that are acquired, i.e. some use different quantitative scales and measurements. Third, and finally, discussing such diverse reports would risk misinterpreting the interpretation of the said survey reports, thus we leave it to the interested reader to check them separately and directly from the source.

3.3.   CONTRIBUTIONS BY ERF REPORTS

British Council's ERF has conducted one of the first region-wide field research analysis on violent extremism in the Western Balkans exploring the problem along the following five main themes: (1) forms and threats of violent extremism; (2) drivers and factors of violent extremism; (3) at risk communities; (4) links to organized crime; and (5) transnational cooperation. All these themes have been considered by researchers who have worked on the six Western Balkans cases, namely: Albania; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Kosovo; Macedonia; Montenegro; and Serbia. Methodologically, country-based research with region-wide focus, has conducted more than 380 participant interviews and focus groups with former foreign fighters, religious communities, state actors, and other relevant actors – providing for a grounded research in each of the Western Balkans countries.

Forms and threats

No region-wide comprehensive and comparative analysis of existing forms and threats of violent extremism in the region has been undertaken before. All ERF reports attempt to cover this gap by offering country-focused analysis of forms and threats of violent extremism. In this regard, authors of ERF reports reach a near consensus in suggesting that while relevant, the existing threats of religious violent extremism in the Western Balkans remain isolated. The reports on Kosovo and Albania conclude that chances for religiously motivated terrorist attacks in these countries remain low.[71] The reports on Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia acknowledge that the religiously motivated threats are lower than is insinuated in the media.[72] However, both draw the attention to ethnically motivated threats (more prominent in BiH), and the rise of far-right nationalist extremism (more prominent in Serbia). The only exception to these quite watered-down claims in terms of threats in the Western Balkans is the report on Macedonia, which found the threats stemming from violent extremism in the country to continue to be high.[73] It should be emphasized that in their attempt to consider and analyze the nature and forms of threats rather comprehensively, all the ERF reports reach their conclusions by considering such problems as the foreign fighter returnees, those with the possibility yet to return, those that are already incarcerated, as well as those engaged in other, non-religious, forms of violent extremisms. Thus,

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[71] Vurmo, "Albania Report"; Kursani, "Kosovo Report."

[72] Bećirević, "Bosnia and Herzegovina Report"; Petrović Predrag and Stakić Isidora, "Serbia Report," Policy Report, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, April 2018), https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_report_serbia_2018.pdf.

[73] Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, "Macedonia Report."

while policymakers and researchers alike need to continue paying attention to religiously motivated threats, the findings of ERF reports would suggest that consideration and closer attention must also be paid to other emerging threats in the region, which may be more pertinent to immediate security considerations.

Drivers and factors of violent extremism

All ERF country reports are in agreement that there is no single dominant factor that drives individuals to embrace violent extremist ideologies or take violent extremist actions. This conclusion is also reached with regards to the profiles of violent extremists; they seem to hold more diverse backgrounds that one would expect. Despite pointing at different drivers and factors, viewed holistically, the reports manage to bring to light some common aspects with regards to drivers of violent extremism in the region.

When opining about the roots of radicalization, Shiraz Maher once wrote: "it's identity, stupid".[74] The problem of identity and young individuals' plight for belonging feature in all ERF reports as one important factor, which in conjunction with other factors, drive individuals to group around more radical circles. In his report on Albania, Vurmo indicates that some young people attach to more extremist alternatives, because this allows them to "gain respect" and develop "provoking identities" in the eyes of their peers.[75] While not the single factor, young individuals' plight for external validation, recognition, and belonging features as one of the key factors in Bećirević's and Kursani's findings on BiH and Kosovo respectively.[76] Kursani even suggests that some of the young people who have taken steps to fight in Syria and Iraq, are likely to have had a radical mindset prior to joining violent extremist groups that facilitated their travel to the conflict zones. Violent extremist narratives and actions begin to make sense only to individuals who already have a pre-radicalized mindset and use these narratives and violent groups merely as outlets to gain recognition and get some sense of belonging.[77] Some of the interlocutors in BiH also indicated that religion, including extremists' Salafi posture, is only a cover to their extremism which existed prior to even becoming religious.[78]

The issue of identity of course does not play a role in vacuum, as all the ERF reports indicate. Identity interacts with other, broader socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. How the issue of "identity vacuum" interacts, for instance, with existing political structures of some countries of the Western Balkans can be illustrated by drawing some findings from other country reports in the Western Balkans. In their report on Macedonia, Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski show how in areas where exclusion of certain ethnicities (identities) is more likely, the embrace for violent extremist ideas by the excluded (identities) is more likely.[79] This is convincingly shown by the report's findings that Albanian Muslims in ethnically and religiously more homogeneous areas, such as Tetovo, show lower instances of violent extremization, than those for instance in more heterogenous areas such as Skopje, where the social exclusion based on pre-defined identities is more predominant. This conclusion also resonates with findings of more recent research in the region.[80] It is interesting how similar claims are implied by Petrović's and Stakić's report on Serbia, where they show how the Roma community in the Sandzak area are more prone to

[74] Shiraz Maher, "The Roots of Radicalisation? It's Identity, Stupid," The Guardian, June 17, 2015, sec. Opinion, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/17/roots-radicalisation-identity-bradford-jihadist-causes.
[75] Vurmo, "Albania Report," 17.
[76] Bećirević, "Bosnia and Herzegovina Report"; Kursani, "Kosovo Report."
[77] Kursani, "Kosovo Report."
[78] Bećirević, "Bosnia and Herzegovina Report," 24.
[79] Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, "Macedonia Report."
[80] Shabani and Kadri, "Working Towards Resilient Communities"; Petrović and Qehaja, "Violent Extremism: Beyond Foreign Fighters and behind Numbers."

embracing more conservative and even more violent forms of Islam, likely due to their high propensity of being excluded from the overall Serbian society.[81]

ERF reports are rich in putting forth aspects in which the problems of identity and the presence of violent extremist ideologies become pertinent drivers. In her report on BiH, Bećirević rightly notes that factors more immediate to the individual such as (identity and ideology) help explain only why some, but not all, individuals become radicalized; however, it is when such factors interact with more macro level factors, such as political, socio-economic, and cultural factors, that may better capture drivers of violent extremism.[82] All the ERF reports discuss various such macro-level factors, such as poor state presence/penetration in some areas and state fragility and instability (as political factors); poor economic conditions; high levels of unemployment; inequality; poverty; education; and social exclusion (as socio-economic factors); and the issue of Islamphobia, as well as the urge to aid Muslims across the world (as cultural factors). All these factors, in one way or another, interact to create an environment which is conducive to violent extremism.

At risk communities

ERF reports also take an explicit effort at identifying potential communities that are most at risk of violent extremism. Each country report identifies different communities at risk, but they can be summarized as follows. The report on BiH and Montenegro take a more geographic approach when pointing at communities at risk. The report on BiH suggests that communities, and especially young people residing nearby Salafi strongholds and para*jamaats*, such as in Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Zenica are more at risk.[83] The report on Montenegro, likewise points at young people residing in the areas of Plav, Rožaje, Podgorica, Bar, and Ulcinj, to be more at risk than others.[84] The report on Kosovo also suggests that young people with specific predispositions are more at risk than others[85] and takes a geographical explanation claiming that politically more divisive areas such as Prishtina and Mitrovica pose more risks for young people, as well as areas bordering Macedonia.[86] The report on Albania points at the foreign fighter returnees and their immediate circles; incarcerated violent extremists, and at young people who are so called early-phase religious believers with no credible access to religious knowledge.[87] The report on Macedonia takes a more ethnic turn, and suggests that the younger age Albanian Muslims are more at risk than other communities,[88] while the report on Serbia suggests that young people who are relatively poor and have very little religious knowledge may be more at risk than others.[89]

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[81] Predrag and Isidora, "Serbia Report."
[82] Bećirević, "Bosnia and Herzegovina Report."
[83] Bećirević.
[84] Edina Bećirević, Šuković Tatjana, and Zuković Aner, "Montenegro Report," Policy Report, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, April 2018), https://www.britishcouncil.me/sites/default/files/erf_montenegro.pdf.
[85] Kursani, "Kosovo Report."
[86] Kursani.
[87] Vurmo, "Albania Report."
[88] Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, "Macedonia Report."
[89] Predrag and Isidora, "Serbia Report."

Links to organized crime

All the research presented in ERF country reports are in agreement that, except for a few not so relevant occasions, there was no evidence of links between organized crime and violent extremism in the region.

Transnational cooperation

The ERF Western Balkans country reports stress two important and related aspects with regards to violent extremism and transnational cooperation, which are the linguistic aspect behind transnational/trans-border cooperation and the role of Diaspora. Transnational cooperation of violent extremists in the Balkans takes place strictly on linguistics lines. The reports on Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia explain how a commonly shared linguistic space among Albanians in these three countries, also keeps the cooperation strictly along and among violent extremists around these countries of the Western Balkans.[90] The report on Serbia also supports the linguistic line of argument on transnational cooperation among violent extremists. It finds that:

> „Extremists in Serbia have their most intensive cooperation with "brothers" from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro (Plav, Rožaje). While connections with Kosovo exist, they are rare since they depend mostly on older Kosovars who speak Serbian/Bosnian".[91]

Relatedly, the linguistic aspects play another important role beyond transnational cooperation among extremists within the realm of the Western Balkans; some ERF reports discuss how the region's Diaspora plays a role in this cooperation – primarily through linguistic (not necessarily state based) links. Most notably, Bećirević notes in the case of BiH, how some networks of the Bosnian Disapora in some of the European countries, raise money for networks inside BiH through, as she notes, "European Salafi lecture circuit".[92] These lectures seem to reach Muslims who understand the Bosnian language, and not only those live in BiH necessarily.[93] The shared (similar) language in Serbia, also makes Muslims there vulnerable to such networks, as indicated by the report on Serbia.[94]

In summary, through its Western Balkans country reports, the ERF has contributed in covering some significant gaps that existed in literature. First, with its comprehensive comparative analysis of all the Western Balkans cases, it has brought to light some common aspects among the countries when attempting to understand the complex interaction of conditions that facilitate violent extremism. Second, it has analytically put forth some conclusions with regards to the forms and threats emanating from violent extremism in the Western Balkans. Third, it has touched upon the important aspect of transnational/trans-border cooperation between extremists, bringing forth the argument that extremism transcends established state borders while being mostly confined to linguistic connections of individuals in the Western Balkans, and possibly Diaspora.

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[90] Vurmo, "Albania Report"; Kursani, "Kosovo Report"; Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, "Macedonia Report."
[91] Predrag and Isidora, "Serbia Report," 30.
[92] Bećirević, "Bosnia and Herzegovina Report," 19.
[93] Bećirević, "Bosnia and Herzegovina Report."
[94] Predrag and Isidora, "Serbia Report."

3.4. THE SHIFTING FOCUS: CONTEXTUALIZING ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM VIS-À-VIS OTHER EMERGING THREATS

The main shift of focus in the emerging post-2016 literature is that we now know more about other (non-Islamic) forms of violent extremism, than we did before. There are around 150-200 foreign fighters from the Western Balkans that were/are engaged in the Ukrainian conflict mostly on the Russian separatists' side. The majority, or more than 100 individuals, from this contingent from the Western Balkans, come from Serbia.[95] There are 7 who were identified to be from BiH.[96] What is interesting to note is that some individuals from this contingent of foreign fighters seem to have also travelled to Syria, assisted by the Movement of Serbian Chetniks Ravna Gora in order to join pro-Russian paramilitary formations where they fought in the "Serbian Hussar Regiment".[97]

It is fascinating to note that, despite some differences, the overarching drivers of far-right extremism in the region seem to be very similar to those driving people into Islamic extremism and in foreign wars. Beslin and Ignjatijevic note that a unique or a single overarching factor that takes people to Syria or Ukraine is hard to pinpoint.[98] They suggest that:

> „ [T]he internal fragilities of the region coupled with jihadist propaganda emanating from the Middle East and empathy towards the oppressed 'Muslim brothers' in Syria have made Daesh's 'Caliphate' an alluring destination. Apart from the internal shortcomings that nudged Balkan mercenaries into Ukraine, the feeling of the Donbass crisis hitting close to home and the need to 'repay' Russian/Ukrainian fighters for their involvement during the Yugoslav wars also played a significant motivational role". [99]

So, in both cases, they identify the state internal fragilities, as well as the ideational aspect. While some of the Muslims in the Western Balkans were lured by the idea of helping the Islamic *ummah* in Syria, the far-right extremists felt they need to join and help their Russian/Ukrainian brothers. Kovačević takes a similar stance when attempting to explain the emergence of far-right extremist foreign fighters in Montenegro. She suggests that part of the explanation rests with the fact that many Montenegrins are orthodox Christians and Slavs who feel a "historic allegiance to Russia"[100] Zakem, et. al. also attributes the Russian influence, terrorism, and transitional organized crimes to the unaddressed issues in the Balkans such as corruption, nationalism, historical grievances, weakened state institutions, media, unemployment.[101]

Yet, another factor driving the non-Islamic foreign fighter phenomenon in the region is the media propaganda and the narratives that appear to come from Russian sources. Kovačević emphasizes that the Russian supported media sources depict militias in Ukraine as just

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[95] Beslin and Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies"; Marija Ignjatijević, "Returning from Violence: Montenegro," Edited report, Returning from Violence: How to Tackle the Foreign Fighters' Problem in the Western Balkans? (Budapest, Hungary: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018), http://europeum.org/en/articles/detail/2208/returning-from-violence-how-to-tackle-the-foreign-fighters-problem-in-the-western-balkans.

[96] Sanjin Hamidičević and Benjamin Plevljak, "Bosnia and Herzegovina," Edited report, Returning from Violence: How to Tackle the Foreign Fighters' Problem in the Western Balkans? (Budapest, Hungary: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018), http://europeum.org/en/articles/detail/2208/returning-from-violence-how-to-tackle-the-foreign-fighters-problem-in-the-western-balkans.

[97] Hamidičević and Plevljak, 57.

[98] Beslin and Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies."

[99] Beslin and Ignjatijevic, 2.

[100] Kovačević, "Returning from Violence," 92.

[101] Vera Zakem, Bill Rosenau, and Danielle Johnson, "Shining a Light on the Western Balkans: Internal Vulnerabilities and Malign Influence from Russia, Terrorism, and Transnational Organized Crime" (Center for Naval Analyses Arlington United States, May 1, 2017), http://www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/AD1035185.

formation, while using Daesh to "spread the fear from Islam and underline regional differences" among the people of the Balkans.[102] She also suggests that right-wing Serbian nationalism *may* represent a bigger security threat to Montenegro, a country that never conducted de-radicalization programs for people who participated in the 1990s Balkan wars. [103] The role of propaganda as a driver also echoes the findings of previous studies on the foreign fighters that travel to Syria from the region, which suggested that propaganda is an effective tool for radicalizing individuals or groups. Another striking similarity between the foreign fighters in Syria and those in Ukraine is their pre-departure criminal records. For both types of foreign fighters, high record of previous criminal activity is present.[104]

One important difference that remains between two types (Syria vs Ukraine) of foreign fighters emerging from the Western Balkans, is their diverse treatment by the public and by state authorities. Ignjatijević claims that foreign fighters from Serbia that travelled to fight in Ukraine have not received much negative attention in the media as did the Islamic foreign fighters, suggesting that:

> „Ukrainian foreign fighters were perceived as "regular" extremists, whereas Syrian were considered terrorists. Thus, not only they were labelled differently but were also given a different treatment from the state. Even though around 24 foreign fighters have returned to Serbia in the preceding period, no trials have been organised, namely, they all entered guilty pleas". [105]

The non-Islamic forms of extremism, namely the right-wing extremism in Serbia seems to be almost completely unacknowledged.[106] This view is also observed by Stojanović-Gajić's study on Serbia.[107] While the returnees from Syria face a robust security response, those returning from Ukraine seem to remain exempt from prosecution and receiving equal sanctions like those that return from Syria.[108] Likewise, while Montenegro seems to have prosecuted one individual who returned from the conflict zones in Ukraine,[109] the threat from such foreign fighters remains completely underestimated in the public discourse.[110]

Another difference between foreign fighters in Syria and Ukraine that this literature considers, includes the fact that the Ukrainian based foreign fighters are viewed more like mercenaries with extensive experience in battlefields. [111] Ignjatijevic claims that these foreign fighters often engage in the conflict zone through private military companies. This takes us to the next difference between the two types of foreign fighters, which Beslin and Ignjatijevic point out, which is that the individuals fighting in Ukraine get hired/recruited by private military companies (PMCs), while this is not the case with the Islamist foreign fighters.[112]

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[102] Kovačević, "Returning from Violence," 92.
[103] Kovačević, "Returning from Violence."
[104] Beslin and Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies."
[105] Ignjatijević, "Returning from Violence," 100.
[106] Beslin and Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies."
[107] Stojanović-Gajić, "Security Issues in the Western Balkans."
[108] Beslin and Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies."
[109] One returnee from Ukraine – Marko Barovic – was prosecuted and convicted for his participation in a foreign armed conflict. Barovic participated in the militia of Donetsk Peoples' Republic from March to October 2015. In April 2017 he was sentenced to 6 months of imprisonment for participation in foreign armed conflict, and to 3 years for other unrelated crimes. Taken from Kovačević, "Returning from Violence."
[110] Kovačević.
[111] Ignjatijević, "Returning from Violence."
[112] Beslin and Ignjatijevic, "Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine | European Union Institute for Security Studies."

Lastly, many authors in Perry's forthcoming edited volume shed more light on the presence of various types of violent extremism in Serbia. Dević's piece in this series addresses the radicalization of Serbian nationalist discourse and its links to various circles in Russia by examining the historical, ideological, and political contexts over the past quarter of the century.[113] Dević shows how cooperation between Russian and Serbian right-wing extremists takes place through hooligan sports fans and various neo-Nazi organizations.[114] Just like the previous studies on the issue, she also shows the different treatment that is made towards the returnees from Syria, and those from Ukraine; the former being treated as participants in terrorist activities, while the latter as participants in the conflict of a foreign state. [115] Ivanović's piece in this series examines more specifically how youth in Serbia engages with violent extremist online content.[116] She finds that although there is a low risk for youth to be receptive to the online recruitment material by far-right movements or fundamentalist Islamic movements in Serbia, there still remain some concerns that should be considered.[117] These include the carefully constructed narratives by extremist groups on political as well as other issues such as gender which can be manipulated. She also points at the issue of some sort of identity crisis, which if present among youth, may, in a combination of other factors, lead them to violent extremist activities.[118]

Wentholt's contribution into this forthcoming series is commendable.[119] She also manages to draw some important similarities between radical nationalist and radical Islamist movements in Serbia. Wentholt shows that these two groups, equally draw on region-specific historical events to support their contemporary agendas.[120] She shows how both extremist groups attempt to justify their cause by portraying one another as historical enemies in the region, fueling thus more abhorrence in order to justify and signify their separate identities. Recevic's study as part of this series also makes a significant contribution in the argument of *othering* a group in order to justify the existence of a certain radical idea of another group.[121] She specifically examines the relationship between the migrant population in Serbia and the local population in the areas most affected by the migrant community. Recevic finds that there is no strong reciprocal relationship between the migrant community and local population insofar as affecting each other's radicalization.[122] Yet, she concludes that the "potential for radicalization can easily elevate in the absence of adequate monitoring and prevention mechanisms, which now seems to be the case".[123]

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[113] Ana Dević, "The Eurasian Wings of Serbia: Serbian Affinities of the Russian Radical Right," in Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21-St Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge, ed. Valery Perry (Ibidem Press (Forthcoming), 2019).
[114] Dević.
[115] Dević.
[116] Kristina Ivanović, "The Nexus between Online Violent Extremism and Serbian Youth: How Do Serbian Youth in Novi Sad, Bor, Zaječar and Tutin Perceive Online Extremist Narratives?," in Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21-St Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge, ed. Valery Perry (Ibidem Press (Forthcoming), 2019).
[117] Ivanović.
[118] Ivanović.
[119] Niké Wentholt, "Using the Past to Extremes in Serbia: Narratives of Historical Violence in Right-Wing Extremism and Islamism," in Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21-St Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge, ed. Valery Perry (Ibidem Press (forthcoming), 2019).
[120] Wentholt.
[121] Tijana Recevic, "Violent Extremism and Radicalization in the Context of the Migrant Crisis: Evidence from Serbia," in Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21-St Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge, ed. Valery Perry (Ibidem Press (Forthcoming), 2019).
[122] Recevic.
[123] Recevic, 4.

4. PROGRESS OF THE WESTERN BALKANS COUNTRIES ACCORDING TO THE ENSUING LITERATURE

The most substantive recent summary of policies with regards to violent extremism is included in Azinović and Bećirević's assessment on how each of the Western Balkans countries have responded to violent extremism.[124] It appears that the most comprehensive measures, in terms of legislation and policy implementation, have been taken during the period prior to 2017 – a period which this literature review does not cover. It is worth saying that most of the respective national plans, new laws, updates to existing legislations, as well as punitive measure against those involved in violent extremism have been taken in 2015 and 2016.[125]

Despite this, the countries of the Western Balkans continued to implement various policies with regards to violent extremism even after 2016. For example, while Albania did not yet implement reintegration and rehabilitation programs, it did take some steps in its attempts to deal with the phenomenon.[126] In January 2017 it began a project which foresaw the introduction of a new curriculum in 10 selected schools that aims to increase religious tolerance and marginalize extremist rhetoric through religious education.[127] Furthermore, Albania has also taken some steps that deal with those charged for, and incarcerated under, suspicion of being involved in violent extremist activities. Albania's Ministry of Justice (MoJ) signed an MoU with OSCE regarding the implementation of prevention projects in prisons – the details of which are not entirely described in respective publications.[128] In October 2017, Albania also adopted an Action Plan for the implementation of its National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism.[129] The ERF policy brief on Albania also provides some updated information with regards to policies undertaken in the country. The brief suggests that

> „The participatory approach employed by many state and non-state players, succeeded to transform particularly the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC), from "closed" and mostly "in-denial" (about religious extremism & VE) players to one of the key partners for many civil society and state institutions involved in C/PVE initiatives".[130]

During this ensuing period, Kosovo also seems to have taken some steps with regards to treatment of imprisoned individuals charged for being involved in violent extremist activities. Since 2018, those convicted are subject to de-radicalization programs in prison. Kosovo policy makers have envisaged the cooperation between the MoJ and the Islamic Community in Kosovo (BIK), whereby the latter selects imams who engage in discussions with those in prison who embrace religious violent extremist ideologies.[131] While the general idea of involving religious authorities in de-radicalization programs is a welcoming step, one problem with this remains with the fact that the cooperation between the MoJ and the BIK was highly publicized. In such publicity, it has been indicated that the imams who would be engaged in prisons are first vetted by the Kosovo's Intelligence Agency (KIA), prior to their involvement with violent extremists in

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[124] Azinović and Bećirević, "Regional Cooperation Council | A Waiting Game."
[125] Azinović and Bećirević.
[126] Azinović and Bećirević.
[127] Azinović and Bećirević.
[128] Azinović and Bećirević.
[129] Azinović and Bećirević.
[130] Gjergji Vurmo, "Transforming Albania's C/PVE Efforts Into Community Resilience and Development Matrix," Policy Brief, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, October 2018), 2, https://www.britishcouncil.al/sites/default/files/policy_brief_albania.pdf.
[131] Azinović and Bećirević, "Regional Cooperation Council | A Waiting Game."

prisons. This publicity could potentially damage the process, as those who embrace Islamist radical religious ideologies have very strong views about any (secular) state institution, vesting potentially those vetted imams as not credible in the eyes of religious extremists – especially when they know by now that the intelligence agency of a (secular) state has a final say on imams.[132] The ERF policy brief on Kosovo also notes that the country has created the division of re-integration of the returned foreign fighters and their family members.[133] This state program is *sublet* to the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP), who would do the job on behalf of the Ministry of Interior.[134]

While they took some additional policy steps after 2016, the other countries of the Western Balkans remained mostly within the confines of their earlier updated National Strategies in Countering Violent Extremism. The ERF policy brief on BiH, notes that there has been no de-radicalization programs implemented, and this remains only as a discussion centered around the returnees from the ISIS territory.[135] BiH has been engaged in drafting the so-called *referral mechanism* in cooperation with IOM, which includes the analysis of the legal framework, visits to vulnerable communities, and some workshops to educate relevant actors on international experiences with referral mechanisms.[136] But, as the brief notes, "final decision on the design has yet to be made"[137] Macedonia voted its National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism in its parliament in March 2018,[138] while Serbia adopted its National Strategy followed by its Action Plan in late 2017.[139] Additionally, the ERF policy brief on Serbia notes that the country's legislative updates with regards to measures on violent extremism were made merely to harmonize Serbia's policy with that of the EU, while "little attention has been paid to economic and political factors that impact the emergence and spread of extremism in Serbia"[140]

It appears as such that the Western Balkans countries continued to advance their policies in some level; albeit these policies remain non-standardized among the countries of the region.[141] Overall, it appears still, and it has been noted before, that prisons lack regulation on how to deal with radicalized inmates – and countries remain unaware of best practices.[142] For example, Azinović and Bećirević indicate that no psychological analysis of inmates in all the countries of the Western Balkans is carried out before they are put in prison, and rehabilitation programs in prisons are overall absent.[143] Generally, during the period which this review covers, the fight against radicalization and violent extremism in the countries of the Western Balkans has shifted from "hard" security measures towards a "softer" approach of prevention.[144] This echoes many voices among the researcher community who suggest that while "hard" measures may have

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[132] For more analysis on how violent extremists view (secular) state institutions see: Kursani, "Salafi Pluralism in National Contexts."

[133] Shpend Kursani, "Reintegration of Returnees: The Challenge of State and Community Response in Kosovo," Policy Brief, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, September 2018), https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/policy_brief_kosovo.pdf.

[134] Kursani.

[135] Edina Bećirević, "Countering and Preventing Extremism in BiH: Learning from International Efforts," Policy Brief, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, September 2018), https://www.britishcouncil.ba/sites/default/files/erf_bih_report.pdf.

[136] Bećirević.

[137] Bećirević, 6.

[138] Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, "Countering Violent Extremism in Macedonia: From a 'Whole-of-Government' to a 'Whole-of-Society,'" Policy Brief, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, September 2018), https://www.britishcouncil.mk/sites/default/files/policy_brief_macedonia.pdf.

[139] Azinović and Bećirević, "Regional Cooperation Council | A Waiting Game."

[140] Predrag Petrović, "The Problem of Islamist Extremism in Serbia: What Are the Drivers and How to Address Them," Policy Brief, Extremism Research Forum (London, UK: British Council, September 2018), 2, https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/policy_brief_serbia.pdf.

[141] Azinović and Bećirević, "Regional Cooperation Council | A Waiting Game."

[142] Azinović and Bećirević.

[143] Azinović and Bećirević; Other case specific discussion on policies can be found in: Orosz, "Returning from Violence."

[144] Azinović and Bećirević, "Regional Cooperation Council | A Waiting Game."

been important in tackling the issue of violent extremism, a move towards the "soft" approaches like rehabilitation and reintegration are essential in addressing the problem.[145]

Lastly, the Western Balkans countries also seem to have included in their strategies and/or other relevant legislative documents the issue of online radicalization, discussed more in depth in a recent report by Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).[146] Despite this, Conway and Brady note that there is lack of progress in actually addressing and implementing the strategies to prevent online radicalization.[147] The problem behind the lack of implementation appear to include (1) limited resourcing of bodies within institutional structures of each of the countries; (2) limited participation of civil society in these efforts; (3) lack of public-private partnership in dealing with the phenomenon of online radicalization; (4) lack of policies and programs to identify risky online content; and (5) the need for more careful media reporting, in each of the countries.[148]

5. (SOME) REMAINING GAPS

While there have certainly been many gaps addressed to improve our knowledge on violent extremism, there are some new gaps that have appeared, out of currently available research.

The first gap that remains intriguing for our present knowledge is the relationship between inter-ethnic and inter-religious aspect of violent extremism. The review above suggests that areas (Western Balkans states or municipalities) where identity aspects are mixed (ethnic/religious), violent extremism appears to be more prominent. Therefore, this area of research remains open, especially the one which attempts to investigate the nexus between far-right extremism and religious extremism This aspect could be more rigorously researched through survey studies, which would aim at establishing a causal relationship between ethnic and religious violent extremism, or the conditions under which this may be the case. Cities and other ethnically and religiously mixed areas could be picked to study the issue more specifically.

Relatedly, more research could be conducted into the causal similarities that can be drawn between why individuals join foreign conflicts in Ukraine and those that join conflicts in the Middle East. The literature already suggests some common drivers as well as some differences that may exist. Thus, further comparative research between such motivations would be fruitful. To this end, another way on how to approach such possible studies is to investigate individuals' authority preferences. We still do not know what makes individuals prefer submitting themselves under and between (i) existing state laws (the established order); (ii) religious laws/order; or community authority, which may include individuals' preferences to take community/family authority (be that religious or secular) more seriously than other types of authorities. This can help us learn more about people's preferences about authority in the region, which could shed more light on the future prospects about the established order(s) in the region, but also inform policy-makers of possible systemic deficiencies. This also goes in line with some indications

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[145] Speckhard and Shajkovci, "The Balkan Jihad"; Metodieva, "Balkan Foreign Fighters Are Coming Back: What Should Be Done?"
[146] Maura Conway and Sheelagh Brady, "A New Virtual Battlefield: How to Prevent Online Radicalisation in the Cyber Security Realm of the Western Balkans" (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Regional Cooperation Council, December 2018), https://www.rcc.int/pubs/70/a-new-virtual-battlefield--how-to-prevent-online-radicalisation-in-the-cyber-security-realm-of-the-western-balkans.
[147] Conway and Brady.
[148] Conway and Brady.

provided in the literature with regards to the lack of state penetration in selected areas of their respective territories – which currently remains still under researched and under specified.

Another area of research that remains indicative, yet not fully explored, is the issue of family/relative/friends' connections between violent extremists or those potentially *to-be* violent extremists. This is a more micro-level aspect that has the potential to drive violent extremism appears in literature but remains not fully explored. Further research into this aspect may give much more grounded explanatory research answers, which would feed the macro-structural explanations discussed above.

The recurring aspect in literature that remains, but which is consistently rather weakly researched is the issue of Salafism/Wahhabism and/or the Gulf funding/NGOs – and conditions under which this can be relevant to explain violent extremism. At present, information about such aspects remain only based on intuition or governmental officials' statements – yet, not enough grounded research exists. Examples are often drawn from anecdotal evidence, which does not provide for much knowledge in this aspect. There are often sweeping claims that are made, without a consideration of heterogeneity of the issue. For example, there are already some indications in the literature provided that the issue of Salafism is quite complex, and despite some studies on the issue, the jury remains out, especially with regards to when and how Salafism and external funding from the Gulf states remain an issue. Future research can pay careful attention on distinguishing divers of religionization or conservatism on the one hand, and drivers of violence on the other. Both avenues of research can be fruitful for adding more knowledge on these aspects, since current research often mixes both into the same research agenda.

The ERF research has provided strong indications that the connections between Western Balkans violent extremism and its/their respective Diaspora remains an issue. Diaspora can always be a source of (even if) marginal income, which can provide some *logistical* support to violent extremism in terms of finances. Thus, the issue of connections between the Western Balkans countries and their respective diaspora already is indicated to be an issue, but it is not systematically explored.

Furthermore, except for some select studies, the issue of women's involvement on violent extremism remains unexplored. Studies on Kosovo and BiH remain indicative that women can be both, victims of men driving them into conflict areas, but also they can have their own agency in deciding on their own fate. One indication comes from a study conducted on Kosovo,[149] but also the ERF report on BiH. The latter indicates that, for instance, although not necessarily under the confines of violent extremism, women who join the Salafi circles have their own agency, so to speak, on deciding their own path into their own Salafi thought, practice, and behavior.[150]

6. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

This Literature Review aimed at taking stock of research findings on violent extremism in the Western Balkans covering the period between 2017 and 2018, as a follow up to ERF's first

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[149] Rudinë Jakupi and Vesë Kelmendi, "Women in Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Kosovo - Reports" (Prishtina, Kosovo: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, January 26, 2017), http://www.qkss.org/en/Reports/Women-in-Violent-Extremism-Lessons-learned-from-Kosovo-841.
[150] Bećirević, "Bosnia and Herzegovina Report."

Literature Review which captured the preceding period. In the short period between 2017 and 2018, there have been no less than 60 publications produced by many local and international research institutes and organizations, which have covered the issue of violent extremism in the region.

In addition to summarizing the gaps that ERF's Literature Review (I) had identified, this literature review has summarized and assessed the bulk of the ensuing literature since the beginning of 2017 to up to late 2018. It has, furthermore, analysed the gaps which have been covered, and how they were covered. It showed that the main focus of the ensuing literature on violent extremism in the Western Balkans continued to focus on the drivers of radicalization, but also on the forms and the level of threats emanating from the phenomenon. The assessment suggested that there are two broader approaches that the literature has taken on tackling the issue of drivers of radicalization. One is the more macro level structural approach, where structural issues such as state fragility, dire socio-economic conditions, inter-ethnic tensions, the presence of radical ideologies, and similar issues in the region were identified as drivers of radicalization. The other is a more micro level individual approach, where aspects such as individuals' identity issues, close family/relative ties, and some other individual-specific factors count as drivers of radicalization in the region.

Furthermore, this review has also discussed the shift in focus which has occurred in the meantime, showing that there have been some research products which have tackled the non-religious radicalization in the region. These include the departing citizens to the conflicts in Ukraine, as well as the rise of the far-right groups in some countries of the region. This shift has been useful, as it also managed to show, at least in part, that there may be some link between far-right and religious extremisms, or how ethnically and religiously heterogenous areas in the region experience "identities in flux" among young people, which may be one of the triggering factors for enforcing, sometimes through radical means, the "otherness" of the other. This review has also briefly discussed the progress, as suggested by the literature, that the Western Balkans countries have made in their policy frameworks, and the way policies have been implemented during the period which this literature review covers.

Lastly, this literature review identified some remaining gaps in knowledge that still remain and has offered some avenues which future research projects could follow in advancing our knowledge about violent extremism in the region in general.

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Annex – Public perceptions on violent extremism

This is the list of reports which filly are partially include survey data conducted in different countries of the Western Balkans. This list may not be exhaustive, though it includes the ones that appeared during the literature search process. The listed survey reports include only those for the period for which this literature is written (2017 – 2018).

Country	Report title	Year	Source
Albania	Violent Extremism in Albania: A National Assessment of Drivers, Forms and Threats	2018	151
	Religious Tolerance in Albania	2018	152
Kosovo	Citizens Perception and Community Response on Returned Foreign Fighters	2018	153
	Kosovo-Wide Assessment of Perceptions of Radicalisation at the Community Level	2017	154
	Kosovo Security Barometer: Citizens' Perceptions on Violent Extremism	2017	155
Montenegro	Political Public Opinion of Montenegro	2017	156
Macedonia	Working Towards Resilient Communities	2018	157

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[151] Vurmo and Sulstarova, "Violent Extremism in Albania: A National Assessment of Drivers, Forms and Threats."
[152] "Religious Tolerance in Albania" (Tirana, Albania: IDM and UNDP, 2018), http://www.al.undp.org/content/dam/albania/docs/religious%20tolerance%20albania.pdf.
[153] Vesë Kelmendi, "Citizens Perception and Community Response on Returned Foreign Fighters" (Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, May 2018), http://www.qkss.org/en/Reports/KSB-Citizens-perception-and-community-response-on-returned-foreign-fighters-1101.
[154] Anisa Goshi and Dallin Van Leuven, "Kosovo-Wide Assessment of Perceptions of Radicalisation at the Community Level" (Prishtina, Kosovo: Government of the Republic of Kosovo, May 2017).
[155] Mentor Vrajolli, "Kosovo Security Barometer: Citizens' Perceptions on Violent Extremism" (Prishtina, Kosovo: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, July 2017), http://www.qkss.org/en/Reports/Kosovo-Security-Barometer-Citizens-perceptions-on-Violent-Extremism-992.
[156] CEDEM, "Political Public Opinion of Montenegro" (Montenegro: Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, June 2017), https://www.cedem.me/images/jDownloads_new/CEDEM_June_2017_-_public_opinion_poll.pdf.
[157] Shabani and Kadri, "Working Towards Resilient Communities."

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Azinović, Vlado, and Edina Bećirević. "A Waiting Game: Assessing and Responding to the Threat from Returning Foreign Fighters in the Western Balkans." Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Regional Cooperation Council, November 2017. https://www.rcc.int/pubs/54/a-waiting-game-assessing-and-responding-to-the-threat-from-returning-foreign-fighters-in-the-western-balkans.

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