

WESTERN BALKANS EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM

Policy brief – Serbia

September 2018

THE PROBLEM OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN SERBIA: WHAT ARE THE DRIVERS AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM

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Summary

The threat of Islamist violent extremism and terrorism in Serbia has reduced. Not only are there are a small numbers of foreign fighters and returnees, but there are now few extremist who could be labeled as violent. The demise of ISIS and its ideological attractiveness has contributed significantly to the lowered threat of violent extremism. What raises concerns however is the fact that there is a growing number of non-violent and not-now-violent Islamist extremists who could be radicalised in the future, if the balance of influencing factors take effect. It should be also noted that far right extremism is gaining support in Serbia and that both forms of extremism could have reinforcing effects on each other. This is possible not only when combined with a variety of socio-economic push factors that are still present, but they are also worsening, causing increasing number of people, especially young people, to become frustrated, and thus vulnerable to extremism as an alternative option. This paper strongly advocates for the introduction of long term measures that would address relative deprivation problem in Serbia as a foundation for mid and short term policy measures. Without addressing problems related to good governance and development, mid and short-term measures would yield only temporary results.

- **Long term measures** - improving the economic situation, reducing poverty and (political) corruption in Serbia, which would reduce inequality and improve equality of opportunity that would enable people to better meet their own needs.
- **Medium term measures** – reform of religious and civic education by: improving the quality of teaching methods and materials; professionalisation of teachers; learning about other religions, also from sociological and historical perspectives; and emphasising critical thinking.
- **Short term measures** – improving how central media reports about Sandžak region and thus contributing to toning down of “siege mentality”.

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Introduction

This brief looks at the most significant drivers of (violent) extremism in Serbia and how they influence and empower one another and also offers recommendations for their mitigation. The analysis rests primarily on the findings of the Extremism Research Forum (ERF) country report for Serbia: research conducted as part of the FCO funded Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum, led by the British Council, from June to October 2017, which consisted of a meta-analysis of existing studies supplemented by a series of interviews and focus groups in Novi Pazar¹ and Belgrade. The findings of other relevant studies have also informed the research and analysis.

Background

According to the Serbian Ministry of Interior 49 Serbian citizens, largely from the Sandžak region, have travelled to Syria since the outbreak of armed conflict there in 2011 to fight against the Bashar al-Assad regime and/or to support the creation of a new state that would adhere to Sharia law. Research also shows that there are fewer than 100 individuals gathered in three masjids in the Sandžak region who could be categorised as violent extremists. Compared to other Western Balkan countries and the rest of Europe, these numbers are low and indicate that the threat of Islamist violent extremism and terrorism in Serbia is not high. However, the fact that research shows a growth in non-violent extremism – individuals and groups that promote extreme ideas without openly inciting violence, who could as a result of global and local economic and political changes be (rapidly) radicalised and become violent, is cause for concern. One should also be aware of the fact that right wing extremism in Serbia has always been present and that around 70 individuals fought on the pro-Russian side in the Ukrainian conflict, as well as that far right groups are seen to be mushrooming in Serbia over the past three years. Behind these negative trends lies the fact that Serbia has done little to eliminate the conditions favourable to its proliferation.

Serbian authorities have adopted a number of measures aimed at fighting and preventing Islamist violent extremism and terrorism, including changes to legislation and the adoption of strategic acts in this field, according to models already in place within the EU. However, these measures have been adopted in order to harmonise Serbian policy with that of the EU and to fulfil its international obligations, while little attention has been paid to economic and political factors that impact the emergence and spread of extremism in Serbia. Consequently, the adopted measures remain insufficiently developed and as they do not take into account the factors that contribute to extremism, they could also have the opposite effect.²

¹ The largest town in the Sandžak region.

² For example, referral mechanisms for early identification and prevention of radicalisation can be seen as instruments of repression if citizen trust in the institutions integral to this mechanism is low.

Socio-economic and political factors

One of the most important and most compelling factors contributing to the emergence, persistence and expansion of (violent) extremism is the low socio-economic standing of Serbia, especially in the Sandžak region. World Bank figures show that the population of the Sandžak administrative municipality face an above average risk of poverty. Thus, while the average rate of poverty in Serbia is 25 percent, this rate is close to 50 percent in Novi Pazar while in Tutin, it is as high as 66 percent.³ Higher than average rates of poverty are compounded by high rates of unemployment which average out at 15 percent across Serbia but are as high as 60 percent in Novi Pazar, of which, according to some estimates, 70 percent are unemployed young people. Another difficulty is the fact that the income of those who are in employment (€290), is well below the national average (€410).

These circumstances are compounded by high levels of corruption in Serbia. According to a January 2017 study by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) more than one in three people in Serbia (35%) identified corruption and criminality as the greatest internal security threat facing the country, while 31 percent identified the perceived misconduct by politicians. Compared with other groups, Bosniaks were significantly more concerned about corruption and criminality (41%), while their second ranked internal security threat was also poor misconduct by politicians. Almost nine out of ten Bosniaks questioned (87%) grade the risk of corruption as high, which is significantly higher than among Serbs (72%) and Hungarians (52%). Political corruption impacts the unequal and unfair distribution of already scarce social, material and financial resources, which additionally acts to increase inequality and a sense of injustice in the community. This results in the inability of a large segment of the population, especially young people, to meet their own needs and attain their aspirations through official institutions.⁴

Extremist organisations which in addition to spreading their ideology also organise and offer various services and support to impoverished people, are keen to exploit the above illustrated state of affairs. They seek to spread the message that they take care of “ordinary people” neglected by institutions and politicians. This message, however, does not only reach the membership of these groups and those close to them but also spreads among the wider population. Our research confirms that a large number of those interviewed report some level of affinity towards these organisations and individuals because they, “actually do something useful”.

³ Poverty Map of Serbia: Understanding Welfare at the Local Level to Make Better Policies. (2016) Belgrade: World Bank Group.

⁴ Petrovic, P & Stakic, I. (2018) Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum - Serbia Report. Belgrade: British Council.

Poor civic and religious education

Poor economy and bad governance are accompanied by an educational system which is completely outdated in many respects.

- Firstly, there is a mismatch between the educational system and market needs resulting in the workforce educated for the low-demand occupations and without a satisfactory level of practical skills. In Novi Pazar there are even two universities, which only contribute further to the frustration of graduates since they cannot find jobs, so end up emigrating in search for employment.
- Secondly, teaching methods and techniques are based on ex-cathedra lectures favoring memorisation of facts and discouraging critical thinking among students.
- Thirdly, schools' curriculum doesn't provide for active and democratic citizenship, leaving students without sufficient knowledge on human rights, as well as how to deal with a past characterised with violent conflicts.
- Also, in primary and secondary schools pupils have to choose between religious and civic education making these two incompatible, while both are necessary for preventing radicalisation.
- In addition, there is a low quality of classes, since teachers of both courses are selected on criteria that are not in line with teaching profession standards. For instance, it is not uncommon that civic education is taught by teachers not specialised in the subjects, but by those who need to attain a certain target of lecture hours. It is reported also that religious teachers are not capable of responding to pupils' curiosity and difficult questions.

Feeling of discrimination

The Serbian citizens of Muslim faith interviewed in this project believe that the Serbian authorities do not treat people equally regardless of their faith but also due to the (political) power they hold in practice.

Muslims in Serbia are also affected by the fact that the Serbian authorities seem to apply double standards to Serbian citizens returning from conflict zones in Syria and Ukraine. The former have been prosecuted and convicted of terrorism offences (seven individuals have been convicted to date) while the latter group have been prosecuted for the offence of participating in a foreign conflict (foreign fighters), which has enabled 26 out of 28 suspects to cooperate with prosecutors by pleading guilty thereby ensuring their rapid release.

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Isolation

Research has confirmed that people living in Novi Pazar are perplexed as to why national media outlets choose to report predominantly negatively on their town. News items about violence and the drugs trade dominate while positive news largely goes unreported, even when it has national implications. According to local journalists, this is common practice rather than an isolated case.

The poor road infrastructure linking the Sandžak region to the capital of Serbia and the capitals of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro contributes to a sense of isolation. Commitments made by various Serbian and foreign politicians promising to build motorways remain just that. What is more, the roads linking the main towns of the Sandžak – Novi Pazar, Tutin and Sjenica – are also poor. This additionally contributes to the development of something akin to a siege mentality among the people of the Sandžak.

Roma radicalisation - In recent years, there has been a trend of Roma radicalisation in Serbia, who are now following a radical Salafi interpretation of Islam. Even though most of the Salafi Roma are peaceful, eleven Roma have travelled to Syria and Iraq according to media reports, some of them taking their families with them as well.⁵ The reason for this trend could be derived from the fact that all the factors conducive to radicalisation described in the paper are specifically present in Roma community. However, addressing Roma radicalisation might be very difficult since this community is already stigmatised, inadvertently drawing broad public attention to this problem could only worsen the situation making the already difficult task of integration even harder. More research is required to understand the drivers of radicalisation, and how it manifests, among the Roma community.

Recommendations

On the basis of the aforementioned factors, **three groups of measures** have been identified that could prevent the spread of both violent and non-violent extremism in Serbia.

The most **significant and long term measures** are those tasked with improving the economic situation in the region and reducing poverty and (political) corruption in Serbia, which would reduce inequality and improve equality of opportunity that would enable people to better meet their own needs. These are also the most important measures because, if no attempt is made to implement them, the success of the identified short term and medium term measures will be merely temporary. For example, improved education for young people will have little effect if they are pushed out of jobs by members of governing political parties and improved road links will then only serve to enable young people to leave

⁵ Petrovic, P & Stakic, I. (2018) Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum - Serbia Report. Belgrade: British Council, pp. 31-33.

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the region. Similarly, if citizen trust in institutions is low and they are seen as generators of corruption, the introduction of referral mechanisms (as is the trend in the EU and the Western Balkans) will result in the opposite of the intended effect and would be seen as an instrument of repression rather than early prevention.

For the implementation of these medium and long term measures Serbia already has access to the framework of the EU accession negotiations, especially Chapters 23 and 24, as well as the Credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans with its six initiatives for progress in the key areas: the rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development; improved communications; strengthening trust and good neighbourly relations; and the Digital Agenda. The European Commission has committed to gradually increasing pre-accession funds in order to support these initiatives. It falls on Serbia to make use of them.

Medium term measures include the improvement of religious and civic education. Faith communities must improve the quality of their educators and the curricula they teach. More important still is reform of citizenship education, the curriculum of which should include learning about other religions (in a historical and sociological context) as well as improved critical thinking skills to enable pupils to better assess problematic content they encounter, especially via social media. Other medium term measures should include improved transport links between the Sandžak, Belgrade, Sarajevo and Podgorica, as well as between the main towns of the region itself.

Finally, **short-term measures** include improvement in central media reporting about Sandžak region and minority communities, including the Roma community. In this respect, Serbian decision-makers can organise training programmes and workshops for journalists that would facilitate better links between those working within the main national media and those working for local media, leading to improved reporting of news in the Sandžak region. Practice has shown that it is not sufficient to identify the problem and propose a solution but that networking and the fostering of personal relationships between actors (in this case journalists) is more effective. They would then be in a position to more easily communicate and verify information. Central government should lead the way in creating a safe media environment, where impartial journalists can provide a balanced opinion/account without fear of reprisal. These measures do not require a great deal of time nor the investment of material or financial resources but their positive impact could be rapidly evident.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or the British Council.