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SOFIA SECURITY FORUM

RIGHT WING EXTREMISM: SOUTH-EAST EUROPE IN FOCUS



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Authors: Yordan Bozhilov; Peter Knoope; Ledion Krisafi, Ph.D;
Mila Serafimova, PhD; Lora Simeonova, PhD; Martin Sokolov; Prof.
Alina Bârgăoanu; Dragan Sekulovski; Suzana Grubješić; Assistants:
Irena Latinović and Marko Đurić; Assist. Prof. Gordan Akrap; Vedran
Matošić; Roman Domović, PhD.

Editor: Yordan Bozhilov

Proofreading: Sonya Ninova

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RIGHT WING EXTREMISM: SOUTH-EAST EUROPE IN FOCUS

Yordan Bozhilov¹

In recent years, in many European countries we have witnessed a rise in extremism, including criminal offenses, based on extremist ideologies (right-wing, left wing or Islamist extremism). Extremist ideologies are becoming more widespread due to the new media and social networks. Politically and ideologically motivated violence and extremism threaten our societies, challenge the rule of law and democracy, and put the lives and health of citizens in danger. This is why it is important to study their roots and the scale of spreading, and to adopt appropriate policies and measures.

In order to address the growing interest and analyze Right Wing Extremism (RWE) in 2021 Sofia Security Forum initiated a study in South-East Europe. As there is no single definition of what Right Wing Extremism is, we have defined it for the purposes of the study as an “ideology or movement which propagates racial or ethnic supremacy; aggression against minorities, LGBTs and other groups; outrage against government policies and decisions; denial of the government’s authority and praising anti-systemic attitudes”. In many cases right-wing extremism includes racism and anti-Semitism, xenophobia, hate speech, conspiracy theories and mysticism. In the last few years, especially after the big waves of migration, what is distinctive for right-wing extremism is racism, anti-immigration and Islamophobia, often mixed with calls for violence, etc. Obviously, RWE ideologies and activities are not compliant with the principles of democracy and rule of law.

We acknowledge that Right Wing Extremism is distinct from Far-right (FR) populist political parties, which are part of the political system in many European countries. The fact that RWE is distinct from FR does not necessarily mean that there cannot be connections in

¹ Yordan Bozhilov is President of Sofia Security Forum, www.sofiaforum.bg, bozhilov@sofiaforum.bg

many different ways, direct or indirect, between politicians and RWE activists. Such links may exist in personal, ideological, inspirational, political, financial or other forms. It is important to analyze to what extent these connections exist.

As many other studies find out, young people are increasingly exposed and vulnerable to far-right and neo-fascist ideas and incitement of religious, ethnic and racial hatred. A particularly worrying phenomenon is that far right paramilitary groups more actively recruit adolescents and young people. Traditional and non-traditional media are an important factor in the spreading of extremist ideologies. Social networks provide channels for communication between members of RWE groups or between different groups. RWE organizations develop international cooperation and organize international events.

In Central and Eastern Europe RWE groups have emerged in recent years that hold meetings, conduct training in martial arts, practice military tactics and methods, and organize marches with the clear aim of influencing and provoking the general public. Many of these groups present themselves as “real” patriots who defend a certain cause, such as protection of borders from migrants, protection from criminals, etc.

Sofia Security Forum’s project aimed at analyzing the spread of Right Wing Extremism (RWE) in six South East European countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia. To implement the project Sofia Security Forum developed a common methodology to guide the activities of the researchers.

Research teams were established in each of these countries to gather information and analyze the main ideological constructs, narratives, dissemination of RWE ideologies, activities of right-wing organizations, the role of media (both traditional and non-traditional) and social networks in the spreading such ideas and the government’s response to the threat. Researchers collected information from open sources (media and social networks) and hold meetings and interviews with representatives of the police, judiciary and think tanks.

Analyses show that, despite differences between countries, there are some common features. None of the teams identifies the existence of RWE organizations that seriously endanger the rule of law, security and citizens in the countries that have been studied. Nevertheless, in

all these countries a social basis for the spread of right-wing ideologies exists, like unresolved social and/or ethnic problems. Young people are increasingly vulnerable to the influence of RWE ideologies. Some already established groups, like football fans' organizations, may be susceptible to RWE ideas. Although the working groups do not identify RWE to be a serious threat to the countries' security, deeper studies of the phenomenon are needed.

It has been concluded that in most of the countries, there are no specialized police or judiciary structures that deal specifically with right-wing radicalization and extremism. In view of the increasing number of cases of manifestation of RWE, it is advisable to reassess the approach in order to better cope with the challenges posed by RWE. Undoubtedly, the role of the education system, family, social institutions, etc. is of crucial importance for the prevention of RWE. A comprehensive approach is needed.

The current publication presents analysis of RWE in six South-East European countries. Further work is certainly needed in the field of analysis and elaboration of adequate responses.

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RIGHT WING EXTREMISM IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

Peter Knoope¹

Over the last two decades, the focus in our domain of work related to violent extremism has been on radicalisation in the tradition of AQ and later Daesh or IS. There is a good reason for this. After all, the starting point on 9/11 was claimed by extremists with a religiously rooted narrative and ideology. The counter terrorism efforts included, among other strategic approaches, trying to discover trends and the root causes for radicalisation in the sphere of a specific manipulation of religious narratives and identities. Some would even go as far as to find roots of extremism in religion itself. But the majority of the analyses come to the conclusion that the political and economic dimension of the causes are at least as important, if not the first point of entry, for recruiters.

However, the tide is changing, especially in large parts of the Western world. Increasingly governments are confronted with a wide spectrum of radical and extremist societal movements and individuals that all seem to have in common that they find their origins and roots in distrust of elites, scientists, journalists, foreigners, and the political class more generally. Some of these movements or individuals are part of the political fabric. We often refer to them as the far right. Others distance themselves from the political arena and operate in an extra-parliamentarian manner with all the consequences related to that choice, including often claiming a right to use violence against actors they consider the legitimate target, their enemy. The articles assembled here give a good overview of this new trend in radicalisation, the networks and their inspiration in the South-Eastern part of Europe. It is therefore a must read for all who want to study the new wave of threats to European stability and seek to mitigate it.

¹ Peter Knoope is Former Director of The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) – The Hague

The RWE challenges

The way we approach these relatively new phenomena confronts us with some serious challenges, especially where policymakers could be tempted to 'copy paste' the earlier recipes to counter radicalisation as developed by networks like RAN and by European governments. That confrontation also lays bare some of the weaknesses of the very approaches that were developed over the last twenty years. It is this confrontation that is educational and can potentially be useful to improve our vision and strategies. Here are some of them:

1. In response to 'traditional or AQ-related' radicalisation, governments have identified at-risk communities. These are often immigrant communities in European states that live in certain quarters of the main cities. This generalisation has always been criticised by the inhabitants of those quarters as stigmatising and unnuanced. The RWE phenomenon exposes this weakness to the full. After all, there is no specific community at risk; RWE is found in all layers and strata of society. There is no at-risk community that can be targeted by policies. It has always been true for the immigrant population as well. But in a certain sense, policies adopted the idea that every Muslim with an immigrant background was a potential radical. That has never been the case. The new approaches to extremism will have to find a way to counter radicalisation without a blanket approach to certain groups in our societies.

2. The triggers for pathways into radicalisation and extremism have always been identified as a negative experience with representatives of the authority, the state. That can be a police officer, a border control agent, a judge, or anybody else that is seen as representing the state. The idea is that when a representative of the state is abusive, negative, or insulting in their behaviour, it implies that the state itself is abusive and negative towards the citizen. In that sense, the state and its representatives are part of the problem as well as part of the solution. This has not always been explicitly incorporated into relevant policies. RWE is also more than traditional radicalisation stemming from the interface between the state and the citizen. Anger about politicians, elites, the upper class, those who profit from globalisation, is at least as big a chunk of the root causes. Reinventing the connection and trust between the state and its representatives is therefore necessarily part of the solution.

3. RWE very often goes hand in hand with a call for the return to traditions and traditional value systems. Loss of identity and social security, or at least the strong perception that there is such loss, is one of the elements that comes out strongly in RWE. In fact, this call for restoration of traditional value systems and romanticising of the past has always been an ignored part of the underlying issues in traditional radicalisation and extremism. RWE exposes this element as one of the root causes that deserves proper attention in the policy approaches.

4. Last but not least, the RWE environment is influenced by foreign elements. Sometimes foreign policy interests inspire governments or non-state actors to sponsor certain groups or individuals. This sponsorship can be of a different nature -- political, ideological, or even financial. Policies to reduce these sponsorships are delicate and sensitive, and get mixed with Western governments own foreign policy concerns and considerations. This is why it has taken a relatively long time to include such policies in counter radicalisation approaches. RWE forces governments once again to consider the options.

The core of the RWE problem

What the articles expose is that the heart of the phenomenon is twofold. RWE is in its essence a search for identity and trust. That search, rooted in insecurity in a highly individualistic and modernity-oriented environment, translates into a call for values, be it religious, historic, or traditional. This search may very well be the answer to a society that is dominated by the need to consume and the one-dimensional perspective and image of the citizen. The state and the elites represent, in that frame, that one-dimensional idea of its citizens and is therefore the ideal enemy to project all frustrations and anger upon. In that sense, one can see RWE as the byproduct of the loss of identity and value systems that result from an ever stronger focus on the individual that has to survive in a rat race rather than on the strength of the individual as part of a strong community. With religion behind the horizon and the average political ideology that hardly goes deeper than 'Yes, we can', the elites no longer represent common moral values, apparently a basic human requirement. People need Nelson Mandelas, Mahatma Ghandis and Mother Therasas for inspiration, leadership and comfort. They seem to have gone missing.

The second, not totally unrelated search is a quest for trust. Distrust has become a leading and guiding principle. It is interesting to analyse how that happened and what represents the chicken and what the egg. Citizens living in urban environments in many parts of the world are increasingly confronted with a rapidly widening and deepening variety of security measures -- cameras, identity checks, face recognition, detection portals, etc. The government obviously does not trust the average cell phone and credit card user or passenger. Is this the result or the cause of the distrust between the governed and the governing? It is hard to unravel. What it tells us is that there is a need to turn back the clock before it is too late. How do we bring back the trust is a mind cracker. How do we reintroduce the social contract between the people and their government is the million dollar question of our time.

In conclusion

Too many people, and unfortunately too many of the machines that our tech giants have built, have a vested interest in distrust and instigate polarisation as a political foreign policy modus operandi, or as a business model. This has become part and parcel of the hybrid warfare that we witness today. The new war that many were fearing and expecting some decade ago may already have begun. It could be happening while we're looking for it in some other direction. Unmasking false intentions and the advocates of polarisation is a first step in rebuilding trust. These articles about RWE in East Europe and the Balkans may certainly contribute to this effect.

RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN ALBANIA

Ledion Krisafi, Ph.D¹

Background

In 1991, Albania emerged from half a century of communist rule. During that half a century the Communist Party of Albania, later the Party of Labour of Albania, completely dominated the political, economic, social and cultural life of the country. There was no possibility for any other political group or organization to have any kind of impact.

The fall of the communist regime made Albania accessible to various groups and organizations from the outside and many flocked to the country to offer support to their respective religious communities. Most organizations came from the Middle East following Albania's legalization of Islam which had been banned by the communist regime in 1967. As Albanians started returning to religion and as historically Islam has been the religion of the majority of the population ($\approx 70\%$), it was logical that organizations from Muslim majority countries would try to enter and have some influence in another Muslim majority country. There was no lack of Catholic organizations either for the 10% Catholic population of Albania. These came mostly from Italy and almost all organizations for the 20% Christian Orthodox population came from Greece. None of the newly arrived Christian Orthodox organizations were from Russia, or had any connection with Russia. There are historical reasons behind that. Greece neighbours the area in the south of the country where the Christian Orthodox community is concentrated and there is also a small Greek minority in some parts of Albania bordering Greece. Furthermore, historically Greece has maintained that all Christian Orthodox in Albania are Greeks, thus equating Orthodoxy with Greekness. For these reasons, it was Greece who stepped in to strengthen the community and not other countries like Russia.

¹ Ledion Krisafi is Project Coordinator at the Albania Institute for International Studies, Executive Director of the Tirana Centre for Journalistic Excellence

These newly arrived organizations entered into an “open field” because religion in Albania was almost totally destroyed during the communist period and there were no Albanian Christian or Muslim clerics left. The rebuilding of the religious institutions and structures was done with foreign money coming from these organizations and in many cases by local clerics educated by the same organizations, or in the countries they come from. Also, many foreign clerics were sent to Albania – Greeks by the Orthodox Church and Italians by the Catholic Church.

However, one distinguishable feature of all these organizations is that although being very involved in their communities and pouring lots of money into Albania, their activities remained confined to the religious field and they didn’t engage in politics. Such matters were largely not on their agenda and they didn’t wield any political influence in the country, despite being foreign organizations. Albanian politics continued to be shaped by local interest.

Right-wing politics and ideology in Albania

To understand right-wing extremism in Albania and furthermore to understand right-wing extremism possibly financed or supported by Russia, it is important to first understand right-wing politics in Albania.

Before the Second World War, there was little distinction between left-wing and right-wing politics in Albania. Those who could be called right-wing were mostly large landowners from Central and South Albania who controlled politics in the country in the two decades between independence in 1912 and the Italian invasion on 7 April 1939. Their ideology was mostly conservative, traditionalist, and family-based, but these beliefs came from an inherited tradition, not from any knowledge of the European conservative tradition or values.²

At the same time, the clans of North Albania, including the Catholic population in the North-East, could also be described as right-wing. Their right-wing beliefs were conservative, traditionalist, clan-based, and religious in their attachment to Catholicism. As in the other case

² Romeo Gurakuqi, *Shqipëria dhe tokat e liriueme, 1939-1946*, Botimet Jozef, 2018

with the landowners of Central and South Albania, the northerners' beliefs had nothing to do with the European conservative tradition, which to them as an oral society with very few people able to read and write, was totally alien. If they could be called right-wing, it is because of their traditionalism and conservatism.³

However, in the interbellum period there was no right-wing party as there was in effect no left-wing party either. There was a party of landowners and a party comprising mostly the intelligentsia – writers, people educated in the West, doctors, etc. — but neither could be defined as strictly right-wing or left-wing.

The lines became clearer during the Second World War. This happened because of the way different sections of Albanian society reacted to the Italian occupation and its administration of Albania. Beginning from the winter of 1941 and the spring of 1942, the communists were the ones who slowly came to be identified with the resistance against the Italians and from the autumn of 1943 with the resistance against the Germans. On the other hand, the right-wing, traditionalist, conservative and at this point also nationalist groups started opposing the internationalist mindset of the Communist Party and coalesced for the first time into an identifiable right-wing organization called Balli Kombëtar (National Front).

During the war, Balli Kombëtar were clearly anti-communist, going as far as to collaborate with the Nazis against the communists in the country, but ideologically they didn't share anything with the Nazis. It was a purely pragmatic collaboration which damaged considerably their public image at the time and has continued to do so more than seven decades after the end of the Second World War. Balli Kombëtar were also fiercely nationalist, calling for the unification of all Albanian-inhabited territories in the Balkans, especially Kosovo and the western part of Macedonia at the time. The Italian fascists in the beginning and then the Nazis created almost exactly what Balli Kombëtar were demanding. With the occupation and the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, most of Kosovo and Western Macedonia were united with Albania.

While the communists proclaimed that these newly acquired

³ Ibid.

territories should be discussed after the war with a new communist-friendly Yugoslavia, reflecting their internationalist ideology, Balli Kombëtar maintained that they should continue to be part of Albania.

Since then, Balli Kombëtar, which was resurrected after the fall of the communist regime, has personified far right-wing politics in Albania, with an emphasis on traditional values and a conservative outlook on many issues pertaining to the family, LGBT and abortion rights, etc. They have a distinctly nationalist ideology unrivaled by any other party in post-communist Albanian politics. In the beginning of the 90s, Balli Kombëtar's ideology entailed that Kosovo should be liberated from Serbian rule. After Kosovo's independence, their focus shifted to calls for Kosovo's unification with Albania in a single state.

In the 90s, Balli Kombëtar won seats in parliament on three occasions – in 1996, 1997 and in 2001, respectively three, four and another three seats. Since then, Balli haven't been able to secure any seats and their activity has also been considerably diminished. In 2017 and 2021, they didn't even compete in the elections.

Balli Kombëtar don't have any kind of influence in Albanian politics and they have a very marginal presence in public debates, mostly on issues such as abortion, LGBT rights, and nationalism. Most of Balli's ideology has become part of the political program of the right-wing Democratic Party of Albania (DP). The DP identify themselves with the anti-communist resistance during the Second World War and later during the communist regime, although they don't pretend to be a successor of the wartime Balli Kombëtar. The DP's founders also have no relation at all with the Balli Kombëtar members during the Second World War.

This far-right ideology in Albania, personified by Balli Kombëtar, was in essence anti-communist and anti-Slavic, especially anti-Yugoslav and anti-Russian. Therefore, there was no possibility of Russian support for this party and organization. It would have amounted to "treason" for such an organization to accept financial or political support from Russia.

In Albania, all right-wing politics, be it moderate or extremist, has in essence an anti-communist attitude, in which communism as an ideology is not equated with Karl Marx and Engels, but with Russia

and Slavism in general. For this reason, Russia constitutes enemy number one of Albanian far-right organizations and parties. The basis of these organizations is repudiation of communist activities during the Second World War and the support for a unified state of Albanians in the Balkans. In this view, Russia is the country that has done the most, possibly with the exception of Serbia, to block or impede Kosovo's path towards independence or, after the independence, to hamper Kosovo's efforts to be recognized by other states and international organizations.

Contrary to other countries in the Balkans or Eastern Europe, in Albania the far-right parties and organizations are totally committed to the Euro-Atlantic world, especially to the United States. This commitment is because of two reasons: first because Albanians see the US as the main power that stopped communism from spreading during the Cold War; and second because of their role in the Kosovo War in 1998-1999, namely the bombardment of Serbia in 1999 and their support for Kosovo gaining independence and international recognition. To far-right parties and organizations in Albania, it is the United States that has fulfilled their beliefs, not Russia. Russia is therefore the enemy.

At the same time, the far-right in Albania describe the other main political party in the country, the Socialist Party, as a continuation of the internationalist ideology of the Communist Party. Many times in the past three decades, the Socialist Party has been accused of being soft against Serbia and Russia. For example, during the Kosovo crisis, the Socialist Prime Minister Fatos Nano met with the Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic in Crete, Greece. Nano was heavily criticized for this meeting and labeled as a traitor by the Albanian right-wing and far-right parties and organizations at the time.

From what has been described as far right until now, we can discern some common features:

- Anti-communism (and opposition to any left-wing ideology)
- Support for anti-communist activities during the Second World War
- Nationalism
- Anti-Slavism in general (especially towards Serbia and Russia)
- Collaboration with Serbia and Russia is labeled as "treason"

- Opposition to LGBT and abortion rights
- In some cases, even a negative attitude towards Turkey or towards Albania having closer relations with Turkey
- Pro-United States
- Pro-NATO

Despite being mentioned as far-right characteristics above, a lot of other parties and organizations in Albania support some of these ideas without being far-right or even right-wing. For example, Partia e Unitetit Kombëtar (Party of National Unity – PUK) is known for its highly nationalist ideology, propagating the unification of all Albanians in the region in a single state, but ideologically the party is left-wing. Like far-right or right-wing parties, it has an anti-Slavic ideology directed against Serbia and Russia as the perceived main enemies of the Albanian nation in the Balkans, and is also pro-American and pro-NATO.

Currently, in Albania there is no sole organization or party which can be pinpointed as representing far-right ideology. On the contrary, the far-right ideology that characterized Balli Kombëtar, has spilled over to several political parties which don't claim to be far-right, but in many cases propagate ideas that can be described as far-right.

Apart from mainstream political parties that in some cases spread such ideas, there are also small groups and organizations which practically don't have a significant physical presence, but survive in the online world through publishing articles. According to police sources, none of these groups have any known relations with Russia. On the contrary, they are fiercely anti-Russian and mostly consist of 2 to 3 individuals; sometimes even a single individual who maintains a web page to disseminate articles in support of Albania and Kosovo's union, attacking everyone who collaborates with Serbia or Russia. These groups or individuals, according to police sources, have no influence at all in Albanian society or politics.⁴

Most of the far-right ideas described above are injected in the political or public debate through the mainstream parties, even through the main opposition party at the moment – the Democratic Party.

⁴ Interview with police official, in charge of extremist groups

Anti-communism and support for anti-communist activities during the Second World War is one of the pillars of right-wing politics as represented by the Democratic Party. This is a common characteristic of right-wing politics all over Europe. What is different, however, and what is really a genuine feature of right-wing politics in Albania is the anti-Serbian and anti-Russian rhetoric. It is what distinguishes right-wing from left-wing politics in Albania, with the left-wing parties being neutral or somewhat sympathetic towards Serbia and Russia.

In the last years, Albania's Socialist Prime Minister Edi Rama, has increased the level of collaboration between Albania and Serbia. Before 2014, meetings between Albania and Serbia high representatives were very rare and no Albanian or Serbian Prime Minister had visited the home country of their counterpart. In 2014, Rama became the first Albanian Prime Minister to visit Belgrade since Enver Hoxha's visit in 1946. The frequent meetings that ensued between Rama and Vucic, the mini-Schengen and later the *Open Balkans* projects, have intensified the anti-Serbia and anti-Russia rhetoric that comes from the right-wing and far-right entities in Albania. Most anti-Serbia and anti-Russia rhetoric is coming from the main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Albania.

In the past and also currently, none of the parties or organizations described above have had a military faction. Usually, these are very small parties and organizations with very little financial means.⁵ They don't have the funds and organizational power to maintain a military faction or anything similar.

However, during the election campaign for the 2021 parliamentary elections in Albania, the right-wing Democratic Party organized armed groups allegedly with the purpose of monitoring the campaign and the voting process.⁶ The groups were full of former police officers and highly trained former security or military personnel, most of whom worked in these capacities between 2005 and 2013 when the DP was in power, or even in the 90s.⁷ The armed groups roamed the streets searching for those trying to buy votes or to influence the voting in an

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://www.reporter.al/pergjaket-fushata-ne-elbasan-vritet-politikani-lokal-pjerin-xhuvani/>

⁷ Ibid.

illegal way. The groups had received no permission from the police or any other institution. In fact, their first and last public display was in the city of Elbasan, a few days before the elections. During their patrols around the city, they clashed with another group of people who, according to the DP, were trying to buy votes. During the altercation, one former Special Forces commando, part of the DP armed group, murdered a member of the other group. The murder made the DP armed group visible to the general public, but also to the police, which until then had no precise information on what was going on.⁸

The murder shocked the Elbasan population and all Albanian society in general as the murdered person was well-known and respected in the city. It also brought an end to the DP's armed group activities not only in Elbasan, but in other cities too. The public reaction against the armed group and the murder was very fierce. Nevertheless, the group's finances and where these came from, as is the case with most political parties in Albania, remained obscure and after that incident nothing was heard of them again.

Another reason why far-right ideology is almost non-existent in Albania and why what little of it exists is different from other countries is that during the Second World War, even though there were some parts of Albanian society which collaborated with Italian fascists and Nazis, this collaboration was inspired by pragmatic reasons, not because by a shared ideology. Nazi ideology was completely alien to an Albanian traditional society which is very much inclusive and welcomes diversity, as evidenced by the harmony between different religious communities in the country. The reason why some elites collaborated with Nazi Germany was because of Nazi Germany's policy towards Kosovo. After the destruction of Yugoslavia by Nazi armies in the spring of 1941, most of Kosovo and some Albanian-majority parts of Macedonia that were already conquered by Fascist Italy, were united with Albania. This policy won the support of many Albanians in Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania, because in their view Nazi Germany "liberated" them from "Serbian repression".⁹ Consequently, when Nazi Germany was

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Romeo Gurakuqi, *Shqipëria dhe tokat e lirueme, 1939-1946*, Botimet Jozef, 2018

defeated and Kosovo and the Albanian-majority parts of Macedonia were returned to being part of Yugoslavia, nothing of Nazi ideology remained in Albania.

Also, the communist rule totally eradicated any trace of alternative powers or even the memory of any alternative political forces. After half a century and major changes in Albania's cultural, social, religious and political life, the old forces before the Second World War, or even those during the Second World War, had considerable difficulties regaining their lost ground. Also, Albanian society came out of an extreme regime, a left wing-one, and was very unlikely to accept any other extremist parties or organizations. Therefore, all the extremist tendencies were channeled in the main political parties and there they were weakened gradually by the political force.

Russian influence in Albania

Compared to other Balkan countries like Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Greece, which have had mostly good relations with Russia during the last centuries, the same cannot be said of Albania. The only time when Albania and Russia (the Soviet Union at the time) had good and very close relations was in the period between 1948 and 1961. Especially since the fall of the communist regime in Albania, Albania's geopolitical alliances with the United States and the European Union, have been completely at odds with Russia's geopolitical positions.

Also, Russian opposition towards Kosovo's independence and Russian support for Serbia in this issue has damaged considerably Russia's image in the public eye. Consequently, this has limited considerably the possibility of any Russian propaganda or messages being disseminated in Albanian media or among the Albanian public in general. Practically, there is no chance of Russian influence as long as Russia opposes Kosovo's independence. Nevertheless, some Russian produced disinformation reaches the Albanian public, but unconsciously. There have been some cases when fake news originating from Russia or Russian-affiliated organizations, questioning NATO's capacities, NATO's ability to protect the Baltic states, NATO's armament capabilities compared to Russia's, have been published in Albanian media. But this was not a direct Russian disinformation

campaign aimed at the Albanian public. The Albanian media had taken the news from English-language websites and published the information without checking its origin or truthfulness. Until now, there is no knowledge of a disinformation campaign aimed at Albania that originated from Russia or Russian affiliated entities or organizations.¹⁰

Russian influence in Albania is much debated, but there is very little evidence of it, of any Russian financing or attempts at influence.¹¹ Until now, there hasn't been any report of Russia financing any political party or organization in Albania. The only instance of a political party being accused of receiving Russian financing was in 2019. At the time, American journalists uncovered that the Democratic Party had hired a lobbyist in the United States, who at the same time worked for a Scottish company which was owned by two Russians.¹² The case was investigated by the Albanian authorities but nothing wrong or illegal was uncovered. Even though the lobbyist hired by the Democratic Party had some ties to Russian businessmen, this seemed to be highly circumstantial, as the DP's lobbying in the United States in this case had nothing to do with Russia.

At the same time, there are also no Russian investments in Albania, which in other Balkan countries have served in the past as channels for Russian influence. The Albanian government has silently excluded Russian offers from major tenders. Even though it is not illegal for Russian companies to bid in open tenders or to invest in Albania, all Albanian governments have been careful to exclude the possibility of any major Albanian company falling in the hands of Russian companies or companies related in some way to Russia.

According to the latest SHISH (Albanian Intelligence Services) report in 2019, Russian attempts at influence in Albania have increased, but they are still at a very low level. The report stressed that Russia currently has no influence in Albanian politics and no investments in the country.

¹⁰ Interview with police officer, in charge of extremist activities online

¹¹ Ibid

¹² <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/incident/mother-jones-alleges-unidentified-russian-source-supported-right-wing-albanian-party-through-shell-companies/>

It is unlikely for the moment that any political parties or organizations would publicly express pro-Russian sentiments. In the Albanian political climate which, for historical reasons, is mostly anti-Russian, it would be almost impossible for a party to survive, let alone win elections or any seats in parliament if it shows and propagates pro-Russian ideas and messages. In a certain way, Russia has been transformed into the “bogeyman” in Albanian politics. Each political party would attack their rivals with accusations of being pro-Russian as if this is viewed as the highest sacrilege.

Conclusions

Right-wing radicalism and extremism is an almost non-existent phenomenon in Albania. This is because of historical reasons mostly, but also because of the characteristics of right-wing politics in Albania, which was really born during the Second World War as a nationalist movement, but contrary to other right-wing extremist parties in Europe, as fiercely pro-Western, pro-United States and pro-NATO.

Also, another significant reason why right-wing extremism is non-existent is that even though Albania was conquered by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany during the Second World War and part of Albania’s political elites collaborated with both those regimes, they did so for pragmatic reasons, not for ideological ones. Therefore, when Nazi Germany was defeated and left Albania, the Nazi ideology went away with the last Nazi German soldiers. Consequently, when communist rule collapsed after half a century, the reborn far-right politics fell in the same line as during the Second World War – it was once again nationalist, but pro-Western, and pro-NATO.

Nevertheless, this far-right politics in Albania didn’t have much success even after the fall of the communist regime. Politics in the 90s was immediately split into two factions: the right-wing Democratic Party and the left-wing Socialist Party, which together account for almost 90% of the votes. The system created by these two main parties was such that it didn’t leave much space for other political parties and consequently the far-right parties reborn after the fall of the communist regime slowly lost pace and became marginalized. Nowadays those parties have no chance anymore of being in parliament and their

ideology is very marginal in Albanian public discussions.

At the same time, as fiercely anti-Russian and anti-Serbian, far-right political parties and groups in Albania could not collaborate or be financed by Russia. Therefore, they were and are underfinanced and are not capable of large-scale organization and influence. In this aspect, the far right in Albania differs considerably from almost all other far-right parties and organizations in Western and Eastern Europe.

What the future of far-right politics in Albania will be is still difficult to predict. At the moment the political system is almost perfectly divided between the Socialist and Democratic parties, and the possibility of a third party breaking their dual dominance is very difficult. Even the Socialist Movement for Integration, which in the 2017 elections was a powerful third force in parliament, was reduced into a marginal and insignificant party in the 2021 parliamentary elections.

Nevertheless, new developments like the influx of foreign workers, a topic which is being discussed in Albania at the moment, can alter the balance and create the conditions for far-right politics to flourish in response to immigration.

RIGHT-WING RADICALIZATION IN BULGARIA

Mila Serafimova¹, PhD; Lora Simeonova, PhD;
Martin Sokolov

Introduction

In Bulgaria, there is no structure that specifically deals with the problems of right-wing radicalism, there is no official legal definition of the term, and there is no separate register of offenses committed on the grounds of right-wing radicalism. The main activities of the employees of the Ministry of Interior in the sector include preventing sports hooliganism and ensuring security at major sporting events, mainly football. Furthermore, there is no centralized organization to deal with the problems of right-wing radicalism and the responsibilities and activities are rather scattered between different institutions, such as the State Agency for National Security and the Ministry of Interior. Notably, there is also no cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Youth and Sports to prevent radicalization in young people.

General situation in the country with regard to right-wing extremism

There is an objective threat in Bulgaria of right-wing radicalization. Contributing factors that we can point out include what is happening in Europe, the ethnic and religious minorities, and socially deprived individuals who are the most vulnerable. Traditionally, far right ideology in Bulgaria has been coalesced around anti-Turkish and anti-Roma sentiments. However, since the collapse of the communist regime it has also expanded to include anti-Semitic and in recent years, as in most Western countries, anti-migrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric and ideas.

Anti-Turkish rhetoric, in particular, is historically rooted in the political discourse of the country, as it was even a mainstay of the

¹ Dr. Mila Serafimova is Media and Information Program Coordinator at Sofia Security Forum, Associate Professor, Ph.D. at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and at National Defence Academy.

Bulgarian Communist Party, culminating in the Revival Process, which was focused on the forced assimilation of the ethnic Turkish minority, and ultimately led to the expulsion of over 360,000 Bulgarian ethnic Turks in 1989. As a wider result, this has allowed anti-Turkish rhetoric and views to persist across the political spectrum.

Nationalist organizations that not represented in parliament can be separated in three categories: skinheads involved in spontaneous attacks on minorities or foreigners, often without a specific ideological basis; far-right organizations based on common interests such as music, football, sports, history, religious beliefs, or extreme ideas; and passive individuals who are voters of far-right political parties. A strict distinction between the three categories of far-right groups is not possible, as, depending on their interests, their members are usually part of more than one group. In addition, these groups often merge and the actors move from one to another.²

Main ideologies and narratives and their manifestation

With regard to anti-Roma prejudice, the discussion is often centered on high levels of crime, welfare dependency, and the very high birth rates. What both topics have in common, however, is the propagation of the core fear of the replacement of ‘true ethnic Bulgarians’. This became particularly evident during the peak of the migration wave to Europe from the Middle East and Central Asia in 2015-2016. At its core, the rhetoric mimicked that of anti-Roma and anti-Turkish sentiments, that foreign to the nation existential threats are going to imminently replace the ethnic population of the country.

While not prevalent, anti-Semitic rhetoric persists with right-wing parties and organizations in Bulgaria. On 17 January 2021, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences organized a roundtable co-hosted by the Ministry of Defence to present a report – *Jews’ Labour Obligation during World War 2: Rescue Plan or Repressive Measure?* – which denied that authorities forced the male Jewish population into labour

² Corruption, Censorship and Anti-Semitism: The US State Department Report on Bulgaria. BoulevardBulgaria.bg, March 31, 2021, available at: <https://boulevardbulgaria.bg/articles/koruptsiya-tsenzura-antisemitizam-dokladat-na-darzhavniya-departament-na-sasht-za-balgariya>

camps in the early 1940s and stated that instead the Army Labour Corps drafted Jews as part of a government plan to save them from the Nazis. This led to swift backlash and criticism and further highlighted the spread of right-wing views among politicians, executives, and the general public.

People part of the LGBT community, like in many countries, have also become a target of right-wing oriented groups and parties. In February 2020, an activist disrupted an event critical of fascism at Sofia University and threatened the organizers. In October the same year, right-wing organizations condemned a book on sexual education meant for young children. Inter alia, there was a steep rise in online activity aimed against the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the US and Western Europe. It is to be noted that as in other cases, these views were not limited to ‘conventional’ right-wing parties, but were also promoted by left-wing ones. Nevertheless, as with other cases, there was wide societal support for far-right discourse. One of the more disturbing aspects of the incident in Sofia University was that the university’s own security guards agreed with the arguments of the extremists threatening the organizers. What is more, especially when it comes to Black Lives Matter and LGBT rights, far right actors have been increasingly supported by newly appearing ‘conservative’ organisations that strive to look more moderate on the surface. Thus, rather than being radical or extreme, far-right ideas in Bulgaria have become the norm, with other ideas or discourses struggling to gain visibility.

As an attempt to challenge the spread of right-wing ideology, in February the Supreme Administrative Court upheld Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova’s ban on an annual march of right-wing extremists to honour Gen. Hristo Lukov (Lukovmarsh), a 1940s leader of the anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi Union of Bulgarian National Legions. In previous years, the Sofia Administrative Court had overturned the mayor’s banning of the march. The annual march has been held since 2003 and traditionally attracted far-right activists from across Europe. The event is organized by the neo-Nazi group Bulgarian National Union.

COVID-19 and the far right

Through most of 2020, Bulgaria was shaken by anti-corruption

protests, regardless of political affiliation. This turbulent political landscape allowed for many right-wing ideologies to manifest themselves online by masquerading as anti-mafia. Radical views were further exacerbated by conspiracy theories and anti-government sentiments, particularly pertaining to the anti-COVID measures taken by the government. The pandemic in general was a main topic for the oppositional far-right parties that organized protests against the lack of economic and social measures by the government in May 2020. Some of the protesters also subscribed to 5G theories of conspiracy.

According to a report by the US Department of State, in 2020 the Jewish NGO Shalom reported death threats, increased incidents of anti-Semitic hate speech in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and periodic vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments. At the same time, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) and Jehovah's Witnesses reported fewer instances of harassment and threats, attributing the change to COVID-19 restrictions. Jehovah's Witnesses said some media continued to misrepresent their activities. Protestants stated that the media published information about members of their community who tested positive for COVID-19, while not doing so for members of any other religious group. An Alpha research survey of Orthodox Christians and nonbelievers issued in January found that the rate of mistrust of Muslims was 26%, of Jews and Protestants – 10%, and of Catholics – 8%.

Activities, including criminal activities, of right-wing extremists

Many football fan organisations are made up of extreme right-wingers and nationalists, such as the Tangra Warriors. There are also left-wing extremists and anarchists among sports club supporters. Sometimes the agitators of Miner Pernik and the National Resistance cooperate. There are also connections between organizations/agitators on a transnational level, as is the case between fans of Botev Plovdiv and Aris Thessaloniki. Many of the agitators strive to build a positive image in society by engaging in social activities, helping individuals, collecting donations for children, etc. They were especially busy during

the COVID-19 pandemic and the refugee crises. The ultras are people with very active social positions.

For each sporting event, the Ministry of Interior prepares a risk assessment, but it is for the needs of planning the operation to ensure law and order. There is no risk assessment and provision of sufficient security by the organizers of sports events themselves. Some of the agitators have an established structure, but rather self-organize through social networks. They communicate through protected social groups, access to which is very limited.

Nevertheless, undoubtedly the most prominent far-right organizations are Military Union Vasil Levski (MU Vasil Levski) and Bulgarian National Resistance Shipka (BNO Shipka). The two unions gained widespread prominence during the peak of the migration waves in 2015-2016, when they organized militias to protect the borders from migrants. Since then they have been organizing trainings of volunteers and actively promoting conspiracy theories, while seeking to enhance relations with other far-right organizations on a regional and transnational level, including with the infamous Russian Night Wolves. What is more, on 8 April 2019 the organizations held a welcome gathering for “Putin’s riders” in the city of Burgas. In the parallel protest against Night Wolves, taking place at the same time, three far-right activists – Svetlozar Minov, Stoycho Gerginchev, and Atanas Mihov – assaulted protesters Ivan Penchev and Ivo Doshev.

The two nationalist organizations were again cast into the spotlight after political scientist Kiril Avramov and investigative journalist Ruslan Trad identified ties between them and weapons trafficking in an article published for Bellingcat³. According to the findings of Avramov and Trad, the militias smuggled weapons and munitions through the port of Varna, which is supposed to have been used for the training of “volunteers” in the area of Svezhen in Strandzha. Furthermore, it is clear that these “exercises” are attended by well-known members of Western European far-right organizations, such as the former leader of

³ Avramov, Kiril & Ruslan Trad. Self-Appointed Defenders Of “Fortress Europe”: Analyzing Bulgarian Border Patrols. Bellingcat.com. 17/05/2019, available at: www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/05/17/self-appointed-defenders-of-fortress-europe-analyzing-bulgarian-border-patrols/

the German Pegida, Tatjana Festerling. The connection with her most likely dates back to the period in which she was the manager of Black Sea Consulting in Bulgaria.

Jim Dawson, who heads the radical British Knights Templar International, also provides assistance and support to the Bulgarian militias. It is believed that the supporter of the idea of “Russia as the Third Rome” was a guest of MU Vasil Levski and BNO Shipka with the ex-leader of the British National Party, Nick Griffin. Dawson donated drones, uniforms, armored vests too and supposedly served as a bridge with former special forces that were to assist with the training of volunteers.

On social media, the leaders of the militias boast about their connections with the far right in Romania who attend the “exercises”, and about partnerships with the Cyberpol & ECIPS Agencies, headed by Ricardo Baretzky. The investigation also reveals that among the “coaches” of the Bulgarians is the former veteran from Afghanistan – paratrooper Igor Zorin, and the native “militias” are modeled on those in Eastern Ukraine, as well as those in other countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

In the last two years BNO Shipka has stopped to actively advertise its relations with international partners, albeit in almost daily videos the leader of the organization, self-proclaimed Lt. Col. Walter Kalashnikov, emphasizes that they are in constant contact. Regardless, exercises in the mountains continue, mainly in the area of the Varbishi Prohod. The footage from the last one from 15 to 18 August 2021, uploaded on social networks, shows both men and women of different ages, including some that have brought their children to the exercises.

However, the preparedness and enlightenment promised via drills by BNO Shipka is not free of charge. The annual subscription to the organization’s secret monthly bulletins, which reveal countless secrets – from the plan of the global elite to destroy the world, through the truth about Hitler, Kennedy and September 11, to prescriptions against cancer – costs BGN 150. For BGN 1,200, people can get a special “Investment Bulletin”, which reveals, for example, “3 secrets of how to quickly make 10 thousand dollars”.⁴ These paid “services” are one of

⁴ Sample newsletters can be found in the blog "The Fight for Planet Earth!": <https://bgprevedi.com/shipka-secret-report/>

the reasons that the leadership of the alliance was attacked and accused of fraud by former associates. For this purpose, the ex-volunteers have even made a special page on Facebook – *Gold coins for MU Vasil Levski and BNO Shipka*⁵ – which has 530 followers and was active in the period February 2019-2020.

And if the revelations about possible abuses of the leaders of MU Vasil Levski and BNO Shipka spread like gossip on social networks, then other more dangerous processes are taking place in the ranks of the paramilitary organization. Some of the “volunteers” from Southern Bulgaria are developing a new organization – Bulgarian Shield – which is split into armed volunteer units and is already conducting its first exercises along the border in the areas of Arda and Mogilovo in Smolyan and Svilengrad. “Patriots who love and fight for their country” have had a Facebook page since 4 August 2021, vowing to be more active offline than online. So far, the page has about 400 followers, and their last action is from 3 September in Svilengrad. They contact the volunteers by phone – mostly via WhatsApp, rarely announcing where their next exercises will be. According to posts by some of their members – such as Stoyan Zarov and Spas Paunov⁶ – the hikes have been taking place since spring. And on 3 July, they even brag in their group *Bulgarian Shield - News*⁷ that they also have their own secret base in an undisclosed location.⁸ Particularly active in communication on the social network are the members of the Smolyan branch of the paramilitary organization, who have their own group *Bulgarian Shield*

⁵ The group is available at: www.facebook.com/%D0%96%D1%8A%D0%BB%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%92%D0%BE%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D1%81%D1%8A%D1%8E%D0%B7-%D0%92%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BB-%D0%9B%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%B8-%D0%91%D0%9D%D0%9E-%D0%A8%D0%B8%D0%BF%D0%BA%D0%B0-912342052430184/?Ref=page_internal

⁶ Spas Paunov at the time when he was a proud member of the militia: <https://bit.ly/2WSiBoQ>

⁷ The group has nearly 300 members and is available at: www.facebook.com/groups/210006710947397/

⁸ The photo from the database is available at: www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=844570099822357&set=gm.226820499266018

- *Smolyan*.⁹ Volunteers who justify their activities on Art. 51 of the constitution, have their own coat of arms and flag – a lion’s head with crossed swords behind it. And it seems that the influx of refugees from Afghanistan is mobilizing the ranks of far-right “patriots.” Given the experience of some of them in the MU Vasil Levski and BNO Shipka, it is good to place them under monitoring.

Communication channels of the MU Vasil Levski and BNO Shipka:

- Official website – <https://www.bnoshipka.org/>

Applications for membership in the organization are submitted via the website. There is also a rich news and video archive and the bank accounts of the organizations are also provided. Most of the hundreds of videos are no longer available because they were removed Facebook and YouTube.

- Facebook

Due to the fact that their posts are regularly reported for breaching community standards and taken down by moderators, the organization distributes content through various pages, groups and profiles. These include the official *Military Union - BNO Shipka*¹⁰ page with 17,000 followers, the *Military Union* group¹¹ with over 4,700, the group of the Sofia organization¹² with over 3,700, the page of the *National Salvation Committee* with 2,500,¹³ the page of the division from Knezha¹⁴ with

⁹ The group has nearly 50 members and is available at:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/162676332560239/>

¹⁰ The page is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/voenensauz>

¹¹ The group is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/MILITARYUNION/>

¹² The group is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/858436560930468/>

¹³ Page available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/NATIONALRESCUECOMMITTEE>

¹⁴ The group is available at: www.facebook.com/%D0%92%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D0%A1%D0%AA%D0%AE%D0%97-%D0%91%D0%9D%D0%9E-%D0%A8%D0%B8%D0%BF%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%9A%D0%9D%D0%95%D0%96%D0%90-1522719694717174/

over 1,500, and the Montana group¹⁵ with 500 followers. Most videos and materials are published by the two profiles of Vladimir Rusev – Vladimir Rusev¹⁶ with 4,700 subscribers where posts garner the most engagement, even more than on the official website, and the backup Vladimir Rusev¹⁷ with nearly 800.

- YouTube

The channel has 756 subscribers and 85 uploaded videos, but is not actively used from 2016 onwards.

- Telegram

From 14 August the organization also has a channel in Telegram called *Bulgarian Military Union “Vasil Levski”*¹⁸ which so far has gained 510 members.

Bulgarian National Union (BNS) communication channels:

- Official sites

The main one is www.bgns.net. It has a modern design, excellent functionality, regular updates and extremely rich content, including documents and videos, a photo and audio archive, and detailed information about the activities of the BNS in Bulgaria and abroad. “Lukovmarsh” has its own portal, www.lukovmarsh.info, which is also updated regularly.

- Facebook

The organization now only maintains its *Free Signal* podcast page¹⁹ with 360 subscribers and its *Lukovmarsh*²⁰ page with more than 12,000 followers. The latter was created in 2013, is administered by 7 people, and since January 2020 has sponsored only one post with the news that Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev will investigate the BNS. Photos and news are published on the page and comments and images that breach Facebook’s community standards are not allowed. Also,

¹⁵ The group is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/144569689572917/>

¹⁶ The profile is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/vladimir.rusev.750>

¹⁷ Profile available at: <https://www.facebook.com/SSMilitaryUnion>

¹⁸ The channel is available at: <https://t.me/joinchat/qZW7ELIRvG8xYzM0>

¹⁹ The page is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/SvobodenSignal/>

²⁰ The page is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/lukovmarsh>

there is still a page of the Bulgarian National Union on Facebook²¹ with about 500 followers, created in February 2020, but it actually focuses on the activities of the former leader and founder of the movement – Boyan Rasate. The nationalist even ran in the early parliamentary elections on 11 July with the Bulgarian National Union-ND and won 4,690 votes.

- Telegram

The BNS is obviously in line with global trends among nationalists and in 2018 created their own channel²² on the social network which has 469 followers and is updated regularly.

- YouTube

Here, due to strict regulations, the BNS has closed its channel. However, it still uploads content from its *Free Signal*²³ podcast, mentioned earlier. The podcast has nearly 185 subscribers on YouTube and 15 episodes uploaded so far, averaging about 400 views each. Radio broadcasts are also uploaded to the Speaker platform²⁴, as well as in a special section of the website.²⁵

Lukov March (Lukovmarsh) against moral decay

“They seduce, instead of coerce” – this is how the Bulgarian National Union (BNS) views the world liberal elite, which enslaves nations by “planting vices and moral decay”. One of the most resilient far-right formations today, has been successful not only online but offline too for the past two decades, undermining the foundations of liberal democracy and accumulating energy from young and angry supremacists.

Lukovmarsh, an 18-year tradition, has become a symbol of the far right in our country, and attracts like-minded people from all over

²¹ The page is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/BNS.officialpage>

²² The channel is available at: <https://t.me/s/BNSIYI?before=194>

²³ The channel is available at: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCR_L_suuzbrjh86HkxNT3Q

²⁴ The channel is available at: https://www.speaker.com/show/f_8514

²⁵ The section is available at: <https://bgns.net/%d1%81%d0%b2%d0%be%d0%b1%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%b5%d0%bd-%d1%81%d0%b8%d0%b3%d0%bd%d0%b0%d0%bb/>

Europe. It is the most successful product of the BNS. In the years since 2003, the February procession in memory of Gen. Hristo Lukov has become a magnet for far-right organizations which march with torches through the streets of Sofia. After its failure in 2020,²⁶ Lukovmarsh returned in February 2021, despite another ban by the mayor of Sofia and the case to ban the Bulgarian National Union – Edelweiss (BNSE), filed by the Prosecutor’s Office. The motto of the march was “We capitulate!” And although fewer, because of the absence of “delegates” from abroad, the nationalists marched with the face of Gen. Lukov under the flags of BNSE. Only days later, on 16 February 2021, the Sofia City Court (SCC) rejected a request to cancel the registration of the organization cited by the prosecution as a neo-Nazi, paramilitary, and unconstitutional entity.

In their testimony before the court, the representatives of the Bulgarian National Union deny that they are followers of the legionaries of Gen. Lukov and point out that they honor him as a hero of the First World War. Their other defensive arguments are that the procession passes without disturbing the public order, and their goal is not to sow enmity. In an article in *Free Europe*, Tatiana Waksberg summarizes the reasons in defence of the procession: “1. The expressed opinions on websites and forums against LGBT minorities and migrants are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of the organization; 2. The march does not engage in any activity against public order; 3. Gen. Lukov himself is presented as a person who is a national hero despite certain allegations regarding his personal ideology.”²⁷

As reported in the SANS Annual Report in 2020²⁸, the spread of COVID-19 is the main reason for the significant reduction in the activities of far-right formations in Europe. ‘The restrictive measures imposed revocation of a larger part of the planned activities, including

²⁶ In 2020, the anniversary was marked only by a torchlight vigil in front of Gen.'s home. Lukov after the ban by the mayor of Sofia Yordanka Fandakova (who later fell in court) for the nationalists to march on the streets of Sofia.

²⁷ Waxberg, Tatiana. "No evidence". How Lukovmarsh entered into the courtroom and left justified. February 24, 2021, SvobodnaEvropa.bg, available at: <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31119040.html>

²⁸ The full text of the report is available at: https://www.dans.bg/images/stories/Information/Doklad_DANS_2020.pdf

joint initiatives of structures of various countries’²⁹, the document notes.

From the site of BNS, which is maintained regularly and professionally, it is clear that the last participation of Bulgarians in a procession abroad³⁰ is from September 2020 in Gdansk, Poland, where the nationalists demonstrated under the title “Never again fraternal wars!”, along with their allies from Fortress Europe – the People’s and Social Front (Národní a sociální fronta) from the Czech Republic, Les Nationalistes from France, and four founding organizations in Poland. From the alliance, absent were only the Hungarian Legion (Légió Hungária) and the German Right (Die Rechte).

Fortress Europe itself was established on 21 April 2019 in Sofia, and during its first year, the BNS boasts that they held 5 meetings in four countries.³¹ The alliance also maintains good contact with the Nordic Resistance Movement, the Romanian Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu Foundation, the Russian Imperial Movement (RIA), the Ukrainian Azov Detachment, the Croatian Pure Party of Rights, and the Italian CasaPound Italia. Over the years, they have exchanged many visits, often together with representatives of Blood and Honor, according to the archives of their official website. The BNS also boasts that their international partners have been ardently supporting them during their legal battle in the last year, both with actions in front of Bulgarian embassies (in France, for example), and by publicizing the “repression” against them in the radical media. According to Plamen Dimitrov, who heads the Sofia branch of the Bulgarian National Union and is in charge of foreign relations, the far-right community in Europe

²⁹ Ibid., P. 12

³⁰ A report from the event is available on the official website of the Bulgarian National Union: <https://bgns.net/%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%b3%d0%b0-%d0%bf% % d0% be% d0% b2% d0% b5% d1% 87% d0% b5-% d0% b1% d1% 80% d0% b0% d1% 82% d1% 81% d0% ba% d0% b8- % d0% b2% d0% be% d0% b9% d0% bd% d0% b8/>

³¹ The balance sheet for the work in the first year is available on the BNS website: <https://bgns.net/%d0%b5%d0%b4%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d0%b3%d0%be%d0% b4% d0% b8% d0% bd% d0% b0-% d0% ba% d1% 80% d0% b5% d0% bf% d0% be% d1% 81% d1% 82-% d0% b5% d0% b2% d1% 80% d0% be% d0% bf% d0% b0/>

perceives the case against Bulgarian nationalists as more scandalous than the banning of Golden Dawn in Greece.³² In their homeland, the BNS are proud of their actions and even declared the period May-June as a “Month of Resistance against Gender Ideology”.³³

The nationalists are also happy to accept the loosening of the COVID measures, which returns the agitators to the stadiums – justified, given that there are many ultras in their ranks. In July, the stadiums of Beroe Stara Zagora, Botev Plovdiv, Levski Sofia, Lokomotiv Plovdiv, Lokomotiv Sofia, Miner Pernik, Neftohimik Burgas, Spartacus Varna, and Heber Pazardzhik were waving banners “Bulgarians do not kneel!”, along with the flags of MU Vasil Levski and BNO Shipka. The goal was to oppose “another anti-national idea – the global contagion of political correctness”.³⁴ From March to the end of August, the BNS also took part in their traditional celebrations – such as in the torchlight procession in traditional costumes in Stara Zagora “Slavery is eliminated through struggle”, organized by Defender, the memorial ceremony for Todor Alexandrov, etc.

In the pandemic year of 2021, the BNS moved to a new headquarters in Sofia. There they organize lectures and book premieres, and now have a new publishing house – Pen and Sword, which publishes *Our Struggle*, the program of the Union of Bulgarian National Legions,

³² The quote is from an interview for the Russian platform "Vanguard of the Russian youth": <https://bgns.net/%d0%b8%d0%bd%d1%82%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b2% d1% 8e-% d0% b0% d0% b2% d0% b0% d0% bd% d0% b3% d0% b0% d1% 80% d0% b4-% d1% 80% d1% 83% d1% 81% d0% ba% d0% b0% d1% 82% d0% b0-% d0% bc% d0% bb% d0% b0% d0% b4% d0% b5% d0% b6/>

³³ "Achievements" from BNS arrange a chronicle on their website: <https://bgns.net/2021-06-%d1%81%d1%8a%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d1%82% d0% b8% d0% b2% d0% b0-% d1% 81% d1% 80% d0% b5% d1% 89% d1% 83-% d0% b4% d0% b6% d0% b5% d0% bd% d0% b4% d1% 8a% d1% 80-% d0% b8% d0% b4% d0% b5% d0% be% d0% bb% d0% be% d0% b3% d0% b8% d1% 8f>

³⁴ A report from the action is available on the BNS website: <https://bgns.net/%d0%b1%d1%8a%d0%bb%d0%b3%d0%b0%d1%80%d0%b8%d1% 82% d0% b5-% d0% bd% d0% b5-% d0% ba% d0% be% d0% bb% d0% b5% d0% bd% d0% b8% d1% 87% d0% b0% d1% 82/>

as well as the speeches of Gen. Hristo Lukov. They are sold through the organization's website and social networks, along with other merchandise products such as masks, scarves, flags, T-shirts, and mugs. Apart from these revenues, the BNS claims that they are supported by membership fees.

The BNS is on the media agenda mainly because of the controversy over Lukovmarsh, or the scandals surrounding the organization. In the mainstream media – major national television channels, newspapers, radio and news sites – they are most often cast in a negative light, or are given the opportunity to take only a defensive stance. However, this is not the case in the media which claim to have a “patriotic profile” such as the Burgas-based SKAT or IMRO's Bulgaria 24 where the BNS leader Zvezdomir Andronov and the “commander” of Lukovmarsh Plamen Dimitrov often participate in various television programs and have the chance to articulate their theses in a comfortable environment.

The organization also earns publicity in the Lubo Ognyanov TV show „Ofanziva“ which had been broadcasted for years on “Kanal 3” – a TV channel now part of “Nova Broadcasting Group” portfolio.

The BNS is also of interest to foreign media, such as Euronews and AP, which often report on Lukovmarsh. The march enjoys regular coverage from the so-called alternative right-wing media in Europe too. Notably, there are more than 10 BNS and Lukovmarsh related reports in the video archive³⁵ of the organization's website by RUPTLY, the Berlin-based subsidiary of the pro-Kremlin television network RT.

Nazis in the gym: National Resistance (NS)

Neo-Nazi vegetarians who hunt pedophiles and organize charity tournaments for terminally ill children – such a public image is being built today by the former skinheads of the NS. In the last 6 years, the divisions have found refuge in gyms, boxing and MMA halls, where they train children for free to save them from debauchery, laziness, drugs and alcohol, and organize football tournaments in memory of

³⁵ The video archive is available at:

<https://bgns.net/category/%d0%b2%d0%b8%d0%b4%d0%b5%d0%be/>

Cap. Dimitar Spisarevski.³⁶ The followers of the NS operate under the motto “Do sports, defend the homeland” and in 2019 officially registered a sports club called NS Fight Club. It has two halls in Sofia, one of them in Pasarel, and a fitness club in Blagoevgrad, where they have a strong core among the ultras, who head the Pirin SS fan club.³⁷ They also cooperate with the German neo-Nazis from the Kampf der Nibelungen club³⁸ who took part in Lukovmarsh in 2018. In the same year, five of our fighters visited their tournament near Dortmund.³⁹

The leader of the NS is theology student Blagovest Assenov, who describes himself as a “white Orthodox Christian who loves Bulgaria”⁴⁰ and has been a defendant for 8 years in a case of minor bodily injury following an attack on a Roma, whom he describes as “a gypsy, homosexual, recidivist, prostitute in Italy”.⁴¹ In his investigation from April 2021, journalist Karim Zidane reports⁴² on Assenov’s participation in an international conference in Lisbon in 2019 which brought together nearly 70 far-right activists in Europe, including Matthias Deyda of the German Die Rechte, the French nationalist Ivan Benedetti and leaders from England, Britain, Portugal, and Poland. To them, the Bulgarian revealed know-how on recruiting young members of neo-Nazi organizations through sports clubs. The faces of NS Fight

³⁶ The last tournament is scheduled for September 11 in the village of Pasarel - <https://www.facebook.com/events/185162090210986>

³⁷ The official page of the fan club is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Pirin-SS-126813020711208>

³⁸ More about the visit at: <https://www.facebook.com/sportuvaibranirodata/posts/1560611053976770>

³⁹ More about the tournament at: <https://www.facebook.com/sportuvaibranirodata/posts/1518175824886960>

⁴⁰ Petrov, Stefan. Blagovest Asenov : Define be as white Orthodox Christian, who loves Bulgaria . Iskra.bg, January 10 , 2020, available at: <https://www.iskra.bg/blagovest-asenov-opredelyam-se-kato-byal-pravoslaven-hristianin-koyto-obicha-balgaria/>

⁴¹ The victims are Bulgarians , Iskra.bg, June 25, 2021, available at: <https://www.iskra.bg/potarpevshi-sa-balgarofilite>

⁴² Zidane, Karim. NS Fight Club: How an MMA gym became a haven for Bulgaria's far-right extremists. BloodyElbow.com, April 21, 2021, available at: <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2021/4/8/22371932/ns-fight-club-mma-gym-bulgaria-far-right-extremists-neo-nazi-radicalization-feature>

Club, at least on social networks, are the ultras from Pirin SS Mircho Angelov and Nikolai Yovev. The second, in addition to a swastika tattooed on his chest, has several arrests for racist behavior. Moreover, he spent 18 months in jail on charges of placing a bomb in front of the office of “Euroroma” in Sandanski, which killed 59-year-old Malin Iliev, an ex-candidate for municipal councillor. Yovev was also an unsuccessful candidate for MEP in 2014, after his registration was deleted due to invalid documentation and an insufficient number of signatures. The attempt to get a seat in Brussels comes after the failure of the NS, who in 2013, along with Blood and Honor, NS Straight Edge and other ultra-nationalists, unsuccessfully tried to register the Nationalist Party of Bulgaria (NPB). Their second failure was in 2018, when they wanted to found Independence.

During the pandemic, the NS appear to have been focusing on sports club activities. On the *Old School Fitness* YouTube channel,⁴³ Angelov and Yovev uploaded various videos – from advice on how to survive in prison, through how to lift 100 kg from a couch, to a guide on hunting pedophiles and reports of their participation in the hetero parade in Sofia, a counter-Sofia Pride event. The organization does not maintain an official website. It relies on their YouTube network of subscribers with over 9,000 people subscribed to date⁴⁴. There is also a blog for NS Straight Edge⁴⁵ created in 2015 where a variety of materials are published – the program of the NS, *The Terrorist’s Handbook*⁴⁶, materials on National Socialist ideology, as well as fighting tactics. The portal is decorated with banners and neo-Nazi symbols such as “14/88” and has links to the restricted website of Blood and Honor and the National Socialist magazine for culture, art and politics *New Europe*.⁴⁷

Posts in Mircho Angelov’s personal profile show that he is close to the administrator of one of the biggest “patriotic groups” on Facebook

⁴³ The channel is available at: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPM0JLE0JPW_sqHmqbRXFSQ/videos

⁴⁴ Page available at: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPM0JLE0JPW_sqHmqbRXFSQ/videos

⁴⁵ The blog is available at: <http://straight-edge-bulgaria.blogspot.com/>

⁴⁶ The publication is available at: http://straight-edge-bulgaria.blogspot.com/2016/08/blog-post_22.html#more

⁴⁷ The journal is available at: <http://nseuropa.org/MAIN.htm>

called *I am a nationalist*.⁴⁸ Anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi messages are not publicly shared in the group, but content from apocryphal websites such as Vajno.info, which exploit topics like refugees and global conspiracies, is. Its administrator, Milen Petrov from Pernik, who works in roadside assistance, manages 8 pages like this one with over 100,000 followers and has successfully monetized this set-up. On the predpriemach.com website, the so-called patriot offers 10 paid publications within a month for only BGN 99.⁴⁹ On biznesforum.bg, he participates as a buyer of verified Facebook profiles and enjoys good reviews from sellers.⁵⁰

National Resistance enjoys favourable treatment from the news website *Iskra*, published by Stefan Petrov-Mashinata. Opinions from the neo-Nazi organization and interviews with Assenov, as well as his speeches, are regularly published there, often in response to calls from organizations such as Shalom to ban the ultranationalist movement. The leader of the National Resistance is also regularly invited to participate in some television programs such as programs on SKAT TV and *Offensive with Lubo Ognyanov* on Channel 3/Nova News.

Conclusions and recommendations

Right-wing radicalization is an objective and long-term threat for Bulgaria, as evidenced by the activity of several organizations with such ideology. Moreover, their efforts to form positive perceptions among the general public are bearing fruit, thus making their extreme views part of the opinion landscape in the country. This is further exacerbated by their sophisticated use of social media and networks, regardless of

⁴⁸ The page is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Az.Sum.Nacionalist/>

⁴⁹ The offer is available at: <https://www.predpriemach.com/threads/%D0%9D%D0%90%D0%99-%D0%94%D0%9E%D0%91%D0%A0%D0%90%D0%A2%D0%90-%D0%9E%D0%A4%D0%95%D0%A0%D0%A2%D0%90-%D0%97%D0%90-fb-%D0%A0%D0%95%D0%9A%D0%9B%D0%90%D0%9C%D0%90-75-000.87371/>

⁵⁰ The offer is available at: <https://www.predpriemach.com/threads/%D0%9D%D0%90%D0%99-%D0%94%D0%9E%D0%91%D0%A0%D0%90%D0%A2%D0%90-%D0%9E%D0%A4%D0%95%D0%A0%D0%A2%D0%90-%D0%97%D0%90-fb-%D0%A0%D0%95%D0%9A%D0%9B%D0%90%D0%9C%D0%90-75-000.87371/>

the reservations by mass conventional news outlets and sources.

Furthermore, there is an alarming lack of measures on the institutional level to tackle the phenomenon. In the short-term it is vital to ,at the very least, offer a definition of what ‘right-wing extremism’ is and have it shared among all concerned government bodies. Second, efforts should be focused on enhancing cooperation between the state bodies in order to have a collective response to the threat. Third, agencies need to focus on prevention and deradicalization methods for such individuals and groups, as at the moment little work is being done to counter hate speech, racism, and xenophobia. Fourth, international and regional cooperation needs to be bolstered. It is evident that far-right organizations are very interconnected with their respective counterparts not only in the Balkans but throughout Europe; it would be naïve to consider that any country has national capacity on its own to both tackle and prevent right-wing radicalization.

EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION AS THREATS TO THE INTEGRITY OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES. THE MEDIA AND ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS AS DRIVERS AND ENABLERS

Prof. Alina Bârgăoanu¹

Introduction

In recent years, right-wing extremist groups, organizations and movements proliferated across the entire European Union, thus becoming an important subject of concern for the local governments. Right wing extremism describes a complex array of ideologies and activities, from nationalistic, xenophobic and homophobic rhetoric and ideologies, to authoritarianism, racism, misogyny and anti-Semitic sentiments, with an encompassing narrative, that is, the anti-establishment, anti-system one. After decades of communist rule that shaped society's development and its collective mentality, EU countries from Central and Eastern Europe have a relatively different relationship with authoritarian and populist approaches, thus providing insights into cultural translations/adaptations of transnational trends. They are part of this *l'esprit du temps*, adapting it to local sensitivities and avoiding, up until the pandemic at least, the fusion between this kind of anti-establishment narratives and the anti-European or Eurosceptic ones.

The history of far-right extremism in Romania shows that, throughout its history, it strongly employed religious symbolism, ultra-nationalist and strong anti-establishment overtones, and made use of a "messianic" rhetoric about personal sacrifice and saving the country in the name of the nation. Ever since the collapse of the communist regime in December 1989, several right-wing groups have scored electoral successes and have had representation in the Romanian Parliament. More recently, at the Romanian general elections in December 2020, a new party, on the radical right and with a strong nationalist, "patriotic",

¹ Prof. Alina Bârgăoanu is Dean of the faculty of communication and public relations of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest, Chair of the board of the European Institute of Romania

sovereigntist rhetoric, came seemingly out of nowhere and won 9% of the vote. In addition to radical and right-wing ideologies and rhetoric embraced by certain political actors and parties, in Romania across the whole political spectrum, several organizations, groups or movements that identify themselves as patriots, nationalists, sovereigntists also disseminate anti-government, anti-Western, anti-European Union rhetoric, while opposing same-sex marriage and addressing hate speeches towards members of certain ethnic minorities, sometimes even stoking anti-Semitic sentiment (albeit by indirect means and allusions to “the cabal of wealthy elite pulling the strings in Romania”, “seeking to impose a New World Order”, or a “great reset”).

The pandemic has provided ample opportunities for these relatively marginal groups to enter the mainstream of public discourse. Narratives that were once on the fringe of the Internet and that used to promote, for small audiences, an idyllic version of a mostly rural country, untouched by industrialization and by the “evil agenda of a global/transnational elite”, mixed with global conspiracies and other toxic narratives and morphed into strong political claims (dictatorship, government overreach and intrusion into private choices) and, more recently, even into geopolitical claims (“it’s time for Romania to consider its EU membership/to leave the European Union”). The anger and the protest potential of the population have been used in order to articulate a harsh critique of the “last 30 years since the fall of Communism” and, more importantly, a harsh critique and a re-interpretation of Romania’s membership in the EU and the transatlantic community.

The internet-based information ecosystem: a breeding ground for anti-system rhetoric

The Internet, specifically online social networks, have become the breeding ground for radical right-wing actors to promote ideas that are hardly compatible with liberal democracy, facilitate the exchange of tactics and strategies, recruit new members and search for funding opportunities. Online social networks have played a major role in several regards, creating opportunities to publish certain narratives, ideologies or programs, engage in disinformation and mobilization campaigns, address hateful comments, and perform intimidating tactics against opponents or targets. Activism on online social networks was framed

as a continuous fight against the “system”, including with mainstream media as part and embodiment of this very system.

In Romania, right-wing actors or organizations that cover a larger spectrum of radicalization or extremism indicators make use of a variety of online outlets, including encrypted chat apps, such as Telegram, blogs and social network websites, such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Reddit, and in some instances VKontakte, while also using fringe platforms, colonized by the right-wing extremist movement, such as BitChute or Rumble. Right-wing extremists generally rely on a combination of online and offline methods and tactics in order to enter more mainstream conversations and even to shape them.

We consider that the Internet can fuel transnational connections and facilitate coordination at an unprecedented scale; at the same time, the Internet has become a powerful tool to normalize or trivialize certain unacceptable or inappropriate behaviors, attitudes and symbols. Right-wing extremists have capitalized heavily on the COVID-19 related global narratives and conspiracies, while strongly advocating against mask mandates, vaccination or any COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the government. The number of right-wing extremist organizations is still relatively small in Romania; however, considering the large audiences that they can reach by online tools. Coupled with the prevailing anti-system rhetoric and the considerable degree of discontent among entire population, the damage that they can cause in terms of trust in democratic processes and trust in Romania’s strategic alliances is a matter of concern.

Right-wing extremism and populism in Romania: a cursory look into its history

As we have already stated, given that the experience of Communism is still a relatively recent one, countries from Eastern Europe have a different relationship with authoritarian and populist approaches. Up until the pandemic, this kind of approaches made scant appearances in the public and political sphere. We can see that, starting recently, a wave of right-wing extremism has been unfolding through new political parties, organizations, and even small, spontaneously-created groups.

Right-wing extremism in Romania has its roots in the pre-WWII Legionary Movement, an ultra-nationalist, messianic and anti-Semitic movement that was synchronous to other movements crossing Europe at that same time. In the early twentieth century, Romania was torn between traditional views and growing modern, more Europeanized approaches (Meale, 2016). An important aspect of this movement was the strong connection with religious symbolism. The right-wing extremist actors made use of religious symbolism, with Orthodox, ultra-nationalist views and messianic obsession about saving the country, while advocating against ethnic minorities, elites and any institution that was perceived as a threat to national integrity/purity.

In 2000, an ultra-nationalist, revisionist, political party, publicly entertaining anti-Semitic and anti-Roma overtones, reached 20% in parliamentary elections, coming in second place. Its party leader entered the run-off of the Presidential Elections, a context in which a mobilization of the entire political spectrum, irrespective of different ideologies, tilted the balance in favor of the representative of mainstream politics.

During the Communist period, this kind of rhetoric and any corresponding political movements were banned, both explicitly and implicitly, from public and political life. The 1989 revolution, with its strong focus on breaking any ties with the Communist period, opened the space for the re-emergence of right-wing extremist and radical rhetoric and for the re-framing of major figures associated with the Legionary Movement as “saints”, “freedom fighters”, “martyrs of Communist prisons”, “the only anti-Communist dissidence that Romania was left with during the harsh Communist rule”. This is a specific strategy for attracting supporters for far-right extremism, namely rhetorical weaponization of memory and the creation of an “actor-centered memory politics” (Zavatti, 2021) where many traditional figures of the pre-WWII Legionary movement are framed as “forgotten heroes”, saints and soldiers who were killed by the Communist and thus sacrificed for a better future for Romania. The cult of the heroes and religious mysticism (Climescu, 2013) lead to the messianic role of the savior who needs to be sanctified and adored by the masses (both in the online and the offline world).

Closer to the present day, old principles, derived from the Legionary

movement in Romania, have been adapted to the new information and social “ecosystem”; xenophobic feelings started to focus on immigrants and the threat that they pose to the internal job market, on extreme nationalism, and intolerance towards ethnic groups (Roma, Hungarians) (Cinpoes, 2012). The new version of Right-Wing extremism adds novel elements such as glorifying World War II right-wing extremists, while endorsing an anti-European Union and anti-Western discourse (Manea, 2018). An additional theme that found its place in far-right narratives is the anti-corruption battle, narrated as a battle between the pure people and its citizens versus the State, the Government, the public authorities which are viewed as flawed, liars with secret intentions and with an ongoing purpose of impoverishing the society through theft, bribes, and destruction of all the important institutions in the country (ex. education and healthcare systems). Aside from this, several political parties whose messages are reminiscent of the far-right principles have started to publicly endorse a nationalist or extreme nationalist doctrine, hold and promote homophobic, anti-Semitic and xenophobic views, while stoking anti-Western or anti-EU sentiments.

The pandemic party

During the last general elections in Romania (December 2020) and as a direct result of the turmoil created by the pandemic, a new party with a strong nationalist, anti-system and anti-establishment rhetoric won 9% of the vote and won seats in the Parliament. The party, “Alliance for the Union of Romanians” (AUR), apparently came out of nowhere, meaning they promoted their message largely below the public radar on online social networks. It embraces nationalist, anti-system, anti-establishment rhetoric, while challenging restrictions, lockdown measures, mask mandates, and the vaccination campaign. Recently, it added an anti-EU rhetoric (Fati, 2020; Chirileasa, 2020) to its cluster of narratives, even if its leaders avoid taking explicit anti-EU positions publicly; they rather argue that their political claims are synchronous to what is happening in Poland, Hungary, Italy and thus are part of a pan-European movement.

Experts estimate that the success of the party can be partly explained by its leaders and activists being constantly on the streets,

organizing rallies and demonstrations against the measures imposed by the government in order to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, their public communication efforts had been heavily focused on Facebook groups and social media posts that targeted a certain disenchanting audience, from those who had a different political orientation, to the undecided voters and those who had begun to lose confidence in the parties they previously voted for (Spotmedia, 2020). It is considered that another strategy for the online campaign was amplifying their online presence by creating many inauthentic pages and accounts, while collaborating with media agencies that were created and paid for by the party (Pressone, 2021).

During the 2020 general elections campaign, one of the most popular offline activities for attracting members and voters were caravans all over Romania, especially in small urban areas that were heavily de-industrialized after the fall of Communism and that faced an exodus of population to the more prosperous regions of Western Europe. The availability of activists and supporters to be “on the streets” and meet with “regular people” increased their credibility and social relevance, especially since their target audience is made up of citizens feeling that they have been forgotten, “left behind” by the “corrupt elites”; “simple” undecided people with unmet needs and with a general feeling of disenfranchisement and dissatisfaction with Romania’s 30+ years of capitalist experience. Voters who were in the “gray zone”, meaning undecided or generally discontent with the political class overall, were swept by an emotional discourse about an ideal country that has the potential to offer the best to its citizens and their families, if only one manages to get rid of external threats coming in the form of corruption, dominance by wealthy elites imposed by international/global organizations. Citizens ridiculed for their views or opinions by other parties and other mainstream public figures felt isolated and became the target audience for a populist, anti-establishment political campaign (Marin, 2020).

Online tools and the quasi-obsession with live footage of offline events on online social networks (both Facebook and YouTube) greatly expanded their audience to include the family members living in diaspora. Thus, another emotionally loaded topic – the scale and the condition of the Romanian diaspora living in the more prosperous

regions of the European Union – was politically weaponized. The contribution of this topic to the electoral success of the AUR party during the 2020 general elections can be partly explained by the fact that the focus was on the less successful, more disenchanted members of the Romanian diaspora and that the party built on previous rhetorical usage during electoral campaigns (2014 Presidential or 2016 elections for the European Parliament) or high profile anti-government demonstrations (2017 and 2018).

The same party organized several demonstrations and rallies attended by thousands of people against mask mandates and other COVID-19 restrictions and, more recently, against COVID-19 vaccination and the green pass. Given that they are able to express their views on the Parliament, party leaders, accompanied by self-entitled civic activists on the streets, are seeking to shape the public conversation around vaccination and the green pass in very harsh terms, sometimes with absurd and outrageous analogies (“Nazi-pass”, “genocide”, “concentration camps”, “gas chambers”, “Nazi 2.0”, “experiments done on people”, “eugenics practices”).

The role of the media and online social networks in enabling the spread of anti-system and radical narratives

The Internet, specifically social media, became a fertile ground for extreme right-wing and anti-establishment actors to spread their narratives, facilitate the exchange of tactics and strategies, even recruit new members and gain more followers. The Internet has played a role in several aspects, giving ample opportunities to engage in misinformation and disinformation campaigns, address hateful and stigmatizing comments and perform intimidating tactics against opponents or targets (trolling, digital mobbing, publishing contact information of such targets, accompanied with the explicit call to action to “bombard” them with requests in the online and offline world).

As we have already underlined, these actors employ a variety of online outlets, including encrypted chat apps (Telegram), blogs and social network websites (Facebook, YouTube, VKontakte), while also using fringe platforms, colonised by the right-wing extremist transnational movement, such as BitChute. Facebook remains the

principal medium of communication, with strong indicators that, in terms of being a host to such radical and extremist right-wing movements, it is likely to be replaced by Telegram. During the first part of the pandemic, such movements, including the political movement that managed to win seats in parliament, were not present in mainstream media (public or private televisions, radio, quality press), thus giving the general impression that they came out of nowhere. Besides, the continuous struggle with the “corrupt, lying, treacherous media” was one of their powerful narratives, which, along with all the other pandemic narratives, created a lot of engagement on social networks.

Both in 2020 and in 2021, protesters took to the streets in several Romanian cities against the public measures to contain the pandemic, more specifically, against the vaccination campaign and its alleged forced imposition upon people’s bodies and against the green pass. Protesters regularly claimed and displayed the words “freedom”, “people’s rights”, claiming that COVID-related restrictions, the vaccination campaign and, more recently, the green pass, violate their human rights. Many protestors chanted “freedom” and “down with the mask”, while large placards read “say no to forced vaccination”, or “vaccination makes you free” — a cynical and unacceptable reference to the infamous “work makes you free” sign at the entrance to Nazi concentration camps.

Moreover, on certain groups and pages on social media, COVID-19 restrictions were defined as “Welcome to Nazi Land!” while police enforcement actions during the lockdown were compared to the beginning of Nazi tyranny. Several media outlets and blogs accused state officials of behaving like Hitler and imposing Nazi-style orders, a narrative enforced by doctored pictures of current political leaders depicted as Hitler or wearing Nazi symbols and uniforms. In a similar manner, a common narrative revolved around comparisons of hospitals and schools with “concentration camps” or “extermination camps”, while Romanian citizens were compared to victims of Nazi persecution, and victims of a “global genocide”.

Major topics that extreme or radical right-wing websites, blogs, groups, and accounts address are mostly related to national history (an idyllic period of glory sometimes dating as far back as before the Roman conquest at the beginning of 2nd century AD and earlier), to

the Legionary Movement, the current status of ethnic minorities, the union of Romania with the Republic of Moldova and the re-creation of the country's historic greatness. Their narratives emphasize the trope of the simple, anonymous citizen who has the power to bring down an enemy threatening their identity, be it cultural, ethnic, socio-economic or religious in nature. What draws Romanians to this kind of movements and rhetoric is the desire to belong to an exclusive community that has access to some hidden knowledge, almost mystical in nature; a community that accepts and empowers the "normal", "average" citizen after a long period of "humiliation" and "neglect" by a "trans-partisan", "corrupt" elite. More often than not, these narratives become the names of pages on social networks, groups and hashtags, thus providing strategic signaling and contributing to the formation of dense online communities. Some keywords and slogans used include "patriots", "renaissance", "freedom", "garden of Mother Mary", "wake up, Romania", "real Romania", "truth", "faith", "apocalypse", "wake up, Diaspora", "wake up, Dacia" (the name of the territory of the Romanian state before the Roman occupation at the beginning of the 2nd Century AD), "truth" etc.

Final remarks

In the past few years, extremist, radical right-wing and anti-establishment groups have become increasingly active across the European Union. In Romania, this kind of pre-political and political forces have come "late to the table", and yet present a real challenge to the integrity of public discourse and democratic processes. They have found a special impetus during the pandemic, by exploiting the protest potential of the population, the popular anger fomented by the very real inconveniences of pandemic life and, sometimes, by the clumsiness of public authorities in designing, communicating and enforcing pandemic rules and restrictions. They capitalized on topics and narratives that were "already there" in the public space – anti-system, anti-establishment rhetoric, endemic public distrust towards any authoritative figure (doctors and teachers included), rebellion against "state/government rule", corruption of the elite, Diaspora as having a quasi-messianic role in saving Romania.

What started as a fragmented, fringe movement in the context of the lockdown and sanitary measures (protests against mask mandates, for example) morphed into a political movement, part of it already represented in parliament and shaping mainstream conversations and decisions, and another part of it even more radical, protesting on the streets or organizing online in very dense communities. The initial health-related (erroneous or misleading) claims of such pretty heterogeneous movements (“I cannot breathe because wearing the mask gives me hypoxia”) morphed into more political ones (“the government has no right to impose mask mandates”, “wearing a mask is a sign of submission to a totalitarian dictatorship”) and, increasingly, into geopolitical claims (“I do not want to be the slave/guinea pig of a tyrannical European Union, who is the source of all these transgressions”). Or, framed differently, freedom from “mask wearing” morphed into “freedom from obeying the rules imposed by a corrupt elite ruling the Romanian state for the past 30 years” and recently into “freedom to break the yoke of EU dictatorship”. The “virus” is a “colony-virus”, hence the trending of “Roexit” messaging especially on online social networks. Another metamorphosis that has taken place was the transition of these conversations from the fringes of the Internet, from marginal, relatively obscure actors, to mainstream media (television, radio, sometimes even quality press) and to high-profile public figures. The only narrative out of these clusters that is still timidly encroaching upon mainstream media is that of Roexit; for the time being, it is trending, with few exceptions, only on online social networks and on some fringe blogs and sites.

The pandemic exposed and exacerbated various levels of discontent, anger, mistrust, polarization, stark inequalities and wild discrepancies in terms of people’s political views. The ascent of such movements to the mainstream of public discourse and even to the mainstream politics exposed various pre-pandemic dysfunctions and internal vulnerabilities, such as: financial and economic challenges, socio-economic inequalities and the corresponding perception („people left behind”); financial insecurity; low trust in public authorities; weak media and information ecosystems; exuberance with the empowering and liberating potential of online social networks. Even if we are to admit that their ascent to visibility and relevance was greatly enabled

by disinformation campaigns, by elements of cognitive and memetic warfare, by network or viral propaganda, it is fair to say that these efforts aimed at information manipulation and manipulation of engagement on online social networks added „fuel to the right fire”.

In order to restore the integrity of public conversations and of democratic processes and thus restore faith in them, addressing both the fuel and the fire is needed. If history is any guidance, the robust answers to the ascent of radicalisation, extremism, anti-system and anti-establishment movements are, among other things, good governance, delivery of public goods, inclusive, and not divisive leadership, addressing inequality and sources of resentment.

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EXTREMISM AS A THREAT TO DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS IN SPREADING VIOLENT IDEOLOGIES.

The Case of the Republic of North Macedonia

Dragan Sekulovski¹

1. Introduction

Violent extremism in the Republic of North Macedonia is a phenomenon addressed in strategic documents issued by the state. However, the media generally stays away from reporting regularly on the topic, which makes it more difficult for the public to keep themselves aware and educated.

The state is currently investing time and resources into implementing the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (2018-2022)² adopted by the competent authorities. The document is derived from the Work Programme of the Government for 2017 – 2020³ and takes into consideration the “Przhino Political Agreement”⁴ that ended the political crisis in the country in 2015. The strategic document also strives to incorporate the directions issued in the European

¹ Dragan Sekulovski is Executive Director of the Association of Journalists of North Macedonia

² Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (2018-2022), https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/cve_national_strategy_eng_translation_sbu.pdf accessed on 10.08.2021

³ Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Work Programme of the Government of The Republic of Macedonia for 2017-2020, <https://vlada.mk/node/14647?ln=en-gb>, accessed on 23.08.2021

⁴ European Commission, Przhino Agreement, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news_corner/news/news-files/20150619_agreement.pdf accessed on 16.08.2021

Commission's Urgent Reform Priorities (2015)⁵, the recommendations from the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues relating to the communications interception revealed in Spring 2015, relevant recommendations issued by the Venice Commission and GRECO, recommendations from the OSCE/ODIHR, and findings and recommendations from recent annual country reports issued by the European Commission.

In July 2017, the state for the first time in recent years directly committed itself to dedicate concrete efforts to the prevention of violent extremism as part of the so-called "Plan 3-6-9" in which the directions for general reforms in the country were outlined. In this document, the government sets commitments to implement reform within the intelligence and security services. Two of the actions stipulated in "Plan 3-6-9" that relate to violent extremism are the establishment of a national committee for countering violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism, and the appointment of a national coordinator and a deputy for this body.

In 2018, the national strategy was adopted with the media being mentioned as an important actor for countering violent extremism and terrorism. In fact, according to the strategy *"the Government of the Republic of Macedonia has a social and collective responsibility to deal with violent extremism and terrorism threats through religious, local, media and educational approaches, emphasizing strengths and advantages in view of preserving the cohesion of the society"*. Although their importance is acknowledged, the media and journalists have been encountering limited opportunities for training or capacity building in relation to reporting on these topics, and have making efforts themselves to counter violent extremism and terrorism. This has led to many deficiencies in media reporting, a dominant one being sensational reporting on violent extremism. Examples include stigmatizing refugees that transit the country, labeling individuals or

⁵ EC, Urgent Reform Priorities, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news_corner/news/news-files/20150619_urgent_reform_priorities.pdf accessed on 18.08.2021

groups belonging to marginalized communities, and in some cases even fostering prejudices against members of smaller ethnic groups and framing them as being part of violent or terrorist organizations.

Further negative trends influencing media discourses on violent extremism are public statements and narratives by certain political figures from the local scene. Examples include local politicians who have been labeling refugees, triggering hatred against ethnic or religious groups, members of marginalized groups, or against military returnees. Such examples can be found both in media reports, especially in debate shows in which politicians take part, and on social media platforms that they use to promote their political views. The intensity of this kind of narratives and public communication increases prior to election processes or national referendums. A direct consequence of poor public communication is the interaction among individuals on social media, mainly younger generations in closed or open groups who spread hatred and discrimination based on ethnic, religious, sexual and political affiliation. Such misuse of freedom of expression, especially on social media, is unsanctioned by the prosecution office and the criminal courts, hence the level of impunity is high which increases the risk of hate crime and stimulates the growth of right-wing violent extremism in society.

2. General situation in the country with regard to right-wing extremism

The Republic of North Macedonia is a culturally and ethnically diverse country with a significant ethnic Albanian minority. It is also characterized by peaceful coexistence between Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Catholics, as well as people of other faiths. Based on the last census which was conducted in 2002, ethnic Macedonians constitute 64% of the population, ethnic Albanians – 25%, and the remaining 11% include Turks, Roma, Vlachs, Serbs, Bosnians and others⁶. There is no precise data about the number of religious

⁶ State Statistical Office population report (pg.65-67) issued 2013 in Skopje www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/PDFGodisnik2013/03-Naselenie-Population.pdf

monuments or buildings on the territory of the country, but according to local media estimations they are about 2,500⁷. Currently, a new national census is being conducted and results from it are expected to be published in late autumn of 2021.

Official radical groups with visible political affiliations are absent. There is no radical right-wing political party in parliament, nor is there a registered political party that can unequivocally be defined as such. Despite this, certain extreme right-wing narratives can be noticed occasionally in public discourse by individuals who are part of the political party sphere. In addition, members of one of the largest political parties in the country participating in public protests have manifested certain extremely nationalistic stands, especially towards groups and/or members of minority groups, and have frequently used items and symbols of Macedonian history⁸.

On the other hand, there are also examples of public protests, organized in the capital by members of the Albanian minority, where radical narratives can be heard as well⁹.

In recent years, a new political actor, recognized by part of the public as left-wing, appeared on the political scene and officially won seats in national parliament after the recent elections. Representatives of this political party called “Levica” are openly against NATO and participated in the anti-NATO public protest prior to the country’s accession to the alliance¹⁰. The same party is against conducting the

⁷ Religija.mk media report: How many religious objects are in Macedonia? Issued on March 2017 <https://religija.mk/kolku-verski-objekti-i-se-potrebni-namakedonija/> accessed on 30.08.2021

⁸ Slobodnaevropa.mk media report issued on January 18th 2018 “Tvr dokorni” protest against language law, EU flag burned <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/28987967.html> accessed on 05.09.2021

⁹ Deutsche Welle media report issued on 18th of January 2021: Protest for “Monster”: chanting, broken windows, insults for Fatime Fetaj accessed on 30.08.2021

¹⁰ Makfax.com.mk media report: Levica and Solza Grceva are protesting against

national census too and called for a boycott of it.¹¹ In the media, they also occasionally use harsh rhetoric towards journalists.

The country, due to its geopolitical position, is exposed to migration movements as well. However, because of the pandemic, global mobility of people was significantly lower in 2020. Based on local reports, more than 22,000 refugees passed through the Republic of Macedonia on their way to other European countries¹². In recent years, numerous reports in the media were published regarding the migration crisis, some of which containing discrimination against migrants and labeling them as terrorists, or people who may spread radicalism. *“Media covered and interpreted the events in ways that revealed deep political divides within their ranks...Media in both groups, however, often ran news articles that lacked information needed for a good understanding of the context. Overall, very little attention was given to the background of stories or to push factors that were driving the population flows.”*¹³

Individuals with Macedonian citizenship have joined the war zones to fight for the Islamic state. There is no publicly available register with the exact number of people who have returned from war, mainly in Syria, but media reports claim that: *“about 130 Macedonian*

NATO in front of the Parliament issued on January 2018 <https://makfax.com.mk/daily-news/%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B0-%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D1%80%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B0/> accessed on 30.08.2021

¹¹ Sitel.mk media report: Apasiev calls for census boycott: Only mass non-cooperation can bring down this forgery, issued on September 5th 2021 <https://sitel.com.mk/apasiev-povika-na-bojkot-na-popisot-samo-masovna-nesorabotkamozhe-da-go-urne-ovoj-falsifikat> accessed on 05.09.2021

¹² Macedonian Young Lawyers Associations, Field Report issued on December 2020 <https://myla.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/FIELD-REPORT-2019-MYLA.pdf> accessed on 27.08.2021

¹³ Tuneva, M. Media coverage of the refugee crisis in Macedonia, SEENPM, https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Crisis-reporting-Macedonia_Final.pdf, accessed 28.08.2021

*citizens joined the so-called Islamic state and participated in the war. At least ten people were killed in the fighting*¹⁴. In addition, local media occasionally reports on police actions carried out by the Ministry of the Interior to arrest war returnees who have been part of ISIS. The arrests take place mainly at the border, but also in urban areas¹⁵.

Based on the National Strategy for Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism, it is estimated that since the end of 2012 until the beginning of 2016 up to 1,000 individuals from the Western Balkan countries travelled to and stayed in Syria and Iraq, some of them with their families. Some joined ISIS, while others aligned themselves with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (also known as Tahrir al-Sham, and formerly known as Al Nusrah Front). These individuals come from Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Macedonia. After ISIS lost its grip on some of the territories it previously controlled, a number of foreign terrorist fighters from the Western Balkans returned home or travelled to third countries, while others died in battle¹⁶.

The public has limited knowledge about violent extremism.

Citizens' understanding of what violent extremism is is supposed to be improved now because of some recent awareness raising campaigns and activities, but despite this it still remains rather poor. There are several reasons why. First of all, the term right-wing violent extremism is difficult to define since different countries have different local

¹⁴ Deutsche Welle media report: Macedonia - the first European country to accept returnees from Syria, issued on 09.08.2018 <https://www.dw.com/mk/%D1%9C%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B0-%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BB-%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%84%D0%B5%D1%80-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8/a-44994587> accessed on 30.08.2021

¹⁵ Voice of America media report: Terrorist cell smashed, eight jihadists arrested <https://mk.voanews.com/a/5715927.html> issued on 20.12.2020

¹⁶ National Strategy for Fight Against Terrorism (2018-2022) (pg.27) as of February 2018 https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/cve_national_strategy_eng_translation_sbu.pdf accessed on 10.08.2021

specifics. Therefore, this phenomenon requires a multidisciplinary approach and the local issues of the country that may trigger violence should be considered to derive a proper definition. Apart from the definition, the local country context should be taken into account along with other issues such as political discrimination, fundamentalism, political marginalization, social exclusion, corruption, radicalization, and so on. In North Macedonia, political discrimination, especially prior to elections, is very visible and the same is true of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

Local civic non-profit organizations can be helpful. These organizations have occasional activities, engaging individuals and groups in training events or awareness raising campaigns to prevent violent extremism. Such initiatives are usually funded collectively by the international community or, in some cases, by individual members of the international community through small grants. However, general perceptions prevail that a lot more funds are spent on other topics, such as media literacy, than on awareness raising or educational activities related to the prevention of violent extremism. Non-formal coalitions and/or small networks of organizations that are dedicated to implementing projects in the area of prevention of violent extremism can also be found in the local context.

Journalists have limited knowledge of topics related to violent extremism. *“With reference to the level of “Knowledge about Violent Extremism and Terrorism (VET)”, journalists when asked if they have reporting skills on topics related to VET, most of the respondents (48%) declared that they are not sure they have, while (43%) declared that they have skills, and 9% do not have reporting skills on these topics.”*¹⁷ An interesting fact is that more than half of the journalists interviewed for the same study have never had an opportunity to report on VET topics, meaning that not all members of the media community have experience with such issues.

¹⁷ NEXUS Civil Concept. *Baseline Study on Reporting of Violent Extremism and Terrorism* (pg.20), issued in May 2020 in Skopje

According to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, the main gaps in relation to responsible and professional journalism on this topic stem from improper reporting on violent extremism, mainly as a result of lack of knowledge. Furthermore, unethical reporting can also be seen in topics related to terrorism or other critical incidents or crisis events. There is an evident need to write more sensitive press releases and conduct interviews with individuals who are well educated and have significant practice in combating or preventing this social issue. With better understanding of the topic and increased dedication to respect of human rights, journalists can play a significant role in preventing violent extremism and terrorism in general not only in the local country context, but in the whole region.

Reporting on terrorism and other forms of violent extremism is generally a challenge for journalists, not only in the Republic of North Macedonia, but globally as well. Access to information is difficult and media workers face pressure to report on developments promptly. Support for journalists must be ensured and capacity building actions must be taken together with occasional campaigns about the importance of ethical reporting in the field of violent extremism and terrorism. One such campaign¹⁸ took place in the spring of 2021 with the goal of offering recommendations to journalists on how to address these topics in an ethical and balanced way in their future reporting. However, public campaigns on violent extremism remain rare in mainstream local media which is one of the reasons behind the lack of basic knowledge among the general public.

3. Main ideologies and narratives and their manifestation

Ethnic and religious discrimination is a mainstream ideology in the local context of the Republic of North Macedonia. *“In*

¹⁸ AJM, Article about video campaign violent extremism and terrorism, <https://znm.org.mk/%d0%b2%d0%b8%d0%b4%d0%b5%d0%be-%d0%ba%d0%b0%d0%bc%d0%bf%d0%b0%d1%9a%d0%b0-%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d0%b5%d1%82%d0%b8%d1%87%d0%ba%d0%be-%d0%b8%d0%b7%d0%b2%d0%b5%d1%81%d1%82%d1%83%d0%b2%d0%b0%d1%9a%d0%b5-%d0%b7/> accessed on 26.08.2021

*Macedonia there are ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian nationalists. The Albanian extreme groups have links to counterparts in Albania and Kosovo, while the Macedonian extreme groups have links with Serbia, Bulgaria, and Russia”*¹⁹, according to NEXUS Civil Concept’s *Meta Analysis of the Available Studies and Research on Violent Extremism and Terrorism in the Western Balkan Region*.²⁰

Examples of events where nationalism and Islamism are observed include a few recent protests²¹ that took place in early 2021 in Skopje. The protests were triggered by the closure of the court case known as “Monstrum”. Based on earlier local media reports, these protests had elements of religious radicalism and Albanian nationalism. Some of the protesters used symbols and signs in Arabic,²² accompanied by discriminatory speech²³.

There are examples of right-wing nationalist violence in the country. The biggest incident in the last several years that resulted in massive violence at the Parliament building took place on 27 April 2017 and had elements of nationalism and extremism. A group of more than 100 nationalists close to VMRO-DPMNE, which some consider right-wing although they present themselves as Christian-democratic, stormed the building and attacked MPs, including the opposition leader, but also journalists and members of the police who were present to protest a vote for a new parliamentary speaker.

¹⁹ Nexus, *Meta Analysis of the Available Studies and Research on Violent Extremism and Terrorism in the Western Balkan Region, With Focus on North Macedonia*, issued in March 2010 (pg.10)

²⁰ The study is focused on North Macedonia, conducted within a project implemented by the Association of Journalists of Macedonia and other local civil society organisations and funded by the Hedayah Centre of Excellence the Global STRIVE Program from the European Union.

²¹ Sloboden pecat media report issued in February 2021 <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/video-protesten-marsh-za-sluchajot-monstrum/> accessed in 25.08.2021

²² Radio free Europe media report issued in 2012 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/24570142.html> accessed in 25.08.2021

²³ The violent protests were motivated by recent court verdict in which group of six men with Albanian ethnicity that executed Macedonian youths on the Smilkovski Ezero lake during Orthodox Easter in 2012 were sentenced for terrorism at the end of the second retrial on 24 February 2021

In the next year, a total of 16 people were convicted by the Criminal Court in Skopje, including former interior minister Mitko Chavkov (VMRO-DPMNE), who received 18 years in jail for “terrorist endangerment of the constitutional order”. The court session commenced with more than 30 suspects in August 2018, but a third were acquitted by the controversial amnesty law in December 2018. Nearly all of those convicted had received sentences of 10 years or more in jail.²⁴

Discriminatory narratives on the basis of sexual orientation, although of lower intensity compared to the past, are still peddled by some media outlets. The headline of an article published by the online medium “Kurir”, which is considered to be close to VMRO-DPMNE, following the Skopje Pride Parade in 2018 read: *“There is no money for higher pensions, but there is money for a gay parade in Skopje”*²⁵. Media reports of this nature criticize the policy of local authorities to support LGBTI events like pride week by taking part in their organization, framing such support as discriminatory towards the rest of society. North Macedonia is generally considered conservative, hence such media narratives can easily instill radical right-wing groups with a violent attitude towards members of the LGBTI community.

Examples of racial discrimination and violence towards the Roma population, especially in smaller urban areas, can be found in media reports too. Accusations of police brutality towards several Roma people were reported in late 2020 by the media²⁶. These incidents, if not taken seriously by the enforcement institutions and the judiciary, can create an atmosphere of impunity that would further increase the risk of violent extremism towards this specific minority group.

²⁴ Freedom House, Nations in Transit Report for 2020 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/nations-transit/2020> accessed on 27.08.2021

²⁵ Kurir.mk media report issued in February 2018 <https://kurir.mk/makedonija/vesti/nema-pari-za-povisoki-penzii-no-ima-za-gej-parada-vo-skopje/> accessed on 23.08.2021

²⁶ Sloboden pecat media report issued in October 2020 <https://www.slobodenpecat.com.mk/>

5. Role of traditional and social media

Traditional and non-traditional media in the local context, similar to the regional trends, are an important factor in the spread of extremist ideologies and this is particularly visible on social media, mainly on Facebook and Twitter. The communication is not strictly local, but there are cases where comments in groups or threads are posted on topics in Serbo-Croatian and/or Albanian, meaning that networks of such communication reach beyond the national level.

In general, there are cases when disinformation that may trigger violent extremism is being published on social media by individuals or groups and later spills over to traditional media, in that way increasing the negative effect on the wider public.

Young people, based on local surveys, are more likely to receive information from social rather than traditional media which, in fact, appears to be a worldwide trend. Some positive aspects of this trend are that the consumers of social media content are more likely to receive information much faster than those who rely on other traditional media such as printed newspapers. However, the potential risk of disinformation or misleading information as well as partial news is more pronounced on social media. Professional media outlets are obliged to follow the generally accepted ethical standards in the journalistic profession and it is the editor's role to verify the information his publication intends to publish. There is no gatekeeper on social media and unknown users can spread malicious information with the intent to create panic, or to mislead their audience.

Several examples of violent extremist narratives on social media

Looking through the Facebook fan pages of political figures, for instance through those of the leader of the right-wing party “Edinstvena Makedonija”, Janko Bachev, posts like this one can be found: “*Americans*

mk/pretepanite-romi-od-bitolskata-policzija-svedochea-vo-zhivo-ne-maltretiraa-kako-stoka-ne-tepaa-i-drzhea-vo-stanicza-do-5-sabajle-video/ accessed in 28.08.2021

are telling us to take in refugees from Afghanistan and that this will only be temporary, while visa procedures are in place to be able to go to the United States. No, dear friends. The refugees will stay here permanently, and the puppet government, through their so-called experts on everything, will toy with the people and divide them by moralizing about humanity/inhumanity in relation to refugees."²⁷ This user has 10,000 followers on Facebook and the post has 463 likes, 91 comments and 73 shares, which is not to be underestimated in the local context.

The narratives visible in social media, but also in some of the traditional media, that featured explicit discriminatory speech that can lead to violent extremism towards a specific group are usually aimed at refugees that pass through or have temporarily stayed in the country. In the second half of 2021, the targets have mostly been citizens from Afghanistan that are arriving in North Macedonia due to the country's policy to accept refugees fleeing Afghanistan.

In October 2021, the local elections will take place and some of the mainstream opposition parties are using the Afghan crisis to gain political points and support from members with radical stands on the topic, or from individuals who oppose the acceptance of refugees. As a result of such public statements, mainly spread on social media by local political actors and tolerated by the pages' admins, other users are also spreading hate by republishing the posts. Here is an example of a comment by a Facebook user, regarding a statement given by the leader of the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, in which he criticizes the policy of accepting Afghan refugees: *"Look what they do! They rape, they steal, they throw bombs, they kidnap everywhere in all the countries they have been accepted as refugees. We don't have enough to provide even for ourselves, and certainly not for them.*"²⁸

Similar comments on the topic can be found under news articles shared on social media as well. A comment from another Facebook

²⁷ Official Facebook fan page of Janko Bachev with the referenced post <https://www.facebook.com/JankoBachev66/posts/957405338170710> accessed on 30.08.2021

²⁸ Official Facebook page of Hristijan Mickovski with the referenced comment <https://www.facebook.com/slobodenpecat/posts/1487753548261460> accessed on 01.09.2021

user under an article about Afghan refugees, published by the digital online media Sakam Da Kazam, reads: *“This is the stupidest thing they have done so far. They bring in terrorists and later there will be problems, just like with the Kosovars who to this day torture us – those that we helped in their hard times. Now it appears it will be worse.”*²⁹

At the same time, in relation to the Afghan crisis and the local Macedonian context, some online media outlets also use such narratives. For example, the headline of an article published by the online media outlet “Pressing tv” mocks the number of refugee the EU will receive: *“The EU will receive “as many as” 400 refugees from Afghanistan”*³⁰

6. Government Regulations & Response

The local Government, in practice and in theory, has a social and collective responsibility to deal with violent extremism and terrorism threats through local, media and educational approaches, emphasizing strengths and advantages in view of preserving the cohesion of society. These efforts should be conducted first by political willingness to approach the problem in a serious manner, then to plan accordingly measures within strategic documents, and eventually to reflect this in the local regulation and in practice with concrete activities.

In terms of regulation, Western Balkan countries, including North Macedonia, have criminalized traveling abroad to join foreign wars and conflicts, and have committed themselves to capturing and imprisoning returnees. As a result of this, however, a new risk of further radicalization arises among fellow inmates. It is very likely this is happening to a certain extent, which is why the issue should be carefully approached.

It can be argued that none of the Western Balkan countries, North Macedonia included, has paid enough attention to this very important issue, as it is certain that the imprisoned returnees will go back to their communities once they have served their sentence, and if not reformed

²⁹ Official Facebook page of SDK.mk with reference comment <https://www.facebook.com/SakamDaKazam/posts/4894327890612348> accessed on 01.09.2021

³⁰ Pressing.mk media report issued on 18.08.2021 <https://pressingtv.mk/svet/eu-kje-primi-duri-400-begalci-od-avganistan/> accessed on 01.09.2021

properly while in prison, there is a high probability that they will recidivate or continue to spread radical ideologies. This shows that dealing with this phenomenon is a long and arduous task, not only for the Western Balkan countries, but also globally because it is easier to fight terrorists, but much harder to fight an ideology³¹.

As mentioned earlier, the most important document that the authorities are using to tackle the issue of violent extremism is the National Strategy for Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism (2018-2022). This document outlines the strategy of the country for stamping out violent extremism on a local level.

Another document worth mentioning that is relevant to the topic, but is issued by a civil organization, and may have a positive impact on related media reporting is the code of ethics of journalists. The code was published in 2001 and since then no changes have been made to it. Many manuals and rulebooks on ethical standards are also available in local languages. These are mainly published by the AJM, the Council of Media Ethics, or the Macedonian Institute of Media. Although there is no specific part in the code dedicated to violent extremism, the AJM recently issued a Protocol³² and Guidelines³³ for Professional Reporting on Violent Extremism and Terrorism, and these documents are very useful tools for journalists in their work when reporting on such topics.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

North Macedonia has made certain improvements in strengthening its internal cohesion in the past several years, but the general perception is that it remains a polarized society mainly on a political and ethnic basis. The reasons for this are many. However, the most notable ones

³¹ Nexus, Meta Analysis of the Available Studies and Research on Violent Extremism and Terrorism in the Western Balkan Region, With Focus on North Macedonia, issued in March 2010 (pg.12)

³² AJM, April 2021, Protocol for Professional Reporting on Violent Extremism and Terrorism <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MK-protokol-za-izvestuvanje-za-slucai-povrzani-so-nasilen-ekstremizam.pdf> accessed on 30.08.2021

³³ AJM, May 2021, Guidelines for Professional Reporting on Violent Extremism and Terrorism <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ENG-upatstvo-za-profesionalno-izvestuvanje-za-nasilstvo.pdf> accessed on 30.08.2021

are the visible antagonism in public discourse between political parties and the frustration of some social groups with the poor standard of living in the country, the high level of corruption, the high percentage of unemployment and the slow euro integration process. The polarization in the society and the fact that the ruling and opposition parties rarely have consensus on topics of national importance are weak spots of the state that also prevent it from overcoming certain bilateral issues with neighboring countries.

In this internal political climate, topics such as prevention of violent right-wing extremism are not constantly in the focus of the state, nor are they of huge interest to the media unless there is a crisis situation. Therefore, the government and all relevant stakeholders should demonstrate high levels of commitment in order to successfully implement the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism by allocating sufficient human resources and funds to it.

Campaigns for educating the general public are needed, especially on social media, as these platforms are not only used to receive information, but to spread messages of hatred and discrimination. In this sense, local civil organizations can be a valuable asset since they can also work on the local level with municipalities and directly with citizens.

The public has limited knowledge about the topic. Hence introducing modules for the unofficial training of students, civil servants, and journalists by the state and by local organizations is a good way to increase the awareness of the negative consequences that a society with increased right-wing violent extremism may experience.

Journalists are not sufficiently sensitized or trained on this topic to cover it objectively and therefore regularly working with media personnel, especially with younger generations, is crucial to build the necessary capacity for the media to adhere to ethical standards in their reporting on topics related to right-wing violent extremism.

In addition, the media should be part of wider networks to address this phenomenon. Higher education institutions, non-governmental organizations, academia and public institutions can further facilitate the raising awareness process.

Monitoring the media is needed to assess their ethics in reporting on violent extremism and terrorism in general.

Lastly, the misuse of freedom of speech, in particular on online media and by political figures in their public statements triggers discrimination and must be penalized by the prosecutor's office. This will help us overcome the current atmosphere of impunity and will have a preventative dimension too, stopping or at least significantly decreasing the instances of hate crimes.

RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN SERBIA

Suzana Grubješić¹,
Assistants: Irena Latinović and Marko Đurić

Introduction

This paper aims at reviewing the right-wing extremist scene in present-day Serbia. Its focus is on formal and informal groups, non-state actors, which represent the prototypical organizational form of the contemporary extreme right rather than on political parties. The ideological differences between right-wing populist parties and right-wing extremists groups in Serbia are nuanced and blurry. Both are committed to the same concepts of anti-establishment, anti-liberal and anti-Western ideology, ethno-nationalism, treason, xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, etc, and both have attracted more attention during the Covid-19 pandemic, sharing fake news or false truths about the origin of the pandemic and its remedies, vaccines in particular. Another common issue in the time of the pandemic is their attitude towards immigration – they agree that immigrants are “dangerous others” who form an economic or cultural threat to the native population, thus fueling anti-immigrant sentiments in the country.

To this date, the societal impact of the loosely-structured right wing extremist groups seems hard to assess. They have no realistic chances of coming to power, but they have the potential of limiting the security and civil freedoms of Serbian citizens. Weak democratic institutions, and a lukewarm response from the state authorities, signal the potential for a rise in support. With the aim of creating the climate of insecurity and fear, the right-wing extremist groups pose a threat to the strengthening of civil society and the success of democratic reform in Serbia which should not be underestimated. We mapped the key actors of the extreme right scene, their political principles, topics they deal with, narratives, strategies and activities. Taking into account the multifaceted nature of right-wing extremism, we also identified the trans-national cooperation of these groups. Unfortunately, the scope

¹ Suzana Grubjesic is Senior Consultant at the Center for Foreign Policy, Republic of Serbia

of this paper does not allow an in-depth analysis of every one of the 26 right-wing extremist organizations in Serbia we identified. There is also no serious research on the motives of those who joined extreme right-wing organizations. Nevertheless, reviewing their statutory frameworks and activities, we can say that those organizations gather mostly younger people, aged between 14 and 35. The findings of this paper are based on primary, open data sources in order to create an informed and realistic picture of the right-wing extremists' activities or potential threats within the country. The Internet, social networks, websites, blogs, etc, were also valuable sources of information.

General situation in Serbia

Any assessment of right-wing extremism in Serbia requires a broader understanding of the political, social and economic context, and it has to take into account the developments of at least the past 30 years. The former Yugoslavia broke up in the bloody civil war with numerous crimes the consequences of which still pose a burden in the region historically associated with political instability and conflict. The emergence of right-wing extremism in Serbia was enabled by the rise of ethno-nationalism in the late 1980s and during the 1990s. During the civil war, right-wing extremists were part of various paramilitary groups, and following the democratic change in 2000, they morphed into diverse groups and movements with consistent use of hate speech and often violence against those they see as enemies or traitors. Although the post-Milosevic Serbian governments have shown tolerance towards the extreme right groups, they should be given some credit for trying to implement a vision of modern Serbia, replacing the old nationalistic concept with a rational and modern, European concept of state and society.

At this moment there is no powerful far-right political party that could unite all or most of the right-wing extreme groups under one umbrella. The split of the Serbian Radical Party in 2008, followed by the formation of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its evolution into a moderate national-conservative party (affiliated to the European People's Party – EPP), which has been in power in the last ten years, weakens the action potential of the right-wing extremist organizations. All extreme right organizations are extra-parliamentary actors, but as some of them have openly been supported by the present government, they have

good prospects of entering the parliament after the election in spring 2022, given that the election threshold was reduced to 3 percent only. Due to the nature of such groups, their extremist attitudes and practices, the connections with the government cannot be open and transparent. This is a two-way relation: many right-wing extremist organizations try to attract people who are disappointed by the “weak” position of the government towards the issues they care for; they see people in power as not patriotic enough and too close to the West, and therefore they look for more radical options. On the other hand, there are extreme-right groups that despise parliamentarism, and this primarily refers to football hooligans who often have something of a working arrangement with the state: in exchange for obedience on the streets, hooligans can pursue their “activities” more or less undisturbed. As there are many valuable pieces of research of their core agendas, links to organized crime, their role in public protests and connections in high places thanks to investigative journalists², we will not analyze them separately. Many members of the football hooligan groups are at the same time members of right-wing extremist organizations which are the primary topic of this paper. This significant overlap between their members makes it difficult to track how many groups and movements there actually are, and how active their networks are in different parts of the country³. Some researchers state that there are around 30 right-wing extremist groups and sub-groups with approximately 5000 members⁴, whereby according to the OSCE Mission to Serbia study⁵, the Ministry of Interior had identified 40 such groups and sub-groups by 2014, with around 5000 members as well.

² BalkanInsight: *Foul Play: Serbia's Football Hooligans Get Down to Business*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/22/foul-play-serbias-football-hooligans-get-down-to-business/>; some of the football hooligans' groups are: Ultra Boys, Belgrade Boys, Ultras, Brigade, Alkatraz, Anti-Romi, South Familij, Head Hunters, etc.

³ Resonant Voices Initiative: *Far Right Balkan Groups Flourish on the Net*, 5/5/2017: <https://resonantvoices.info/far-right-balkan-groups-flourish-on-the-net/806/>

⁴ Bojan Klačar i Marija Djorić: “Istraživanje o percepciji desničarskog ekstremizma za vreme pandemije”, quoted in *Radio Slobodna Evropa* on June 16, 2021, www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-pandemija-ekstremna-desnica-antivakseri/31311122.html

⁵ OSCE Mission to Serbia: „Youth and Hooliganism in Sports Events“, published on May 9, 2014, <https://www.osce.org/serbia/118397>

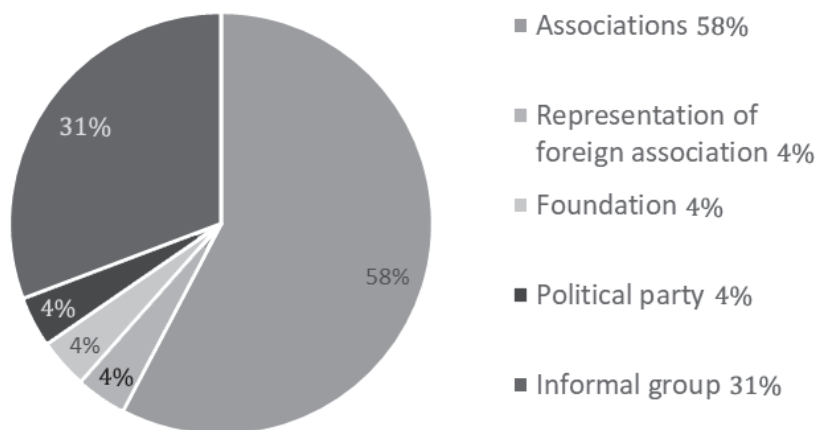
Table 1**List of identified RWE organizations**

NAME	Registered¹	Website/social media accounts
Nacionalni front	23/11/2015	Deleted from the Registry, all accounts deleted
Otačastveni pokret Obraz	18/3/2002	www.obraz.rs, deleted from the Registry; registered in 2015 under the name Svetosavski savez Obraz
Čast otadžbine	22/3/2013	www.castotadzbine.rs https://www.facebook.com/castotadzbine/
Pokret Levijatan	19/11/2019	www.levijatan.org
Nacionalni srpski front	16/3/2016	www.nsfrent.org https://twitter.com/nsf_srbija https://www.youtube.com/channel/ UC1f8O7M80mbqDHorkgHKfRw
Omladinski klub Srbska čast	19/9/2014	www.facebook.com/SrpskaCast.rs/ https://www.instagram.com/srpska_cast_ official/ https://www.youtube.com/channel/ UCNZFLw8t4PyoQ5Sf_rbJJVw
Svetosavski savez Obraz	16/3/2015	www.obraz.rs https://sr-rs.facebook.com/mladen.obraz https://www.youtube.com/user/vladimirknin
Ustani za Kosovo	15/2/2018	https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=PqF6UJa2OJI www.ustanizakosovo.rs
Srpski narodni pokret Zbor	3/2/2017	www.zbor.rs https://twitter.com/snpZbor https://www.youtube.com/channel/ UCsXjBCtKf4TKXuzK2qmSD9A
Udruženje studenata Pravnog fakulteta Srpski identitet	4/11/2015	n/a
Centar za nacionalnu kulturu i društvena pitanja NAŠI	20/11/2016	n/a
Potomci (narodne patrolne)	8/4/2021	www.narodnapatrola.rs https://t.me/joinchat/ONj-KUt- Hxir0Xt31P74tA

NAME	Registered ¹	Website/social media accounts
Srpski narodni pokret 1389	15/3/2010	www.1389.org.rs, it became part of the political party Srpska desnica
Pokret 1389	10/10/2004	www.1389.org.rs, remained as an association
Udruženje građana Delije Sever	14/6/2003	https://www.facebook.com/krle.rd?ref=br_rs
Pokret Nacionalni front	7/3/2011	Website and all accounts deleted
Srpski sabor Zavetnici	4/6/2019	www.zavetnici.rs
Solidarnost za Kosovo	n/a	https://www.solidarite-kosovo.org/ https://www.facebook.com/solidarite.kosovo/ https://twitter.com/solidarite_kos https://www.instagram.com/solidaritekosovo/
Srbska akcija	n/a	www.akcija.org https://twitter.com/SrbskaAkcija https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtPAPRm-zeyW_UYn_Zp0hSQ
Srbski ponos	n/a	https://www.facebook.com/ponossrpski/
Srpski dobrovoljački korpus 1941-1945	n/a	https://www.facebook.com/kraljevi.dobrovoljci/
Srpski narodni pokret Naši	n/a	https://nasisrbija.org/ https://www.facebook.com/snpnasi/
Krv i čast Srbija-Combat 18	n/a	http://28serbia.blogspot.com/
Stormfront	n/a	https://www.stormfront.org/forum/f43/
Studentska akcija	n/a	https://www.facebook.com/studentska.akcija https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpZxUIcukMQNtjwbdyYBrHw
Generacija identiteta	n/a	https://web.archive.org/web/20170619153754/https://generacija-identiteta.blogspot.com/

Out of the total of 26 organizations, 14 (58%) are registered as associations, 1 as a foundation, 1 as a representation of a foreign association and 1 as a political party. For 9 organizations data about formal registration were not found. Eleven associations are registered in Belgrade (of which 5 in Zemun) and three more are registered respectively in Novi Sad, Nis and Pancevo. In their statutes, 7 out of 12 associations declare that a member can be a person under the age of 14, with the written consent of a legal representative. Only one organization (*Srbska čast*) explicitly declares that a member can be a person who is at least 15 years old, while 3 organizations do not specify the required age for membership⁶.

RWE organizations by legal form



⁶ Statutory documents of the registered RWE groups could be found at the Serbia Business Registers Agency: www.apr.gov.rs/home.1435.html

Table 2

**List of most prominent right-wing websites and portals
(CeSID 2018)**

Name	Website/portal
Patriot	www.patriot.rs
Pobeda Info	www.pobeda-info.rs
Web tribune	www.web-tribune.com
Treći prostor	www.treciprostor.com
Srpski nacionalisti	www.srpskinacionalisti.com
Srbski FBReporter	www.facebookreporter.org
Stanje stvari	www.stanjestvari.com
Novinar.online	www.novinar.de
Prevrat	www.prevrat.com
Koreni	www.koreni.rs
Nikada granica	www.nikadagranica.org
Crvene beretke	www.crveneberetke.com
Vojvodjanske novine	www.vojvodjanskenovine.rs
Fakti	www.fakti.org
Srbija danas	www.srbijadanas.net
Vaseljenska TV	www.vaseljenska.com
Srpska.ru	www.srpska.ru
Narodni slobodarski pokret	www.slobodarski.rs
Srbin info	www.srbin.info
Novi Standard	www.standard.rs
Borba za veru	www.borbazaveru.info
Arandjelovac info	www.arandjelovacinfo.rs
Oslobodjenje	www.oslobodjenje.rs
Srpska televizija	www.srpska.tv
Poredak	www.poredak.rs
Inter magazine	www.intermagazin.rs

The use of social networks, websites and portals provide avenues for a broad spectrum of right-wing extremist groups to mobilize by recruiting new members, broadcasting disinformation and propaganda, harassing opponents, and coordinating activity including publicity stunts, protests and acts of violence. As they are largely

underrepresented in the traditional media, they have increasingly turned to the Internet to get their messages across. There are at least 30 websites and portals in Serbia which promote right-wing extremist views. Typically, these deny or denounce the independence of Kosovo, demand the union of all Serbian people in one state, denounce the EU and NATO and champion Christian Orthodox Russia. Most of them strongly support Russia's war in Ukraine and its seizure of Crimea. *Srpska.tv*⁷ was registered on January 25, 2019. It has 36.3K subscribers. The leader of the Serbian League, Aleksandar Djurdjev, and a private company Feedback Consulting & New Media Production, which is connected to him, registered *Srpska.tv* portal and back in July 2016 he also registered another outlet – *poredak.rs*⁸.

The Internet is also a platform for people previously wanted by Serbian authorities, like the leader of the neo-Nazi *Nacionalni stroj* (National Machine) Goran Davidovic aka the Führer, who along with another member of his group was being tried in absentia in Serbia for initiating national, racial and religious hate and intolerance. While he lived in exile in Italy, he was very much present in Serbia thanks to social media profiles. He came back after 11 years to Serbia in 2020, following the ruling of the Court of Appeal which revoked the previous ruling. He was also a guest in the popular morning show at the national TV station Happy on May 31, 2021.⁹ His new organization is called *Nacionalni srpski front* (National Serbian Front), whose Facebook account has been suspended, while their Twitter account has only 900 followers (in July 2021).

Stormfront forum, one of the most often mentioned Internet forums linking extreme rightists and neo-Nazis, has a special Serbian section. There are more than 200K posts left by moderators and visitors. In addition to that, there are also around 10K folders which deal with selected topics. You can also find interviews with related organizations like *Krv i Čast* (Blood and Honor), *Srbska akcija* (Serbian Action), *Obraz*, *Studentska akcija* (Students' Action), etc. Statistics say that forum has been visited more than 3,250,000 times.

⁷ www.youtube.com/c/SRPSKARTV/videos

⁸ <https://poredak.rs/>, www.youtube.com/channel/UCPJy3XGU9aRsMe29AbP4LVw

⁹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgnYWQGMhdc

Krv i čast Srbija (Blood and Honor Serbia) was established in 1995, with the permission of the Blood and Honor organization from Great Britain. It functions as an unregistered and secret organization, the Serbian branch of the international neo-Nazi network Blood and Honor. It is related with the band Terror 88, motorclub MC Serbs and Combat 18. Their official website and blog channel are no longer in function, and they have no profiles or pages on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. They operate in cells of 2 to 5 persons. Members of one cell are not familiar with other cells, and there are also “lone wolves“ who operate independently of others.

Pokret Leviatan (Movement Leviathan) was founded in 2015. On its official website, it promotes almost exclusively the protection of animals. Its Facebook page with 228K likes (in July 2021) contains only photos or videos of animal abuse and Leviathan’s rescue missions. The same is valid for its Instagram profile with 135K followers (in July 2021), while its Twitter account has been suspended. In addition, the Facebook and Twitter accounts of its leader Pavle Bihali have also been suspended. Its members wear T-shirts with Nazi symbols; they propagate against the Roma, migrants and the LGBT population, and some of them were arrested for fighting and for various other incidents.

Narodne patrol (People’s Patrols) is one of the newest RWE groups, founded in February 2020 as an extremely anti-immigration group. Because of the censorship on social networks, as it claims, the members operate via Telegram groups in several Serbian towns (Zemun, Novi Beograd, Pancevo, Novi Sad, Sombor, Sabac, Uzice and Backa Palanka). Members of other RWE groups often participate in the People’s Patrol actions against migrants.

As for the activities of these groups on YouTube, many of them have no channels of their own, and those who have a channel are inactive, with only several hundred views of their videos, and with an average of 100 or so followers and a few comments. For example, the YouTube channel of the *National Serbian Front* has 120 followers and 3 videos (one posted 4 years ago and two posted 5 years ago), Onene video is an interview with Nick Griffin, former leader of the British National Party, with 558 views and one comment. The second video is a rally against illegal migration with 9.200 views and 20 comments,

and the third video is an action named “We did not forget” (about the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999) with 852 views and no comments.

Main ideologies, narratives and their manifestation

Although their precise goals differ, we could conclude that right-wing extremist groups share many of the following principles, the spread of which is analyzed through media and internet sources (statutory documents of the registered groups, their websites, social networks, etc.):

- Ethnically based politics
- Reference to the 1990s wars
- Glorification of war criminals
- A belief in victimization
- Redrawing borders along ethnic lines
- Hatred of LGBT groups and the Roma population
- Anti-NATO and anti-EU attitudes
- Propaganda against migrants
- Pro-Russian attitudes and links
- Links to organized crimes
- Racial superiority of the white race.

We could also add the attitudes relating to the Covid-19 pandemic as most of the identified right-wing extremist organizations are skeptical about the government’s response to the pandemic and advocate either no vaccination at all or non-compulsory vaccination, whereby some groups have shared materials aimed at creating panic and rage against the adopted protocols, leading the anti-vaxx crusade in the country.

While during the 1990s the RWE groups acted primarily as paramilitary formations in the Yugoslav wars, they later shifted their focus from the external to the internal “enemies” – vulnerable groups inside Serbia, that is – national and other minorities and human rights activists. Roma people are presented as thieves, as well as filthy and primitive; LGBTIQI persons as immoral and ill, threatening the Serbian patriarchal order; immigrants and refugees from the Middle East as a threat to physical security and the safety of women, etc. Generally,

all minority groups are portrayed as a peril to the Serbian nation, one way or another. RWE groups also talk about a constant threat from the neighboring nations. Another figure is the self-victimization and the heroic self-representation, and both are used as a legitimizing discursive strategy for mobilization in all post-Yugoslav nationalisms during the 1990s, and are still present in the radical right argumentation.

The generation that grew up during the 1990s and reached adulthood after 2000 has become easy prey for the right-wing extremist groups. Serbia's never-ending transition has created its "losers", despaired and disappointed people among large sectors of society, and an atmosphere of entrenched national and social frustrations. Hurt national pride from the wars in the 1990s, the NATO bombing in 1999, and the issue of Kosovo have contributed to the attractiveness of anti-globalist, anti-Western and even anti-pluralistic extreme-right demagoguery.

The overall view of most groups of the RWE groups also includes the rejection of secularization, democracy, and free market economy—the major characteristics of the decadent "rotten West"—and anti-Semitism. At the same time, all of these groups advocate some sort of traditional and/or religious value. RWEs in Serbia see themselves as the defenders of Christian Orthodoxy, and advocate harmony between church and state. In most cases, these ideals are combined with anti-capitalist, anti-globalization, or anti-liberal criticism.

Among the Serbian RWE groups, Russia is perceived as one of a few allies, the country of brotherly orthodox and Slavic people, with which they share common values, but also as an entity opposed to the West and Western values. The cult of tsarist Russia, the Romanovs, monarchism and anti-communism is strong with some groups, while others prefer the present Russian Federation and its leader Vladimir Putin, whose support is seen as invaluable in Serbia's foreign policy, particularly with regard to the issue of Kosovo. Recent years have seen the emergence of Serbian nationals travelling to fight for pro-Russian forces in the conflict in Ukraine. There is little transparency about the number of Serbian nationals who had been or currently are in Ukraine, and the estimates range from a few dozen to around 300 persons¹⁰.

¹⁰ BalkanInsight: *As Ukraine Conflict Intensifies, Serb Volunteers Prepare for Battle*, April 16, 2021 <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/16/as-ukraine-conflict->

Some of them also went to Syria to fight for Assad's forces through the engagement of a Russian private military company known by the name of Wagner¹¹.

Anti-migrant rhetoric had been on the rise in 2020 and 2021, as RWE groups organized anti-migrant rallies in Belgrade, Sid and Subotica, where they were spreading hatred and unfounded accusations¹². One of the groups called *Narodne patrole* (People's Patrols)" on October 25, 2020 organized a rally in front of the Faculty of Economics in Belgrade¹³, calling for people "to clean up the park" that is in front of the Faculty where migrants usually gather. In some cases xenophobic attacks against migrants were live-streamed on social media - one such example is when Filip Radovanovic¹⁴, member of the RWE group called *Levijatan* drove through the fence of a migrant centre in the Belgrade suburb of Obrenovac, went into the building and shouted racist remarks at migrants. This attack was live-streamed on Facebook¹⁵. Upon his arrest, *Levijatan* organized a protest in front of the centre under the slogan "Stop Illegal Immigrants". Generally, tolerance towards migrants has been decreasing, particularly in towns which accommodate collective centers and in border areas with EU countries. The majority of the population is still benevolent towards migrants, but the radicalized minority uses fake news as a tool to raise panic and to disturb the domicile population.

Rebuking the EU, NATO and the West in general is one of the key

intensifies-serb-volunteers-prepare-for-battle/

¹¹ Blic: *U smrt za 5.000 dolara: Srbin poginuo ratujuci na ruskoj strani protiv dzihadista*, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/u-smrt-za-5000-dolara-srbin-poginuo-ratujuci-na-ruskoj-strani-protiv-dzihadista-u/wj92h5j>

¹² Radio Slobodna Evropa: *Širenje neistina o migrantima u Srbiji*, 10. novembar 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/lazne-vesti-o-migrantima-i-izbeglicama-srbija/30940207.html>

¹³ Radio Slobodna Evropa: *Zašto je dozvoljen skup antimigrantskih desničara u Beogradu*, 29. oktobar 2020, www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/za%C5%A1to-je-dozvoljen-skup-antimigrantskih-desni%C4%8Dara-u-beogradu/30919602.html

¹⁴ N1: *Kolima probio ogradu i uleteo u Prihvatni centar za migrante u Obrenovcu*, 7.maj 2020, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a596797-kolima-probio-ogradu-i-uleteo-u-prihvatni-centar-za-migrante-u-obrenovcu/>

¹⁵ Share Monitoring: *Racist Attack on Migrant Center Livestreamed in Serbia*, <https://rs.bird.tools/data?caseId=3197>

common denominators of the RWE groups in Serbia. These groups strongly oppose Serbia's bid for EU membership and advocate an exclusive alliance with the Russian Federation. The West has been routinely accused of applying double standards, and of bias against Serbian national interests in Kosovo.

There are bands in Serbia, such as *Sorab 28*, *Providjenje*, *Kristalna Noć*, *Terror 88* and *Iz Revolta*¹⁶ that belong to the so-called *White Power* music, promoting fascist symbols at their concerts all over the country, which are closed for a wider public. Their messages are a mix of fascism, chauvinism, racism and anti-migrant attitudes. These bands have no official accounts on social networks like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, but they still find ways to spread their music and lyrics on internet platforms. One such platform is *Bitchute*, which is an alternative to YouTube, but which does not remove hate speech content. Hardcore band *Terror 88* is active on this platform, as well as on *Vkontakte*, which is the Russian equivalent to Facebook. They are also listed at the *Rock Against Communism*¹⁷ platform which gathers neo-Nazi European bands.

Connections to RWE groups abroad

The discourse that Serbian RWE movements share with their European counterparts is based on animosity towards “others”, and on the need to defend national values, Christianity and the white race. The fact that most European RWE groups are linked to Russia is an additional impetus for cooperation. The Russian and European far right actors both see Serbia as a perfect place to establish a strong presence, a “fertile ground” for strong nationalist policies. For example, in winter 2017, big names such as Nick Griffin and James Dawson, well known British ultra nationalists, came to Serbia¹⁸. They have built

¹⁶ Radio Slobodna Evropa: *Bendovi u Srbiji nekažnjivo promovišu nacizam*, 13.novembar 2020, www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bendovi-u-srbiji-neka%C5%BEnjivo-promovi%C5%A1u-nacizam/30944285.html

¹⁷ www.ranker.com/list/rock-against-communism-bands-and-artists/reference

¹⁸ BalkanInsight: *British Nationalist Trains Serb Far-right for Online War*, 1 May 2018 <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/01/british-nationalist-trains-serb-far-right-for-online-war-04-30-2018/>

strong connections with the *Serbian Right*, which has in the meantime transformed into a political party, tightly linked with the ruling coalition, and the Serbian branch of *Generation Identity*¹⁹, since the Identitarian movement has identified Serbia as a valuable tool in the “great replacement” narrative which accuses a globalised political elite of planning the replacement of the “native” European white Christian population with Muslim newcomers. But after two years, the attempt to sustain a Serbian branch of Generation Identity had failed, for many and varied reasons²⁰.

The motorcycle club *Noćni vukovi* (Night Wolves), also referred to as “Putin’s Angels” in U.S. media, was founded in Russia in 1989 and currently has branches in 14 different countries, including Serbia²¹. Pro-Russian nationalist groups are most widespread and active in Serbia, but they often operate across borders or establish branches in the Serb-inhabited areas of neighboring countries, particularly North Kosovo, Republika Srpska in BiH, or Montenegro. The form of extremism advocated by these groups primarily seeks to promote inter-ethnic hatred, spreads anti-Western narratives, challenges the territorial integrity and legitimacy of the post-Yugoslav states and questions their capacity to protect their citizens. *Night Wolves Serbia* closely cooperates with *Srbska čast* (Serbian Honor), which is formally a rescue organization. It was founded at the Russian Humanitarian Center in the city of Nis and, accordingly, is funded by the Russians. Serbian Honor has branches in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely in the Republika Srpska. One of the leaders of the Serbian Honor organization is Bojan Stojkovic²², a former Serbian paratrooper who was trained in Moscow. *Night Wolves Serbia* is also connected to *Night*

¹⁹ Resonant Voices Initiative: *Far-right Balkan Groups Flourish on the Net*, 05.05.2017. <https://resonantvoices.info/far-right-balkan-groups-flourish-on-the-net/806/>; European Western Balkans: *Serbian and European Right Wing*, 10.2.2016. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/02/10/serbian-and-european-right-wing/>

²⁰ Detektor: *Young Patriots: Serbia’s Role in the European Far-Right*, 19 November, 2019 <https://detektor.ba/2019/11/19/mlade-patriote-uloga-srbije-u-obnovi-evropske-ekstremne-desnice/?lang=en>

²¹ Noćni vukovi Srbija: <https://nightwolves.rs/>

²² www.facebook.com/dangerboy.serbia

Wolves Bulgaria, which can be seen on the official Facebook page of the Bulgarian branch²³. For example, when Sasa Savic Schwaba, the director of Night Wolves Serbia suddenly died of a heart attack at the age of 44 in April 2021, Bulgarians expressed condolences to Serbian comrades. They also participated in joint motorbike tours in Republika Srpska²⁴, and in this year's celebration of The Battle of Cer in Sabac, Serbia²⁵.

The serbian public was surprised to hear that Robert Rundo, co-founder of the *Rise Above Movement* (RAM), an American white supremacist group, had found his home in Belgrade. According to the Bellingcat report from November 2020²⁶, Rundo had spent much of 2020 in eastern Europe. He attended a neo-Nazi commemoration in Hungary, and then went to Sofia, Bulgaria, for an annual neo-Nazi march²⁷, which was banned by the local government, but Belgrade became his place of residence, as he founded a company in Serbia which allowed him to apply for temporary residence permit. The report confirms his liaison with the newly formed Serbian right-wing group *Fondacija Junak* (Foundation Hero)²⁸ which allegedly assists Serbian war veterans only. According to the Serbian media, Rundo was escorted to the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina and expelled from Serbia on February 12, 2021²⁹.

How right-wing extremist groups get the money to finance their activities is an issue that itself requires much more attention. Not all of them need significant amounts of funds; it does not necessarily cost too much to write, record and post propaganda on the Internet, but for those with ambition, the money could be found through involvement

²³ Night Wolves MG-Bulgaria: www.facebook.com/groups/191319904214369/

²⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0SuTvVxc38

²⁵ www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2540905512627383&set=g.191319904214369

²⁶ Michael Colborne: *An American White Supremacist's New Home in Serbia*, Bellingcat, November 2020 www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/11/18/an-american-white-supremacists-new-home-in-serbia/

²⁷ www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/22/in-the-wake-of-hanau-an-annual-neo-nazi-rally-is-banned-in-sofia

²⁸ <https://nabranikuotadzbine.org/fondacija-junak-pomaze-ratnim-veteranima/>

²⁹ www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2021&mm=02&dd=12&nav_category=16&nav_id=1810471

with organized crime, financing from abroad, or having friends in high places. Tracking international cash flows requires skills and support most researchers and investigative journalists do not possess. But one does not have to be an economic wizard to see that a lot of money circulates in this political spectrum. Judging by their official financial reports submitted to the Serbian Business Registers Office, and looking into their statutory frameworks, they manage to raise small funds through donations and membership fees.

State response to RWE activities

The very existence of right-wing extremist organizations in Serbia is not explicitly forbidden by law. However, many activities associated with such organizations are forbidden by the Constitution and relevant laws – the Criminal Code, Anti-Discrimination Law, Public Information Law, and others. The practice of the Serbian courts in the cases related to the RWE groups and their members shows that they have no clear position towards them - the Constitutional Court banned the neo-Nazi organization *Nacionalni stroj* back in 2011. The same year it rejected the Public Prosecutor’s request to ban 15 unregistered RWE groups, mostly football hooligans. In 2012, the Constitutional Court banned the clerical-fascist organization *Obraz*, but dismissed the motion to ban two similar groups *SNP Naši* and *SNP 1389*, which ceased to operate in the meantime, becoming part of the political party *Serbian Right*, whereas *Obraz* and *Nacionalni stroj* continue to exist, proving that there are no mechanisms in place to ensure the enforcement of the Constitutional Court’s decisions. *Obraz* altered its name in 2015 and became officially registered as *Svetosavski savez Obraz*. Its leader Mladen Obradović was on trial and jailed for two years for organizing riots at the Belgrade Pride Parade in 2010, but the Appeal Court cancelled this ruling in 2013. PREVEX³⁰, a European Union-funded project dealing with the prevention of violent extremism in the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans, said in a report that Serbia had been encouraged by “some international stakeholders” to acknowledge right-wing extremism in its strategic documents, but so far without result. There is the tacit political backing some RWE groups enjoy. For

³⁰ PREVEX – Preventing Violent Extremism, www.prevex-balkan-mena.eu/

example, a prominent member of *SNP 1389* Misa Vacic was briefly employed in 2016 as an adviser in the Serbian Government's Office for Kosovo and his contract was cancelled shortly after the news was leaked to the press. He later founded *Serbian Right* and participated at local elections, winning some seats in local assemblies.

Experts from the Serbian civil sector, who have been dealing with the issues of right-wing extremism, think that security services are under equipped to recognize the potential threat of right-wing extremism, so that it remains in the "grey zone". Serbia's law enforcement capacities need improvement, but are progressing. The Criminal Police Directorate's Service for Combating Terrorism and Extremism (TES) works on terrorism detection, deterrence, and prevention. Serbia's Operational Working Group consists of TES, the Security Information Agency (BIA), and the Prosecutor's Office. Meanwhile, most of right-wing extremists have learned the limits of their promotion and activities, focusing primarily on ultra-conservative values which cannot be legally sanctioned due to the adopted freedom of speech standards, and which can easily fit into official discourse.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Understanding the phenomenon of right-wing extremist organizations requires an overview of the current situation in Serbia, in which the majority of the population espouses the values of traditionalism, authoritarianism, patriarchalism, authoritarian political culture, and the lack of democratic pluralistic tradition. There can be little doubt that this phenomenon is here to stay. With the populist government firmly in power, any attempt to develop counter-narratives to RWEs can easily fall into the often deployed trap of being against freedom of speech, or being "overly ideological". The feeling that the nation is under threat is a key driver of RWE groups, and in the case of Serbia they see this threat coming both from inside and from outside. Radical nationalism, intolerance towards other nations, minorities and migrants, anti-Western and anti-liberal sentiments, and the cult of the glorious past are shared among Serbian RWE organizations. Those which openly embrace neo-Nazism are pushed to the political margins, whereas those which declaratively reject it seek to become part of the political mainstream as legitimate actors, trying to present themselves

as non-violent Serbian patriots. The benevolence of the police and the judiciary, and the lack of enforcement mechanisms for the courts' rulings contribute to the sort of normalization of such groups in Serbian political and social life. The prevailing public discourse which fails to recognize them as politically dangerous phenomena creates a fertile ground for their consolidation. Although RWE groups have no realistic chances of coming to power, they have the potential of limiting the security and civil freedoms of Serbian citizens. Weak democratic institutions, unfinished transition and a lukewarm response from the state authorities, coupled with the so-called Serbian "wound culture" and thriving on myths, whereby the Kosovo myth is still the strongest, pose a threat to the strengthening of civil society and the overall success of the process of transformation and Europeanization of Serbia.

With this in mind, to counter the mainstreaming of right-wing extremist groups, it is not enough to rely on the role of the repressive state apparatus, but rather to be prepared to address their ideological postulates and to unmask their activities presented as "humanitarian assistance", "animal protection", "assistance to war veterans", "protection of Serbs", etc. The starting assumption is that recommendations should be in line with EU accession as a strategic objective of Serbia, which makes the EU particularly important especially in the area of rule of law. The role of education becomes even more important, as young people are the main vulnerable group and the target of RWE groups. Working with young people has the best chance of ensuring prevention and building their resilience to radical views and extremism. New educational programs fostering tolerance, intercultural dialogue, human rights, the reduction of social and ethnic distance, civic engagement, transparency and accountability, should be developed with the help of international organizations and introduced into formal education. The answer to the cyber activism of RWE groups should be found in producing new content which deconstruct right-wing extremism, its ideas and actions, and such content should be made available to the widest audience. The precondition to that is to design activities to promote media literacy and digital literacy to tackle extremists' activities online. The civil sector and international organizations play a critical role in this respect, highlighting issues and laying the foundations for continuing research into and prevention of

this phenomenon. To this date, Serbian civil society and investigative journalists have carried out numerous projects and research initiatives in various ways and with varying degrees of intensity. But the problem here is the lack of synergy, and consequently, the lack of a broader impact. The other important impediment is the limited access to information, little technical and human resources to handle such a complex topic. Finally, what seems to be missing in today's Serbia is the politics of alternatives which will seriously challenge the treacherous paths and pathologies of denial and delusion the right-wing extremists pursue. Myth-busting has never been more important than it is now.

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EXTREMISM AS A THREAT TO DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS IN SPREADING VIOLENT IDEOLOGIES. THE CASE OF CROATIA

Assist. Prof. Gordana Akrap¹; Vedran Matošić;
Roman Domović, PhD

Introduction

The question to what extent right-wing extremism in the Republic of Croatia threatens, or could in certain circumstances threaten, the democratic order and become a serious national security issue, has not been considered particularly relevant by the Croatian public until recently. Inappropriate rhetoric, namely hate speech as a tool for defamation and exclusion of minority groups or “dangerous others” in general, has been seen as having more of a trendy character. As, after all, in most countries of liberal democracy, there is a constant presence of greater or lesser intensity of such rhetoric. This rhetoric has very rarely, almost never, been accompanied by a more serious realization of the phenomenon.

Clear condemnation and dissociation of state institutions, along with the legal framework, from those unacceptable activities make a significant contribution to combating right-wing extremism. In that regard, the public reports of SOA -- the central institution of the Croatian security intelligence system -- do not label extremism as a threat to national security. This means that in their opinion, there are no organized social groups or political parties in Croatia whose actions can cause such a wave of violence that would lead, or at least in part, to the destabilization of the democratic framework of the Croatian society and state.

However, security, which is considered more than satisfactory in Croatia, was called into question after the senseless act of a young man who, in October 2020, shot at a government building on St. Mark’s Square with an automatic weapon and seriously injured a police

¹ Dr. Gordana Akrap is President of the Hybrid Warfare Research Institute, Croatia

officer guarding the Office of the Prime Minister. The young man later committed suicide. From the very beginning of the investigation, the police classified the crime as “multiple attempted murders with elements of terrorism.”

All this raised a number of questions. In the first place, where, when, and under whose influence did, until that moment, a calm and inconspicuous young man from the family of a former war veteran become radicalized? And of course, is Croatia really as safe as it was previously thought? However, it should be noted that in the several public reports that the SOA has issued in the past it did not rule out the possibility of such incidents occurring where unstable and pliable individuals who lead a parallel life on social networks come in daily contact with extremist ideologies²

1. After this senseless act, which indeed can be partially characterized as an act of terrorism since the goal of the attack was obviously the Office of the Prime Minister, certain issues had to be reintroduced into public discourse in order to find answers to the following questions: are there any centers from which right-wing violent extremist ideology spreads and if yes, where are they? It does not matter whether we are talking about a **populist party** or a badly structured **subcultural social group** whose activities are manifested as digital guerrilla warfare. Both deserve equal attention as each can strongly influence the attitudes of the younger and immature population, especially when it comes to individuals from dysfunctional families. The former still belong to the worldview of parliamentary struggle and political competition in terms of organization and political discourse, while the latter fight “against violence against citizens” and despise institutions as fortifications that should be demolished completely.

² Since 2015, the Security Intelligence Agency has been publishing a Public Report which, among other things, contains assessments of the activities of extremist groups in the Republic of Croatia, as well as their connection with related organizations abroad.

2. Right-wing populism -- possible destabilization of the democratic order?

Populist parties began to appear on the political scene after World War II. They began their activities as a kind of protesting political platform, opposing the established parties. After some time, they also entered this political and social area of activities to participate in government. In many countries today, the government cannot be formed without such parties. Although they often leave the impression of frivolity in public and are defined by a populist way of communicating, their leaders do not perceive that as discrediting, but rather as a medium by which they oppose the dominant political culture.

For populists, politics must be an expression of general will. They do not recognize the heterogeneity of political elites. They see them all as a “caste that lives on the backs of the people.” In addition, populism is characterized by a weak fundamental ideology, which means that populism is a kind of political parasite that exploits the host ideology, be it nationalism, socialism, or any other. Populism is a blank framework in which left, centrist, and right worldviews can be inserted³.

Right-wing populists attract their electorate with anti-immigration stances which have strengthened among a certain section of the population after the 2015 migrant crisis and Islamist terrorist attacks, as well as anti-Serb ones emerging on the anniversaries of the Croatian War for Independence and the Yugoslav and Serbian aggression against Croatia. Especially as a reaction to Serbian views on Croatia’s War for Independence and their non-cooperation with Croatian authorities in the search for missing persons. Left populists put economic issues at the center of their interests, while the cultural context proves crucial when it comes to supporters of right-wing populism. Right-wing populists attract most of their votes thanks to their “protective” attitude towards culture. However, they offer the electorate views on socio-economic policy, which vary between neoliberalism and the strengthening of the welfare state. When they act from the position of state interventionism and the strengthening of the welfare state, the benefits of the welfare state are limited to “their own people”, i.e. views on the need to exclude “dangerous others” are completely open.

³ Mudde, 2004.

Analysts dealing with the phenomenon of populism can approach it in different ways: (a) as a party organization, (b) as a political discourse, (c) as a communication style, and (d) as a political ideology⁴. When it comes to the point of how populist parties act, or could act, in order to influence the stability of the democratic order and thus national security in the Republic of Croatia, it would be crucial to analyze populism **as a communication style in public space and on many social networks**. Namely, it seems that the way of communication, which usually has a significant emotional charge, can be the basis for violent actions in more extreme cases.

If we accept that populism, as previously pointed out, is basically (although other definitions are possible) a conflict between two homogeneous groups -- a corrupt elite and an honest people⁵ -- and that populist leaders see the removal of ruling elites as a basic precondition for “national liberation and prosperity”, emotions expressed by criticizing the ruling party can suppress rational decision-making in part of the population. It is not uncommon to read in anonymous reactions on different media portals and social groups that “everyone should be killed”, “they’re all a gang of thieves”, “they are all the same”, etc. Of course, there is a long way to go from verbal abuse to acts of violence. Most of those reactions represent the emotional discharge of individuals who have no violent intentions in real life. In this context, the considerations should include the already mentioned immature and mentally unstable persons who, encouraged by populist and violent rhetoric, do not have a major problem moving from words to deeds, to accept violence and terrorism in their “social and political” activities.

3. Subcultural right-wing extremism -- from digital to street violence

Subcultural right-wing extremism is fully embedded in the ideological matrix of political extremism. We find the basis for understanding this phenomenon in the definition that speaks of the common position of different political views that deny a state based on

⁴ Grbeša and Šalaj, 2018

⁵ Mudde, 2004.

constitutional and democratic values, regardless of whether they deny the principle of human equality (right extremism) or the principle of equality they tend to expand on all spheres of human life by negation of individual freedoms (left extremism), or they perceive every form of statehood as violence (anarchism).

Subcultural right-wing extremism glorifies inequality, xenophobia, racism, and historical revisionism. The prefix “subcultural” stresses on the organizational (or activist) aspect that we most often encounter among the younger population, whether it is fan groups, groups of like-minded people, fans of groups whose work glorify neo-Nazi ideology, or various activist groups, which may have certain influence on the formation of value attitudes in part of the population.

If the mentioned phenomena in the Republic of Croatia are viewed today in the context of assessment of possible threats to the democratic order, we can say that the threat does not seem real. These are marginal groups that are as loud as they are insignificant. Much of the violent tendencies are exhausted in the virtual world with occasional excesses that have no significant consequences for the safety of citizens. However, when it comes to the international public in relation to right-wing extremist militant outbursts in the Republic of Croatia after its independence, and then its accession to the EU, it is worth emphasizing there is an increased sensitivity. Since right-wing extremism imposes historical revisionism as one of its key themes, associations with the political context and the formation of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) under the patronage and strong alliance with Nazi Germany during World War II, often leads to overestimating the magnitude of the problem in the present.

Namely, right-wing extremist parties in Croatia have no success in the elections, neither at the national, nor at the local level. This is the most important criterion for determining the impact of this ideology on social processes. They do not exist in the parliamentary life of Croatia. Therefore, a realistic analysis of trends should be based on the observation of political groups, organizations, NGOs, publishers, who do not belong to political parties. Right-wing extremism exists in the *para-political* space, in social circles that are not primarily of a political nature, but are nevertheless indirectly interested in political discourse. By analyzing these areas of articulation of right-wing

extremist thinking, orientations, and actions, one can read the extent to which right-wing extremism is a real danger to Croatian democracy⁶.

In recent times, classical party and paramilitary hierarchical organizational structures are giving way to various movements and informal associations that are very skillfully networked and in a modern way. As a rule they are always ready for action, primarily related to the Internet. Contemporary right-wing youth subculture has its own way of dressing, coded communication, specific music that they listen to, and well-developed marketing in the service of recruiting new supporters.

Violence associated with subcultural right-wing extremist groups is predominantly the focus of various research and studies. However, there are also new, more modern forms of action, such as *fighting for a neighborhood* or a *nationally homogeneous zone*, as well as *public protests*⁷. Some analysts point out that in the last few years we can talk about a clearly developed protest policy, as it creates a favorable atmosphere of meeting and getting closer like-minded people to strengthen the cohesion of old (older) members and make new acquaintances. In addition, the protests are a kind of initiation. Each participant expects to be seen as well as to be given the opportunity to publicly express their own opinions, positions and attitudes. Certainly, the effect of provocation has an important place in protest iconography. The frequency of protests is correlated to the integration of individuals into the extremist subculture. Namely, the more frequent the protests, the greater the chances that accidentally interested individuals will become mobilized and new integrated members of an extremist group or movement.

The international aspect of right-wing extremist cooperation also has its significance. Today, in almost every country in the European Union, there is at least one large gathering of right-wing extremists with “delegations” from other European countries. In addition, there are guest appearances at congresses and party gatherings, international youth gatherings and daily communication on the Internet and other media. International cooperation is pragmatic. Small and isolated right-wing extremist parties, organizations, and movements try to overcome

⁶ Velički 2009

⁷ Velički 2012

and compensate for their minor role in their home countries by participating in international networks, and leaders and sympathizers create the impression of overcoming their domestic political isolation by exchanging experiences.

In addition, right-wing extremist groups are characterized by aggressive anti-globalism. However, on the list of political and activist priorities, economic globalization is of secondary importance. The struggle is directed against cultural globalization, the bearer of which is, as a rule, the United States. The counterbalance to globalization processes is an ethnically and politically homogeneous state whose strength is reflected in its resilience to the cultural, political, and economic influences of other countries. The enemy is not nationally, but globally organized, which directs right-wing extremists to transnational networking so that their activism has a global mission to counter globalization⁸.

In Croatia, right-wing extremist subcultural groups are not numerous. The frequency of protests is associated with some anniversaries and commemorations, especially with the War for Independence and the suffering of Croatian citizens after World War II. Physical violence is generally uncommon at such gatherings. But there is a strong desire to reinterpret historical facts, as well as detect “traitors”. The exceptions are certain sport-fan factions that flirt with neo-Nazi ideology or openly express racism and xenophobia, and any public gathering ends in violence or arranged mutual confrontations with members of the opposing fan group. It should be noted that Croatian legislation prevents rallies and protests that can be characterized as hate speech and endangering the constitutional and democratic order, so that all these phenomena can be viewed as isolated incidents without significant impact on social dynamics. As we have pointed out, the virtual world is a medium where one can talk about a certain type of violence that manifests itself through different forms of hate speech.

The suppression of right-wing subcultural extremism is not only possible by banning parties and organizations. It is necessary to work on strengthening the democratic culture, on which there is wide agreement in the competent Croatian institutions, and what is especially

⁸ Ibid

important in society and in the most influential media. Repressive legislation cannot fundamentally suppress right-wing extremism, but it can provide a solid framework for combating it with a whole-of-society approach. At European level, there are coordinated repressive measures in the European Union to combat right-wing extremism, such as the Anti-Discrimination Act. However, as it turned out, the concept of prevention and measures to combat right-wing extremism should still be designed in accordance with national specifics.

Since the younger population gravitates towards subcultural groups, including extremists, as a way of opposing the dominant culture, it should be noted that on several occasions various studies have shown that constitutional values are widely accepted in the Republic of Croatia. This fact suggests **that young citizens and Croatian legislators, when it comes to fundamental liberal-democratic values, have similar views**⁹. In those studies, young people were supposed to speak on important issues such as, respect for human rights, freedom, equality, social justice, gender equality, nature protection, national equality, inviolability of property, peace, rule of law, democratic and multi-party system, but as we pointed out the younger population in Croatia is committed to constitutional solutions and fundamental liberal-democratic values, although occasionally declining oscillations are noticeable in some surveys, but not to any worrying degree.

4. Internet media and cyberspace activities

In an attempt to combat disinformation and misinformation shared on social networks and mobile communication applications, owners and managers of social networks have developed algorithms to try to deal with these forms of threats. However, the use of algorithms leads to the further action and spread of disinformation and misinformation associated with populist and violent ideas and proposals. Namely, algorithms recognize the preferences of individual readers or groups and in accordance with these interests offer them to read/listen/watch the same or similar content, which leads to increased negative effects

⁹ Ilišin, 2015

on the recipients of such information. There is additional exposure to content that can encourage radicalization, violence, and even terrorism.

In Croatia, there is no organized right-wing extremism as we find in some other Central European countries, or specially in some Eastern European and WB6 countries, in the form of paramilitary groups or ultra-right organizations that organize protests and marches. In Croatia, traces of right-wing extremism can be found in individuals or smaller groups such as a football fan movement and a small group of veterans of the Croatian War for Independence (Homeland War) who emerged from the military organizations of the right-wing political party HSP (Hrvatska stranka prava / Croatian Party of Rights). Their activities are not violent but provocative, and the most controversial activity of theirs is the use of the slogan “*Za dom spremni*” (eng. For the homeland ready).

The slogan “*Za dom spremni*” was used as an official salute in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in the Second World War. During the Croatian War for Independence (1991-1995) it was used by members of the HOS (Hrvatske obrambene snage / Croatian defence forces), at the time a paramilitary formation of the HSP party which advocated for the reconstruction of the NDH. Later, that formation was disbanded and only volunteers were incorporated in the regular Croatian army units. Some soldiers kept HOS insignia with the slogan “*Za dom spremni*” on their uniforms. This creates controversy today because the left political scene and the Serbian and Jewish national minorities see the slogan as a symbol of the revitalization of the NDH which directly connects today’s Croatia with the NDH^{10,11}. The right political scene rejects such criticism and says that it is an Ustasha salute and that is why it is viewed as unacceptable, but an exception should be made in one case and that is when the slogan is displayed inside the coat of arms of the HOS under which that unit fought in the Croatian

¹⁰ HINA, „Bernardić: Dopustiti pozdrav Za dom spremni je skandalozno, HDZ relativizira fašizam“, Index.hr, 5 May 2020, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/bernardic-dopustiti-pozdrav-za-dom-spremni-je-skandalozno-hdz-relativizira-fasizam/2188189.aspx>.

¹¹ G. Borković, „Korištenje pozdrava 'Za dom spremni' treba zakonski regulirati“, 1 May 2020, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/koristenje-pozdrava-za-dom-spremni-treba-zakonski-regulirati>

War for Independence.¹² There is also a statement by a representative of the right, however, who believes that modern Croatia has no reason to resort to symbols of failed political heritage, or the defeated NDH.¹³

Discussions about this greeting are often encouraged by journalists as well. For example, when Prime Minister Plenković held a press conference on 7 September 2017, he spoke about three points: the real estate tax, the implementation of the science and education strategy, and the HOS commemorative board in Jasenovac¹⁴. After the press conference, reporters asked him questions. Twelve questions were asked and nine of them had to do with the HOS commemorative board and “Za dom spremni”. An attempt was then made by the Prime Minister and his team to end the Q&A session, but journalists once again raised questions about “Za dom spremni”. Evidently, the topic was of much greater interest to them than the other important socio-economic issues the Prime Minister wanted to discuss.¹⁵

Precisely because of the issue of the “Za dom spremni” slogan, the Croatian government established the Council for Dealing with the Consequences of Non-Democratic Regimes. The council also included prominent representatives of the Serb and Jewish minorities, who agreed with the council’s conclusions. The Council adopted two documents of recommendations on how to deal with the symbols of totalitarian regimes. According to these documents, the greeting “Za dom spremni” can be used in the coat of arms of the HOS exceptionally and only in relation to places or cemeteries that commemorate the fallen

¹² Dražen Ciglencečki, „HASANBEGOVIĆ PREDSDJEDNICI: Ne, 'za dom spremni' nije stari hrvatski, nego ustaški pozdrav, 6 September 2017, <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/hasanbegovic-predsjednici-ne-za-dom-spremni-nije-stari-hrvatski-nego-ustaski-pozdrav/>.

¹³ Telegram, „Hasanbegović, Jakovina i Nazor raspravljali o Za dom spremni i ploči HOS-a, izvukli smo što su pričali“, 6 September 2017, <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/hasanbegovic-jakovina-i-nazor-veceras-raspravljali-o-za-dom-spremni-i-ploci-u-jasenovcu-izvukli-smo-sto-su-pricali/>.

¹⁴ In Jasenovac was a Concentration camp organized and run by Ustashes’ during WWII.

¹⁵ Telegram, „Upravo se javio i premijer na presici, kaže kako pozdrav 'Za dom spremni' nije legaliziran i kako rade na zakonu“, 7 September 2017, <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/javio-se-i-plenkovic-na-svojoj-presici-kaze-kako-pozdrav-za-dom-spremni-nije-legaliziran-i-kako-rade-novi-zakon/>.

members of the HOS during the War for Independence. This permission does not negate the premise that the slogan is unconstitutional¹⁶ and the documents did not solve the problem. Parties still maintain their positions despite the recommendations and even some historians who look at the issue differently do not agree with the Council.¹⁷

a. Part of the football fan scene

Part of the football fan scene at some matches of the Croatian national football team shouts the slogan “Za dom spremni”, especially when the matches are broadcast on television. They do it to provoke leftists, but the provocation ends with the shouting and does not escalate into violence, certainly not into physical conflict. The same is known to happen at the matches of Croatian football league clubs.

A few years ago, there were some serious incidents caused by members of the football fan movement -- a physical attack on water polo players of the Belgrade Red Star in Split¹⁸, an attack on Serbian citizens watching a Red Star football match in a cafe in the village of Uzdolje¹⁹, the display of a banner in Zagreb and Split which read “we will f.k Serbian women and children”^{20, 21}, and several physical clashes

¹⁶ <https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/Vijesti/2018/02%20velja%C4%8Da/28%20velja%C4%8De/Dokument%20dijaloga.pdf>

¹⁷ Denis Romac, „Preporukama Vijeća za prošlost nezadovoljni i lijevi i desni“, 1 March 2018, DW, <https://www.dw.com/hr/preporukama-vije%C4%87a-zapro%C5%A1lost-nezadovoljni-i-lijevi-i-desni/a-42779148>.

¹⁸ Slavica Vuković, „Na splitskoj rivi napadnuti vaterpolisti Crvene zvezde, spas tražili i skokom u more“, 9 February 2019, Večernji list, <https://www.vecernji.hr/sport/na-splitskoj-rivi-napadnuti-vaterpolisti-crvene-zvezde-spas-trazili-i-skokom-u-more-1299890>.

¹⁹ Marin Zdelar, „Napadači na Srbe u Uzdolju optuženi za zločin iz mržnje“, 4. December 2019, 24 sata, <https://www.24sata.hr/news/napadaci-na-srbe-u-uzdolju-optuzeni-za-zlocin-iz-mrznje-663362>.

²⁰ L.R. „'Je**t ćemo srpske žene i djecu': Zbog odvratnog transparenta navijača privedene četiri osobe“, 12 June 2020, Dnevnik.hr, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/navijaci-pozirali-s-odvratnim-transparentom-je-at-cemo-srpske-zene-i-djecu---608928.html>.

²¹ Večernji list, „Degutantna poruka iz Zagreba osvanula i u Splitu: 'J**at ćemo srpske žene i djecu'“, 5 July 2020, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/degutantna-poruka-iz-zagreba-osvanula-i-u-splitu-j-at-cemo-srpske-zene-i-djecu-1414927>.

between Croatian and Serbian fans in Vukovar.^{22,23}

As for individual cases of attacks on members of Serbian national minorities, it is not certain whether these are right-wing extremism or usual football fan clashes, and they are often justified by mutual accusations as to who was the first to attack and that it was a reaction to an earlier attack. But even if it is right-wing extremism, it does not mean that because of this the whole football fan movement or most of it can be identified with right-wing extremism. Such fan activities are largely reminiscent of the Serbian and Yugoslavian aggression against Croatia during the Croatian war for independence when Croats were declared Ustashas in Serbian propaganda. There are also reactions to provocative visits by Serbian politicians, such as the event when Serbian official government delegation member Miloš Stojković came to Knin to visit the Serbian community. He then recorded a video on the Knin fortress, talking about Knin as an “occupied Serbian city”, the return of the “Republic of Serbian Krajina”, and the removal of Croatian flags from the fortress, saying that it would be Serbia again²⁴. There are also situations where Serbs in Croatia attacked Croats because of Croatian insignia, such as the attack of a 30-year-old Serb on a 13-year-old Croat in Vukovar.²⁵

In addition to such conflicts, some graffiti was written in different cities, containing messages directed against Serbs and messages

²² Branimir Bradarić, „Navijački sukob u Vukovaru, potukli se ispred škole“, 21 February 2019, Večernji list, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/navijacki-sukob-u-vukovaru-potukli-se-ispred-skole-1308187>.

²³ V. P. P./HINA, „Teška makljaža u Vukovaru: Potukli se Bad Blue Boysi i Grobari, sve je krenulo s napadom na Hrvata?“, 18 June 2020, T-portal, <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/teska-makljaza-u-vukovatru-potukli-se-bad-blue-boysi-i-grobari-sve-je-krenulo-s-napadom-na-hrvata-20200618>.

²⁴ „Tko je provokator koji je na Kninskoj tvrđavi govorio „ovo je Srbija“: Laže i mulja, a evo s kim se druži“, Tihana Marović, 29.1.2021, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/tko-je-provokator-koji-je-na-kninskoj-tvrđavi-govorio-ovo-je-srbija-laze-i-mulja-a-evo-s-kim-se-druzi-15046626>

²⁵ Davor Tomšić, „Član Grobara (30) u Vukovaru tukao dječaka (13) zbog maske s hrvatskim obilježjima“, 2 June 2021, Index.hr, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/clan-grobara-30-u-vukovaru-tukao-djecaka-13-zbog-maske-s-hrvatskim-obiljezjima/2280785.aspx>.

glorifying the Ustasha and the NDH.^{26, 27, 28, 29}

It is important to note that there appears to be active cooperation in organized crime between hooligan groups supporting different football teams, who as a rule are very hostile towards each other. Croatian media reported on 23 April 2019 that the former leader of the BBB ultras group supporting Dinamo (Zagreb, Croatia) and one of the leaders of Delije who support Red Star (Belgrade, Serbia) were arrested on 17 April 2019 on a highway in Croatia with 170 kg of marihuana and a few loaded guns.³⁰

Another major example where members of the different football fan clubs from Croatia and Serbia seem to be cooperating was publicized in December 2017. Six citizens of Croatia, alleged members of the Torcida football fan group (from football club Hajduk, Split, Croatia) went to Belgrade to the match between Partizan and Red Star (both from Belgrade, Serbia). They were invited to this football match to take part in a brutal fight between various groups of hooligans in the stadium.³¹

²⁶ Danijel Prerad, Ustaški grafiti osvanuli diljem Kutine, 1 June 2017, Večernji list, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/neprijemljeni-predizborni-grafiti-policija-podnijela-prijavu-1173714>.

²⁷ M. T., „Incident u Šibeniku: Nacistički i ustaški grafiti osvanuli na spomeniku antifašistima“, 9 March 2019, Dnevnik.hr, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/nacisticki-i-ustaski-grafiti-na-spomeniku-strijeljanim-antifasistima-u-sibeniku---552359.html>.

²⁸ „Sramotni grafiti na školi usred Zagreba: 'Ustaše Jarun' i 'Srbe na Vrbe'“, 11 August 2019, Nacional, <https://www.nacional.hr/sramotni-grafiti-na-skoli-usred-zagreba-ustase-jarun-i-srbe-na-vrbe/>.

²⁹ Goran Borković, „U Zagrebu ustaški grafit dug 15 metara + FOTOGALERIJA“, 12 April 2020, Novosti, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/u-zagrebu-ustaski-grafit-dug-15-metara-fotogalerija>.

³⁰ Mario Pušić, „VIDEO: KOD KARLOVCA PALI BIVŠI VOĐA BBB-a ČUPKO I JEDAN OD VOĐA ZVEZDINIH DELIJA: U kamionu su švercali čak 170 kilograma marihuane!“, 23 April 2019, Jutarnji list, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/crna-kronika/video-kod-karlovca-pali-bivsi-voda-bbb-a-cupko-i-jedan-od-voda-zvezdinih-delijs-u-kamionu-su-svercali-cak-170-kilograma-marihuane-8772788>.

³¹ Krešimir Žabec, „FOTO, VIDEO: POZNATA IMENA SVIH ŠEST SPLIČANA KOJI SU SE TUKLI U BEOGRADU Povezuju se s krim miljeom, Grobari objavili osobnu najteže ozlijeđenog“, 14 December 2017, Jutarnji list, <https://sportske.jutarnji.hr/sn/nogomet/foto-video-poznata-imena-svih-sest-splicana-koji-su-se-tukli-u-beogradu-povezuju-se-s-krim-miljeom-grobari-objavili-osobnu-najteze-ozlijeđenog-6846573>.

b. Certain members of IXth HOS battalion

Every year, on the anniversary of Operation Storm (5 August), a few members of the IXth HOS battalion walk through the town of Knin carrying HOS flags and shouting “Za dom spremni”. Their leader, Marko Skejo, wears an Adolf Hitler style mustache.³² Today, an extremely small circle of people participates in this gathering and rather than support for their activities they often find condemnation, even from people on the right side of the political and public spectrum. That is very clearly visible in the elections on all levels of administration in Croatia (local, regional, state, and European).

c. Social networks

The activities of these groups can be followed on social networks, mostly on Facebook. Football fan groups have their own pages, but there are no extremist messages on them. Subgroups of the political right do not have a central place on the internet from where to spread their messages and political views. For example, there is no Facebook page of the IXth HOS battalion where messages and ideology can be spread. There are various primarily Facebook pages dedicated to the HOS that have been set up and maintained by HOS members or their relatives and sympathizers. These groups have from a few dozen to about 7000 members. The profile pictures are dominated by the coat of arms of the HOS, which is characterized by the initial white field in the Croatian coat of arms and the slogan “Za dom spremni”. But there are no extremist messages on the walls. There are mostly interviews with HOS fighters who remember the war days and various war photos, documents, and videos. Some messages that can be classed as provocative, belittling, insulting or even hate speech addressed to Serbs, Serbia, or admirers of Tito and Yugoslavia, may appear in the comments, but that does not mean that these pages are an organized place for spreading right-wing extremism.

Although the Serbian aggression on Croatia carried by the Greater

³² „Skejo i ove godine u Kninu uzvikivao ‘Za dom spremni’: ‘Srpskoj kobri satrali smo glavu’“, 5 August 2021, Jutarnji list, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/skejo-i-ove-godine-u-kninu-uzvikivao-za-dom-spremni-srpskoj-kobri-satrali-smo-glavu-15093029>.

Serbia ideology was defeated, many members of the Serb minority in Croatia, primarily from the former occupied territories, still cannot come to terms with the new reality and carry out actions similar to those that were the prelude to the war. Here are some examples. The young men took pictures with the Serbian flag at the entrance to the city of Vukovar.³³



Figure 1. Provocation with the Serbian flag at the entrance to Vukovar.

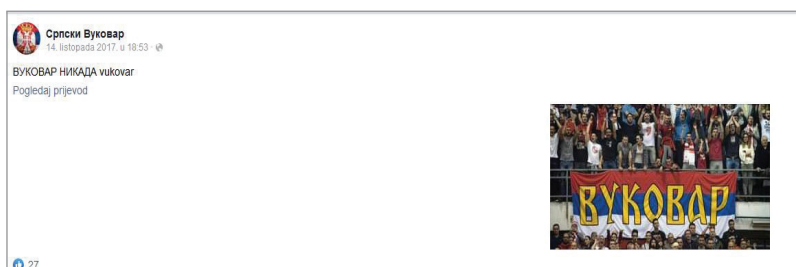


Figure 2. Provocation by declaring Vukovar a Serbian city.

³³ Branimir Bradarić, „Prekršajne prijave mladićima koji su se slikali sa srpskom zastavom na ulazu u Vukovar“, 10 January 2015, Večernji list, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/prekršajne-prijave-mladicima-koji-su-se-slikali-sa-srpskom-zastavom-na-ulazu-u-vukovar-983404>. It is extremely important to notice that after city of Vukovar was occupied in mid-November 1991, Serbian and Yugoslavian army members, just as a members of local paramilitary units committed numerous war crimes against civilians, against hospitalized soldiers, journalists, prominent members of Vukovar and other persons that were non-Serbs.

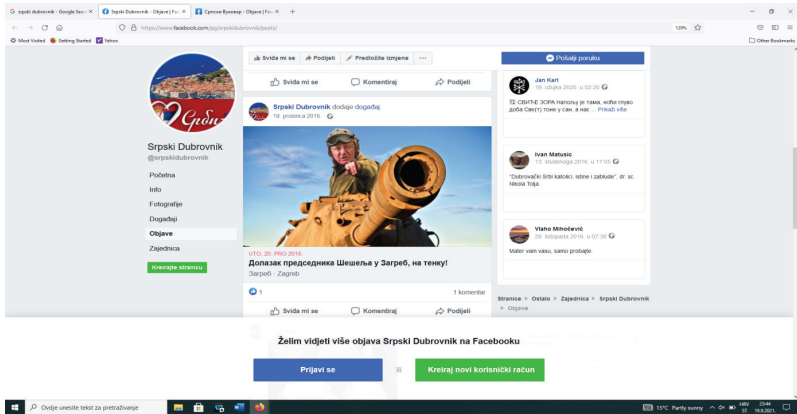


Figure 3. Provocation by declaring Dubrovnik a Serbian city.

There is a Facebook page that, along with photos and posts of Greater Serbia content, proclaims that Dubrovnik is a Serbian city, and the same content exists for Vukovar.³⁴

d. Fictitious right-wing extremism

The part of the media and political scene that belongs to the left declares certain individuals, groups, or events right-extremist even though they are not.

This left inherited the legacy of communist Yugoslavia and sympathizes with communist dictator Josip Broz Tito. The fight against Ustasas' and Croatian nationalism plays an important role in this narrative. Since that no longer exists, they must create a fictitious enemy. In addition to spreading paranoia that the Ustasha movement is being revived in Croatia, the central and right-wing political leadership is accused of keeping Croatia on the edge so that it can become like Orbán's Hungary and that prime minister Plenković is carrying out the "Orbanization" of Croatia.³⁵

³⁴ <https://web.facebook.com/srpskidubrovnik/>; <http://sbpv.mojsajt.rs/srpskidubrovnik>

³⁵ Jaroslav Pecnik, Model koji sve više nalikuje na tihi diktaturu: "Viktator" Plenković provodi orbanizaciju Hrvatske, 18 March 2019, Novi list, <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/model-koji-sve-vise-nalikuje-na-tihu-diktaturu-viktator-plenkovic-provodi-orbanizaciju-hrvatske/>

5. Media and political correctness

There is a blurring of reality in the media, which in turn calls for new divisions and new conflicts because things are not portrayed as they are, but facts are swept under the carpet so as not to be abused by some of the political parties. The assumption is that politicians who are afraid of being called right-wing or even extremist are involved in the media, so in their statements and possibly through influencing the media, they are placing spins, hiding important details in the description of an event, and distorting reality. However, such politically correct statements and behaviors often cause far more problems than coming out with true and accurate data immediately. It should be made clear that the application of the notion of “political correctness” when it comes to radicalism, extremism, violence, and possible terrorism can only hinder society and the state from seriously and successfully confronting such negative processes. Namely, the blurring of the true and complete understanding of the causes with their consequences blocks the way to solving the problem at the starting point and both society and the system are directed to actively face only the consequences instead of the real causes. These are primarily cases involving members of the Serb minority and their extremism.

Although the principle of political correctness has been applied in the Croatian media for years to cover up the fact that a person of another nationality or ethnicity (e.g. Serb and/or Roma) may be behind certain acts of violence or aggressive and illegal behavior, there’s been a serious change in the media’s reporting of the news. Realizing that such concealment does more damage to interethnic relations and may have a negative effect on encouraging ethnically motivated violence, the leading media started to avoid politically correct reporting. In previous years, the media outlets that are prone to a more aggressive approach and spreading interethnic intolerance, have always taken advantage of the vacuum that the leading media would leave by applying the principle of political correctness in reporting certain events.

Today, we are seeing that the leading media do not hesitate to call certain socially unacceptable activities and events by their real names, all with the aim of reducing the influence of some minor media, which could encourage violence and intolerance through their writing. One clear example is a recent incident where young men in their 20s forcibly removed the Croatian flag and set it on fire in Vukovar, a city that is a

symbol of the Serbian destruction of Croatian cities, and a symbol of the suffering of the Croats and other non-Serbs during Croatia's War for Independence³⁶.

Although headlines stated that the crime was committed by a British citizen, the body of each news article made it clear that this was a person of Serbian nationality and origin whose parents were not allowed to return to Croatia for their participation in illegal activities during the War for Independence on the aggressor's side.

There are several media on the right that are on the borderline between democracy and its abuse through intolerance (TV show Bujica and two weeklies – Hrvatski tjednik and 7Dnevno). They have views similar to those of right-wing populist parties, they have ratings and readership, but their influence is questionable and more research should be conducted on that.

6. Conclusion

It cannot be denied that in Croatia there are sympathizers of various radical views on the organization of society and the state, including right-wing radicalism. What is extremely important, however, is that Croatia because of:

- the clearly won victory in the War for Independence,
- the fact that the regular Croatian armed forces strongly and completely opposed the organization of right-wing paramilitary formations such as the HOS and the shallow idea behind them,
- the significant influence by all main media in Croatia that are jointly opposing any kind of radicalism in society, especially right-wing radicalism,
- the fact that there are no political or social movements and ideas that exist in the public sphere (not because of censorship, but because those radical ideas do not have public support) and because those ideas do not have any support by our citizens, we can say that

³⁶ „Britanac (20) došao u posjet rodbini u Vukovar pa zapalio hrvatsku zastavu. Sad je u istražnom zatvoru“; Telegram.hr, 13.9.2021.; <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/britanac-20-dosao-u-posjet-rodbini-u-vukovar-pa-zapalio-hrvatsku-zastavu-dobio-mjesec-dana-pritvora/>

in Croatia the right-wing political options pose no real danger to our constitution, democracy, and the freedom of our citizens. Their presence in the political life of the Republic of Croatia is almost non-existent. They do not have elected representatives at any level of elections in Croatia, which clearly indicates the extent of their shallow organizational power and influence.

Of course, there can always be an individual who, as a self-radicalized lone wolf, commits an act prompted by a radically right-wing political ideology. However, both society and the state, with the help of the leading media, have had a strong enough positive effect on the corpus of Croatian public knowledge to, in advance, condemn such tendencies to political and organizational failure.

When the corpus of public knowledge that exists in a particular society is clearly defined on issues of key national importance, when questions about the foundations on which the modern Croatian state was created are clearly and unambiguously determined by the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, condemning both right and left wing extremism and radicalism, and when those facts are clearly and unambiguously articulated in public media, the room for maneuver for right-wing political influence is reduced. In this context, the statement of the late first President of the Republic of Croatia, Dr. Franjo Tuđman, perceived as a “father of the nation”, especially by the politically center and right voters, who at the very beginning of the peaceful reintegration of the liberated Croatian Danube region and the city of Vukovar (8 June 1997), said a sentence that is often repeated in public:

“A winner who does not know how to forgive, sows the seeds of new conflicts and future evils. And the Croatian people do not want that”.

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