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Executive Summary

This brief is based on a compilation of views, opinions, insights, and conclusions on fostering talent in security and law enforcement institutions and countering terrorism and violent extremism in the Western Balkans (WB) region contributed by the civil society organizations and key stakeholders active in the region and compiled from reports, publications and articles listed in the Bibliography section of this document.

*Most of law enforcement agencies in the region have undertaken steps in last few years to establish professional HR management systems that will introduce transparent and merit-based recruitment and career development which is a precondition for fostering talent and professional leadership in these important public services. The major challenges in current HR practices across the region are: over-burdened police structure with overlapping functions, too many management levels without clear lines of accountability, lack of standard procedures for human resources management and capacity of HR departments, the hiring and promotion procedures are not competitive and are often justified on the ground of “urgent needs” and there is great turn-over and weak retention of most experienced officers with integrity. The biggest obstacle to introducing functioning merit-based HR in law enforcement is **deep politicization of human resources management**. Formal introduction of merit-based system of HR management in professional police service is hampered by informal influence of ruling parties on employment, promotion and demotion of professionals at the key posts. Moreover, politicization of HR has facilitated opening of police services to the people with links to the crime or even to those who have committed crimes. Politicization of HR management has also led to losing talent of experienced law enforcement officers with integrity through transfers, demotions without clear criteria or retirements at earliest stage in line with laws. Therefore, the core to developing professionalism and nurturing talent in security and law enforcement institutions is to limit political interference in recruitment, selection, development and promotions of professional staff, introduction of merit-based and equal opportunities HR management practices, and strengthening of internal affairs and external oversight over both political and professional leadership of law enforcement institutions.*

Due to increased focus of international community on Islamic extremism primarily, all Western Balkan governments focussed their response almost exclusively to confronting this type of extremism without taking into consideration other forms of home-grown extremism that are heritage of inter-ethnic conflicts and unfinished state-building in the region. When it comes to the Islamic extremism, the region could be divided in two camps based on the language barrier: Albanian speaking communities in Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania and South-East part of Serbia, and Serbo-Croatian speaking Muslim communities in Sandzak region of Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The biggest challenge for all governments in the region is to develop capacity to determine

the difference between the non-violent and not-violent extremists (Schmidt)¹, first being the group of potentially conservative believers but with “firm and absolute” rejection of violence and the second being the group that has opted for non-violence as ‘pragmatic and temporal avoidance to resort or advocate violence’.

Several societal groups that are at particular risk of becoming radicalized and potentially violent: young people in twenties and thirties as a way to prove themselves (search for identity), the relatively poor and deprived, those who turned Salafi “overnight” are in greater risk of becoming violent extremists, than those who were religious for longer period of time, those who went to study abroad in the Middle East. Specific to the region is radicalisation of Roma in Serbia and Montenegro and Macedonia. Salafi groups in the region have links with traditional diaspora, mainly in Austria, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland and more recently in the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The most important European and transnational link the extreme Salafi groups had was with Austria. All countries in the region have established legal and strategic framework which is largely in line with international standards and the EU approach to countering terrorism. The biggest challenge has been the prevention of radicalisation, as well as inter-agency coordination at the national level. There is systematic support in place for developing intra-regional cooperation, as well as operational cooperation and exchange of information with relevant EU agencies.

FOSTERING TALENT OF SECURITY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT PROFESSIONALS

Indicators:

- ✓ Introduction of checks and balances into police legislation and practice for limiting political interference in HR management and career cycle.
- ✓ Effective internal affairs investigations and strengthened external oversight inquiries looking at the infiltration of crime in the police
- ✓ Retention and development of investigators, analysts and other professional law enforcement staff that have been involved in most sensitive investigations of high-profile corruption and organised crime cases.

¹ Schmid, Alex P. (2014) *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?* The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, p. 15.

Introduction

The **human resources management is the least developed and most sensitive part of organisational governance in security and law enforcement institutions** in the Western Balkans. There is little publically available information on human resources systems in intelligence service² in the region and they continue to nurture clandestine way of attracting, selecting, training and developing of staff. For the most part, this paper is based on analysis of the reforms undertaken in police services in the region, as there is most information available, because of strong civil society constituency gathered around PointPulse Network³ that systematically monitors reforms in police at the regional level, as well as due to EU focus on reforms in this area due to reforms needed within Chapter 24 (Freedom, Security and Justice).

Most of the law enforcement agencies in the region have undertook in last few years steps to establish professional HR management systems that will introduce transparent and merit-based recruitment and career development that is precondition for fostering talent and professional leadership in these important public services. The major challenges in current HR practices are similar across the region and nicely summarised in the audit report of the Albanian Supreme Audit Institution (SAI) of State Police:⁴ police structure is burdened with parallel structures that perform same function and too many management levels of management, they lack standard procedures for human resources management, hiring and promotion procedures are not competitive and are too often justified on the ground of “urgent needs” and there is great turn-over and weak retention of most experienced officers with integrity. While WB6 police services have different organisational design of HR function and the level of establishment of new merit-based processes, they all face the same challenges to the effective implementation of the career development: **deep politicization of human resources management**. Formal introduction of merit-based system of HR management in professional police service is hampered by informal influence of ruling parties on employment, promotion and demotion of professionals at the key posts. This is evident from a number of incidents, as well in the public⁵ and police perception surveys⁶ as documented further in the text.

2 DCAF (2012) Case Studies of Intelligence Governance in the Western Balkans.

3 <http://pointpulse.net>

4 SAI Decision No. 184, Date 31.12.2016 “On the assessment of audit documents in the State Police Directorate”

5 <http://pointpulse.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/COM-Survey-2017-ENG.pdf>

6 Saša Đorđević, (2013) ‘Found in Translation: Citizens and Police Officers on Police Corruption’ in BCSP and BCHR (2013): *Collection of Policy Papers on Police Reform in Serbia* (Vol.8), (Belgrade: BCSP and BCHR), pp. 56-81.

Assessment of different phases of career cycle in police

In the next part, we will briefly present a review of introduction of professional HR managementsystem in the six Western Balkan police services of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia and highlight key challenges ahead.

Most of police services have jobs systematization act (job classification) in place, listing the number of the necessary personnel on typical workplace positions, the minimal level of educational qualifications and years of service for most typical posts. The existing systematization lacks a detailed **job descriptions** specifying concrete knowledge, skills and capabilities for a specific job posts. This hampers adequate recruitment, career development and promotion.

Most of the progress in HR reforms has taken place in setting transparent procedures and practices for open **recruitment** for entry-level posts in uniform police. However, the ministers of interior are still directly involved in the recruitment processes as they are required to sign employment for each individual officer as in the case of Serbia or indirectly (by appointing the members of the selection committee), which leaves room for politicization. Because of lack of training provided to the managers involved in selection interviews and the lack of monitoring of selection practices and bias, there is great discretionary power during the interviews for managers who be used to degrade or upgrade certain candidates without clear criteria of assessment. The percentages of those believing that employment in the Police is a result of certain connections or bribe are especially high in Macedonia and Montenegro.⁷

⁷ Sofija Mandić, (2017) *The Citizens Opinion on the Police - Comparative Analysis of the Results of Public Opinion Surveys Conducted in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo*, (Belgrade: BCSP). Available at: <http://pointpulse.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/COM-Survey-2017-ENG.pdf>

Due to the secure jobs that police services provide and modernised campaigns and more transparent recruitments for Basic Police Training, the police services have been successful in attracting significant numbers of candidates but mostly men with only high school degree. All services face challenges in attracting and retaining members of ethnic minorities and women in operational police jobs. Many of police services lack the approach to recruiting the candidates with higher educational qualifications, in accordance with the need to fill specialists' posts within the police force in line with the requirements of EU accession process (e.g. accounting specialists for financial investigations, experts with IT background for cyber-crime, forensics etc.). This is evident in European Commission assessments of situation⁸ where staffing of specialised police units was recognised as a major challenge to effective fight against complex crimes such as organised crime and terrorism. Research by PointPulse Network also shows that WB 6 police services have problem with retention of police IT specialists and public procurement experts due to low salaries in comparison to business sector and lack of other opportunities for development within the organisation.

Limited resources and inadequate planning have faced Kosovo Police with unique challenge in the region and that it is that KP officers do not have health insurance. The KP Union has consistently requested from the Government to allocate budget funds for the realization in practice of the right to health insurance, because of the dangers associated with the work of police officers.⁹ This right is guaranteed under Law No. 04 / L-076 on Police, police personnel should enjoy social and economic rights, including social security and health benefits¹⁰, but the country's executive has not moved forward in implementing the health insurance package for KP personnel. Also, unique problem of Kosovo Police is that average age of police officer is above 40 years and that service cannot afford rejuvenation unless certain number of officers older than 55 is not sent to early retirement. The current police law does not guarantee benefits for officers seeking early retirement after the age of 55, and does not even guarantee the basic pension of EUR 90 until police officers reach the age of 65 years.¹¹

8 Country Report for Serbia (p. 32), Country Report for Montenegro (p. 31)

9 Interview, Fadil Azemi, Secretary General of the KP Union, 26 September 2017.

10 Article 46, Law No. 04/L-076 on Police.

11 Plator Avdiu (forthcoming) *Police Integrity in Kosovo 2017* (Pristina: KCSS)

Career Development

When it comes to training of police officers, there are ongoing training programmes in all of the countries from the region. The bulk of the in-service and advanced training was organized on an ad hoc basis, dependent on the interest and funding of international donors. This practice did not allow for sustainability and long-term planning for capacity building and management. Until now the program of mandatory professional development was not connected to the requirements of a respective position or to the promotion system. In most countries, there is no centralized collection of statistics on training and personal development of employees. The records exist only for specialized training and professional development conducted by internal police educational units and these records have rarely been used to monitor whether professional development is provided in line with equal opportunities to men and women alike. There are no consolidated and systematized records about other forms of education, which may negatively impact new jobs or managerial positions in the future system of career advancement. Furthermore, the experiences of police services in Western countries show that, even when the career development system is in place, special programs should be put in place for empowering and preparing women for taking advantage of the opportunities for discharging specialist functions in the police or taking up executive roles.

Performance appraisals/evaluations

The traditional system of assessing personal performance at the annual level in most police services resulted in an annual score that didn't have a major impact on the employee's chances of getting promoted (a positive score was sufficient). The main flaws of the old performance appraisal system were **unclear evaluation criteria** leaving too much room for interpretation and arbitrariness by the appraiser (direct supervisor), **inconsistent appraisal practice** across police organisation and the lack of incentives and preparation of the police managers to use the performance appraisal as an instrument of guiding the employees towards the realization of organizational goals and fulfilment of their professional potential. The lack of clear criteria and monitoring of evaluation practices is more susceptible to subjectivity and/or politicization. For instance, the evaluation criteria in Montenegro are not adequate to evaluate the police work as the same criteria apply to all civil servants in the public sector¹². However, even when the criteria for promotion are clearly defined like in the case of Serbia¹³, risks of politicization have also been identified. This especially applies for higher-level positions where the Minister is directly involved in the process. In addition, there are certain risks during the process potentially obstructing merit-based promotions: in Macedonia, when an employee of the Ministry of

¹² Aleksandra Vavić and Ana Đurnić (forthcoming) *Police Integrity in Montenegro 2017* (Podgorica: Institute Alternativa).

¹³ Saša Đorđević (forthcoming), *Police Integrity in Serbia 2017* (Belgrade: BCSP).

Interior applies upon an internal call, they need to obtain a recommendation from their supervisor.¹⁴ This is not a good solution as the supervisor might submit a negative opinion for various reasons and prevent the career advancement of their subordinates.

Promotion systems must not only be fair and objective. They must also be seen to be so by the employees, in order to encourage the less represented categories of employees, including women, to take the opportunities presented to them and apply for internal competitions. Stojanović Gajić study on women in Serbian Police¹⁵ found out in the survey and the focus group discussions with police officers that, once the internal competitions start being implemented as a part of promotion system, the men and women employed in MoI will have a different view of this opportunity. This indicates the need to remove the formal and informal barriers preventing women to make the most of promotion opportunities and to provide them an additional incentives to take their chances.

Retention of Talent

There is still a high turnover of the police personnel during the changes of the Minister of the Interior, especially in senior and mid-management professional positions. The effectiveness of the professional development provided is hampered by the high transfer rates of police officers within the police structures. In Montenegro demotion of police staff also proved to be problematic as demotions happen without proper explanations.¹⁶ Given that the consent of employees for reassignment to different job positions is not required, there is a high risk of abusing this institute. Similar situation is in Serbia where some of most seasoned investigators that have personally led most sensitive investigations such as the assassination of the first democratic PM Djindjic or Saric clan, have been demoted or sent to retirement as soon as they fulfilled the minimum conditions for retirement. Another practice used to condition loyalty of professionals to politicians is not giving tenure to senior managers, but as evident from Serbian and Kosovar practice, to cover various positions with Acting Officers (AOs). In Albania high turnover rates are highlighted in the EC report of 2016 that weaken police operational capacity. Another indicator of politicization of the police is the high rate of staff turnover, which was especially evident in Albania after changes of government. Most prominent case was misuse of rationalization process for laying off 1696 employees under the new legislation limiting the number of employees within the public sector. Prior to losing job, these people were allocated to the newly established job post of 'risk assessor' that was then pronounced surplus. This was done without clear criteria and the people on the list included police officers sentenced for crime, as well as some most senior police investigators that have led most sensitive investigations of organized crime, political assassinations, as well as specialized financial investigators. This process was cancelled after numerous appeals by those affected¹⁷.

14 Lembovska, M. and Stojkovski, F. (2016), *Assessment of Police Integrity in Macedonia*, (Skopje: Analytica Think Tank).

15 Stojanović Gajić, Sonja and Đan, Aurelija (forthcoming), *Mogućnosti za unapređenje položaja žena u operativnom sastavu Srbije* (MUP RS and Policija Švedske).

16 Milonjic at al. (2016), *Assessment of Police Integrity in Montenegro*, (Podgorica: Institute Alternativa).

17 <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1358431>

Criminal links with the police

The political interference in HR practices have facilitated opening of police services to the people with links to the crime or even to those who have committed crime. For example, although security vetting during employment in police is obligatory in all services, there have been media reports in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia that not all employed officers have been employed without vetting. Just in the Police of Sarajevo Canton, more than 300 police officers have not passed security vetting¹⁸ and the same media report claims that there are still police officers with links to the crime working in Sarajevo Canton. Serbian media documented cases of police officers working as close protection for known criminals¹⁹, as well as the links between the police officer in specialised police unit Gendarmerie regularly socialising with sentenced drugs dealer²⁰. The most notable case has been Albanian Police, where due to perception of its links with organised crime and drug traffickers²¹, and the EU conditioning, the special law was adopted to allow for re-evaluation of 13 000 employees of Albanian State Police, Republican Guard and the Service on Internal Affairs and Complaints.²² The purpose of this extraordinary vetting is to filter those incriminated in crime and corruption, dishonest or incapable police officers through testing of integrity, wealth and professionalism. Different categories of staff will be evaluated by different commissions made of internal and external experts, including Interpol and Europol that may assist in individual cases.

Conclusion

This analysis showed that the biggest obstacle to introducing functioning merit-based HR in law enforcement is **deep politicization of human resources management**. The core to developing professionalism and nurturing talent in security and law enforcement institutions is limiting political interference in recruitment, selection, development and promotions of professional staff, introduction of merit-based and equal opportunities HR management practices and strengthening of internal affairs and external oversight over both political and professional leadership of law enforcement institutions.

18 <http://www.nap.ba/new/vijest.php?id=30283>

19 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/danju-policajci-nocu-kriminalci/h46x4eb>

20 https://www.cins.rs/english/research_stories/article/prosecutors-office-did-not-investigate-connection-between-nenad-vukovi-and-demolishing-of-cafe-belonging-to-aleksandar-vavi

21 <http://pointpulse.net/magazine/strain-albanian-police-caused-drug-markets/> and <http://pointpulse.net/magazine/vetting-process-as-a-dead-letter-in-albania/>

22 <http://pointpulse.net/magazine/vetting-deliver-police-integrity/>

COUNTERING TERRORISM AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM²³

Indicators:

- ✓ Number of appropriate sentencing instances for foreign terrorist fighters irrespective of whether they fought in Syria and Ukraine and their subsequent social re-integration
- ✓ Number of pieces of information exchanged within the region and with international partners and in particular with Europol and Eurojust that have resulted in identification of new groups or prevention of incidents
- ✓ prevention of violent extremism,
- ✓ Number of operations resulting in prevention of attacks
- ✓ Number of interrupted financial flows for financing of terrorism through capital donations
- ✓ Improved intelligence and capacity of law enforcement to deal with arms trafficking, border control, terrorism financing through WBSCTi regional platform

Mapping the field of extremism

Until the emergence of ISIS and its recruitment of Islamic fundamentalists from all over the world for going to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters, the phenomenon of extremism did not get much attention in the Western Balkan region. Due to increased focus of international community **on Islamic extremism primarily, all Western Balkan governments focussed their response almost exclusively to confronting this type of extremism without taking into consideration other forms of home-grown extremism** that are heritage of inter-ethnic conflicts and unfinished state-building in the region. As the research of Kosovar Center for Security Studies shows other politically and ethnically motivated violent extremisms had ‘higher execution rate than religious threat incidents’ in Kosovo (Kursani, 2017: 35)²⁴. However, Kursani warns that this could be because ‘religious threat incidents were foiled’ or ‘some of them stayed in the status of warning’ (Ibid.). Other than Islamic extremism present in the region is right-wing extremism in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina that resulted also to sending foreign fighters to the conflict in Ukraine. Moreover, national and fascist

23 This section of the brief is mostly based on the findings of the still unpublished studies within Western Balkan Forum for Extremism Research supported by the UK Government’s Conflict, Stability and Security Fund and managed by the British Council, as well as the authors’ review of relevant research produced by think tanks from the region. For more details, see: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/partner/international-development/news-and-events/june-2017/western-balkans-understanding-threats-of-extremism-to-the-uk>

24 Kursani, Shpend (2017), Kosovo Risk Assessment Report Since Independence, (Pristina:KCSS), available at: http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/KS-RiskAssessment-eng_201377.pdf

groups have caused a number of incidents against the groups that are perceived as ‘others’ within home societies such as: LGBT+, Roma, refugees and migrants from the Middle East. It is important to note that in the case of Serbia, the **extreme-right wing organisations** are ‘institutionally marginal, in the sense that the great majority of them remain outside parliamentary politics’, their public influence is considerably higher, due to the increased tolerance of the state institutions towards them, and, in some cases, due to compatibility of their agendas with the mainstream discourses’.²⁵ It is important to note that the right-wing ethnic extremism is also a **specific driver of Islamic extremism** in Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and has spill-over affects to the neighbouring countries with majority Muslim population such as Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is important to note that some of these **right-wing groups are supported by foreign actors**, primarily Russia, but also Western right-wing groups.

When it comes to **Islamic extremism, the region could be divided in two camps based on language barrier: Albanian speaking communities** in Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania and South-East part of Serbia, and **Serbo-Croatian speaking Muslim communities** in Sandzak region of Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is important to note the majority of Balkan Muslims practice non-violent teaching of Sunny Islam and that Takfiri ideology is relatively new phenomena imported to the region by foreign-fighters during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina and through the education of some of Muslim clerics in the Middle East, mostly Qatar. It was transferred through local mosques in the border regions of Westerns Macedonia towards Albania and Kosovo, as well as from Sandzak to Montenegro. Therefore, the biggest challenge for all governments in the region is to develop capacity **to determine the difference between the non-violent and not-violent extremists** (Schmidt)²⁶, first being the group of potentially conservative believers but with “firm and absolute” rejection of violence and the second being the group that has opted for non-violence as ‘pragmatic and temporal avoidance to resort or advocate violence’. It is believed that there is relatively small number of individuals fall in to the category of violent extremists throughout the region in comparison to the Western Europe. However, it is worrying that there is a significant pool of not-now-violent extremist, as well as a trend of spreading extremist believes among youth of both majority and minority populations.

25 Stakić, I. (2016) ‘Serbian Nationalism and Right-Wing Extremism’, in Ejodus, F. and Jureković, P. (eds.) *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, Vienna: PFP Consortium Study Group ‘Regional Stability in South East Europe’, 136. Available from: http://www.filipejodus.com/Public/Uploads/Attach/jurekovic_and_ejodus_2016_violent_extremism_579f5bba2729b.pdf [Accessed 14th December 2017].

26 Schmid, Alex P. (2014) *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?* The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, p. 15.

Geographical concentration and spill-overs

Media reporting has created a perception of violent extremist being **geographically concentrated** in each of the countries, usually in the under-developed and isolated regions with weak state governance and legitimate grievances because of exclusion and even discrimination as in the case of Bosniaks in Serbia and Montenegro. In the case of Albania, these are: areas of Pogradec, Librazhd, Cerrik neiighbouring Macedonia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the areas most strongly affected by extreme Salafist religious narratives are in Sarajevo Canton, Tuzla and Zenica. It is interesting that while the area of Bihać used to be the centre of recruitment for violent extremism, now it has fallen off this list after a number of young people from Bihać went to fight in the Syrian war, and after the main recruiter was arrested, the police employed a much more robust approach. In Macedonia, the neighbourhoods of with predominantly ethnic Albanian minority surrounded with ethnic majority Macedonians in Kumonovo and Skopje (Cair, Gazi Baba, and Saraj) are considered to be more conducive to radicalisation than the town of Tetova which has a Muslim majority population. In Montenegro, five towns in Montenegro are on the map because of the origin of foreign fighters to Syria and active para-jamatas: Plav, Rožaje, Podgorica, Bar and Ulcinj. In Serbia, Islamic Extremism Serbia is geographically linked to Sandžak region, the region in south-west Serbia with the dominant Muslim population. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Islamic extremists seek to spread their influence outside this listed regions, by targeting Muslim population in other parts of countries, including in big cities and ethnic Roma Muslims.

It is also important to highlight that with the appearance of ISIS, the spreading of violent Salafi ideology was mediated also through **social media**²⁷ and that the number of websites promoting radical content has not decreased with defeat of ISIS in the field. As Kladničanin (2013) points out, the calls for violence at these web pages most often are not direct and blatant. They carefully and skilfully conceal their violent propaganda behind general discussions about Islam and, most importantly, behind the emotionally-charged topics, such as Srebrenica genocide, suffering of Muslims in Palestine, Syria and Iraq, with the emphasis on suffering of Muslim children. The findings of the public opinion survey conducted among youth from Sandžak²⁸ show that almost a half of the respondents (46.7%) think that social networks (Facebook, Twitter) are the most important tools of extremist propaganda, while much lower percentage of the respondents – 5.9% – believe that web portals are the main spot from which the extremists spread their messages. Altogether, more than a half of the respondents (52.6%) see online platforms as crucial for propagating extremists' ideas. Only 7.1% think that extremists spread their messages mainly from religious objects, while 8.3% believe that they do so “in the community”. This finding indicates the importance of internet as a channel of dissemination of extremist mes-

27 Kladničanin, Fahrudin (2013) ‘Vehabije u sajber prostoru Srbije’ (‘Wahhabis in Cyber-space in Serbia’), in Jelinčić, J & Ilić, S. (eds.) *Politički ekstremizam u cyber prostoru Srbije (Political Extremism in Cyber-space in Serbia)*. Zrenjanin: Centar za razvoj civilnog društva, pp. 129-130.

28 Ilić, V. (2016) *Stavovi mladih u Sandžaku: Koliko su mladi otvoreni prema islamskom ekstremizmu*. Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, p. 30.

sages. In contrast, the study taken by IDM²⁹ from Albania showed that over 70% of key informants and the majority of focus group participants emphasize that peer to peer radicalization which may potentially develop into violent extremist acts is more threatening and needs to be addressed at local level. The violent extremist international cooperation mostly took place on small groups and individuals who were organized (often in non-institutional form in para-jamaats) in spreading the violent extremist message.

Communities at risk

Research in all countries should that several societal groups that are at particular risk of becoming radicalized and potentially violent: young people in twenties and thirties as a way to prove themselves (search for identity), the relatively poor and deprived, those who turned Salafi “overnight” are in greater risk of becoming violent extremists, than those who were religious for longer period of time, those who went to study abroad in the Middle East. Inmates in prisons who have contact with religious extremists in prisons represent another category of “vulnerable group”. While the social-economic status may not be determinant, the feeling of boarder social exclusion of the group (on ethnic or religious basis) is important as evident in the analysis of Analytica indicated that while ethnic Albanians “feel they can practice their religion freely, [...] they felt more discriminated on ethnic grounds, in the way that other Muslim communities in Macedonia like Turks and Bosnians are not described in the media as being Muslims first”.³⁰

Specific to the region is radicalisation of Roma in Serbia and Montenegro and Macedonia. They are a stigmatised minority on the margins of society, with an almost absolute unemployment rate and poor education levels, which makes them susceptible to radicalisation. It is known that, due to these socio-economic disadvantages, they are being purposefully targeted by some radical preachers as in the case of Montenegro. For example the Hamid Beharović, who is presently standing trial for alleged participation in ISIL units in Syria, is of Roma origin, and, has also previously played a role in recruiting citizens of the Roma minority to Salafi circles. In Serbia, Salafist ideas spreading to Muslim members of Roma communities, especially among The Ashkali Roma community that immigrated from Kosovo after the Kosovo War in 2000. There have also been cases of Christian Roma being converted to Islam under the influence of Salafist imams. Roma communities are ideal targets for radical movements because they are generally extremely poor, underemployed, with very low levels of education and are often centred around isolated, illegal settlements. Members of Roma communities are also frequently involved in petty criminal activity, which further distances them from the majority population.

²⁹ IDM (2015), Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania, available at <http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf>

³⁰ Analytica, 62.

Furthermore, they are also often the victims of verbal and physical abuse by extreme right-wing groups, leaving vulnerable to radicalised ideas. The radicalisation of members of Roma communities is a trend that is particularly noticeable on the outskirts of Belgrade, Novi Sad and Smederevo. According to several Roma interviewees in each mahalla among Muslim Roma there are several dozen who follow Salafi interpretation of Islam.³¹

Transnational links

Salafi groups in the region have **links with traditional diaspora**, mainly in Austria, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland and more recently in the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The most important European and transnational link the extreme Salafi groups had with Austria was through takfiri ideologist Nedžad Balkan, known as Abu Muhammed. He was born in Vienna, but with roots from the town of Tutin, in the Sandžak. This former kick boxer, after his return from studies in Medina, became one of the most extreme takfiri preachers. He had an extensive influence on a number of para-jammats across the Balkans, not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in Montenegro and the Sandžak region of Serbia. Another link between non-violent extremists and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Europe comes from Sweden. A key organisation giving support to BiH Salafi groups is the Swedish Dawa Organisation. However, these diaspora NGOs and cultural centres are linked to the mainstream Salafi movement.

Connections among extremists in the Balkans are present and mostly revolve around language: connections between the extremists within the region from Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania, and further Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. This can be demonstrated by the plans for attacks by extremists during the Albania-Israel football game which were prevented by a police raid conducted in three countries: Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia³². The group was planning synchronized attacks in all three countries, with the main focus being the football game that was supposed to take place in Elbasan. Cooperation between extremists has occurred on different levels, from logistics, to 'guest lectures.' Additionally, colleagues from Macedonia quoted source from state intelligence service -UBK suggested that there have been instances of radicalisation of individuals in the Macedonian diaspora, particularly in Italy, Germany, and Austria. Some of these individuals have engaged in paramilitary activity in Syria and Iraq.³³ . Thus, extremists in Serbia have the most intensive cooperation with "brothers" from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro (Plav, Rozaje), while connections with Kosovo exist but are rare since they depend mostly on older Kosovars who speak the Serbian/Bosnian language. It is reported that Idriz Bilibani had been contact between Kosovo

31 According to 2011 census, 147604 Roma live in Serbia out of which 35591 are Muslims. The most Muslim Roma lives in Belgrade as well as in East and South Serbia. Radovanovic, S. & Knezevis, A. (2014) Roma in Serbia. *Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia*. Available from: <https://goo.gl/UC7jGy> [accessed 13th July 2017]

32 <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-arrests-19-on-suspicion-of-planning-is-attacks-11-17-2016>

33 UBK interview (2017)

Albanians and Bosniaks, especially in Prizren area and Bosniaks in Serbia and Montenegro.³⁴ Cooperation traditionally goes in a form of visits of da'is who give religious lectures and book presentations, but there are also humanitarian activities.

Institutional responses

All countries of the region have established legal framework for the countering violent extremism (CVE) which is largely in line with UN, CoE standards and EU *acquis*. All countries have criminalised foreign fighters phenomena in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014). All WB6 have also relevant strategies and action plans against terrorism based on the four pillars of prevention, pursuit, protection and reaction and is in line with the EU's counterterrorism strategy. The level of implementation of legislation varies across the region where Kosovo and Albania had most progress.

The key challenge ahead of all governments is to **address prevention of violent extremism** by addressing drivers of extremism in deprived regions and better engagement with legitimate local religious and civil society actors, cooperating with detention facilities; building alternative and positive narratives to counter extremist ideological influences; fostering collaboration within the EU's Radicalization Awareness Network. There are some pilot programs for **de-radicalisation** in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo³⁵, however, no countries have fully established comprehensive programmes on prevention, de-radicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of returned fighters including those in prisons, and their families, in particular for women and minors. **The difference in prosecution of foreign fighters who took part in Ukraine and Syria or Iraq** is most evident in Serbia, as all returned fighters from Ukraine have made a deal with the Prosecution and pleaded guilty, receiving suspended sentences rather than time in prison. This was justified with the fact that Islamist fighters are tied to internationally acknowledged terrorist groups³⁶, while those who go to Ukraine are associated with and join the groups that are not labelled as such.³⁷ This difference in treatment of foreign fighters may signal that the punishment is not severe and that it is still worth joining the battlefield in Ukraine, while on the other hand giving the Salafist recruiters another argument to add to their narratives of unjust treatment of Serbian Muslim communities they target.

34 Refik, A. (2013) *Iz Kosova u rat u Siriji*. Deutsche Welle. 02.07.2013. Available from: <http://www.dw.com/hr/iz-kosova-u-rat-u-siriji/a-16918070> [accessed 2nd July 2017]

35 Perry, V. (2016) Initiatives to Prevent/Counter Violent Extremism in South East Europe: A Survey of Regional Issues, Initiatives and Opportunities. Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council

36 https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list
[http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2368\(2017\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2368(2017))

37 The ICJ has decided that Ukraine didn't provide enough evidence to prove that Russia sponsors terrorist groups in Ukraine. See decision of the court published on April 19, 2017: <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/166/19412.pdf> [Accessed 4th September 2017].

The **national level coordination** is only partially functional in Macedonia and Serbia, while the inter-agency coordination and cooperation between relevant authorities is the special challenge in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to fragmented law enforcement structures between state, entity and cantonal levels. Montenegro did not appoint national focal point for terrorism and Serbia lacks a single database on terrorism-related information at national level, which will contribute to more efficient information exchange and better inter-institutional, regional and international cooperation. There is space in all countries of the region to improve cooperation between law enforcement agencies, intelligence services and relevant key state institutions (education, health, and social services) as well as with local communities and civil society organisations. There is structured support for the improvement of cooperation among law enforcement and intelligence services, between countries in the Western Balkans, as well as with relevant EU agencies and countries through Western Balkan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (WBCTI)³⁸.

38 <http://wbcti.wb-iisg.com>