



Working paper 3: Interactions between States and Religious Institutions in the Balkans

PUBLICATIONS



PAVE has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 870769.

PAVE Consortium



Berghof Foundation



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
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العامة والشؤون الدولية



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Published by Trinity College Dublin. March 2022.

This publication is part of WP4 of the PAVE project, led by Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme (FMSH).

Authors: Maja Halilovic Pastuovic, Goran Tepšić, Nemanja Džuverović, Sead Turcalo, Jelena Brkić-Šmigoc, Mirza Smajić, Veldin Kadić, Muamer Hirkić and Gillian Wylie

Design: EURICE GmbH

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To cite: Maja Halilovic Pastuovic, Goran Tepšić, Nemanja Džuverović, Sead Turcalo, Jelena Brkić-Šmigoc, Mirza Smajić, Veldin Kadić, Muamer Hirkić and Gillian Wylie 2022. Interactions between states and religious institutions in Balkans. Working Paper 3. PAVE Project Publications.

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1 Introduction

The aim of this report is to present PAVE's findings on interactions between states and religious institutions in the Western Balkans. Two countries in the Western Balkans were the focus of PAVE's research for this report: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. The PAVE project in general aims to explore multi-causal drivers of vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism by focusing on three clusters of community-level factors and actors: a) cumulative extremisms (WP3), b) interactions between state and religious institutions (WP4), and c) online and offline de-radicalisation (WP5). This report addresses the second cluster (WP4). In order to do so successfully, the PAVE project explored the interplay between state and religious actors who influence their communities' propensity to become vulnerable or resilient to patterns of violent extremism. The research i) examined the role of religious and political institutions in the prevention of extremism in different forms, ii) explored real and perceived cooperation of religious and political institutions in countering religious and political extremism, and iii) investigated what activities, aimed at preventing religious and political extremism, actors from different types of institutions conduct. The findings are based on 66 semi-structured interviews at six locations in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, archival research and discourse analysis. With regard to the context of the research, the Western Balkans are understood as an area of fragile social experiences/societies. There are recognised failures related to nationhood and state-building following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, of which both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were part. Governance is riddled with complexities and political corruption in both countries, with Bosnia and Herzegovina having added layers of Dayton-induced administrative dysfunctionality. National and ethnic tensions are rife, causing political instability and cyclical resurfacing of unresolved identity issues.

2 Background

2.1 Serbia

Over the past three decades, Serbia has changed its legal status four times, from being a federal unit of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (until 1992) and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1992-2003) to being a member of a state union with Montenegro (2003-2006) and an independent state (from 2006). Simultaneously, it was involved, directly or indirectly, in four conflicts: Slovenian (1991), Croatian (1991-1995), Bosnian (1992-1995) and Kosovan (1996-1999). In the post-war period, Serbia was confronted with the secession of its southern province of Kosovo (2008), whose independence it still disputes. Therefore, Serbia struggles with legacies of wars and international isolation during the 1990s and late democratic and economic transition, which started in the 2000s after the fall of the then president Slobodan Milošević. Conflicting historical narratives, competitive victimisations and collective grievances, combined with the poor economic situation, widespread corruption, and malfunctioning of state institutions that fuel ethno-religious polarisation are the main drivers of the community's vulnerability to radicalisation and extremism. As Perry (2019) argues, **radicalisation in Serbia – and the whole of Western Balkans – is more embedded in the experience of violence and**

ethnic cleansing of the 1990s wars than in any other factor typical for Western Europe or the USA. Therefore, Serbia and the Western Balkans region are not confronted with the kind of ‘new violent extremism crisis’ that started after the outbreak of wars in Syria (2011) and Ukraine (2014). Instead, Serbia is dealing with various manifestations of the **socially embedded ‘culture of extremism’** – primarily a consequence of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and events that followed it.

Religion plays an essential role in this ‘culture of extremism’ since it was – as a constituent factor of nationhood – often the main diacritic between the warring parties in the 1990s. It also, however, serves as a driver of solidarity. It attracted various foreign fighters to the Bosnian War, e.g. from Greece and Russia or the Middle East countries, who fought for the Serbian and Bosniak sides, respectively. Recruitment of foreign fighters from Serbia by ISIS in Syria or pro-Russian forces in Ukraine could also be seen as an act of religious solidarity and a ‘repayment of the debt’. Both Islamist and far-right extremists from Serbia trace their ideological beliefs to the religious and war narratives. The ideology of Islamist extremism first came to Serbia (Sandžak region) mainly as a consequence of jihadi presence in the Bosnian War (Perry 2019), while almost all of the far-right nationalist organisations emphasise religious elements of Serbian identity in their political programmes (Bakić 2013b; Stakić 2015).

Perry (2019) argues that the case of **Serbia is ‘a tale of two extremisms’: far-right nationalism and Islamist extremism.** Both forms of extremism have religion as their points of reference, although that is less obvious in the first case. While Islamist extremism stems directly from specific interpretations of Islam, relations between far-right nationalism and Orthodox Christianity are less apparent, apart from some far-right clerical organisations (Bakić 2013). Religion influenced the process of radicalisation indirectly as well since it was fundamental to the Serbian and Bosniak ethno-national identities. Therefore, **state and religious institutions played a decisive role in both cases since their activity, or rather passivity, produced the main drivers of radicalisation and extremism in the country.** They fostered the production of narratives adopted by radical and extremist organisations through their **‘normalisation’ and ‘mainstreaming’ of extremist discourses** and participated in various political conflicts that led to **socioeconomic underdevelopment** and the spreading of radical ideologies, **inter-religious/inter-ethnic discrimination and hate speech.**

Almost 85% of the population of Serbia is Orthodox Christian, 4.97% is Catholic Christian, and 3.1% is Muslim (Đurić et al., 2014). A Law on Churches and Religious Communities adopted in 2006 recognises five traditional churches and two traditional religious communities in Serbia: the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Reformed Christian Church, the Evangelical Christian Church, the Islamic Religious Community, and the Jewish Religious Community. The Law refers to the exceptional historical and civilisational role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in shaping, preserving and developing the Serbian identity. The Serbian Orthodox Church “is one inseparable autocephalous church” in “canonical unity with other Orthodox Churches”. It has a hierarchical structure with the Patriarch as its head and the Holy Assembly of Bishops and the Holy Assembly of Synods as the most important governing bodies. The jurisdiction of the SOC is divided into 30 dioceses, half of which belong to the territory of Serbia. The SOC governs and freely disposes of church property, church funds and endowments, and performs independent control of its revenues and expenditures. Although Serbia is formally a secular state, the SOC is considered a national church. Furthermore, the SOC is traditionally considered a national institution with the greatest public support

(together with the Serbian army) and an important political actor in Serbia and the Western Balkans region.

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Serbian Islamic Community shared a similar fate. In 1992, the new Serbian Islamic Community emerged in Belgrade, but the Sandžak elite discredited it as a political tool of the central government and established a separate Islamic Community in Sandžak. The first of the two Islamic communities in Serbia, the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICoS), claims continuity with the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia, which was dissolved at the beginning of the Yugoslav conflicts. The Law from 2006 and the official register of the Ministry of Justice identified the ICoS as the only legal Islamic community in Serbia. The Head of the ICoS is the Grand Mufti (Reis-ul-ulema), with the Riyaset and Assembly as the highest governing bodies. The jurisdiction of the ICoS is divided into regional (muftiate and meshihat), municipal (majlis), and local administrative units (jamaat). The ICoS is represented in all major Serbian cities, including Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac, and in Sandžak (Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin, Prijepolje) and Albanian-speaking Preševo Valley (Preševo, Bujanovac, Medveđa) as well.

A separate Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS) was established in 2007 as a part (meshihat) of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The meshihat has a president and includes three muftiates of Sandžak (with majlises in Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, Nova Varoš, Priboj, Prijepolje and Brodarevo), Belgrade-Novı Sad (including the city of Subotica) and Preševo Valley (covering Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa). The ICiS claims to be the only legitimate Islamic community in Serbia, although its legal status remains unclear. Although there is no official data, it is commonly understood that the ICiS enjoys the loyalty of approximately 250 mosques in Serbia (Perry 2019; Kisić 2015).

According to the 2018 survey on religion, 34% of Serbian citizens consider religion very important, ranking Serbia ninth among 34 European countries (PRC 2018). Two surveys conducted mainly among the Muslim youth population in Serbia emphasise the role of religion even more. The survey of the drivers of youth radicalism and violent extremism in Serbia (CeSID 2016) shows that 65% of young Bosniaks consider themselves true believers and accept all the teachings of their faith, while 70% think that the influence of the religious community in their area is either great or great but not decisive. Another study of the youth population's attitudes in Sandžak (mostly Muslims) from 2016 supports these results, showing that 61.9% of respondents declare themselves true believers who accept all their faith's teachings (Ilić 2016).

2.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

There are **four legally recognised religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina**: the Islamic Community, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and the Jewish Community. Their cooperation is most visible in the work of the **Interreligious Council**, which consists of representatives of all four religious communities and is established as a non-governmental organisation. Previous research has shown that the Islamic Community has been the most active of all the religious institutions in the field of countering/preventing violent extremism (C/PVE), primarily due to the 'foreign fighters' phenomenon and departures to Syria and Iraq. The importance of political/state

institutions¹ is reflected in the possibility of preventive but also punitive action in cases before or after the manifestation of some form of violent extremism. In addition to the Ministry of Security, which is responsible for all strategic plans for the prevention and suppression of extremism, security agencies, ministries of the interior, ministries of education, social work and mental health centres also play a pivotal role.

CSOs mostly work in the prevention sector, but their activities are limited due to the current lack of funds, previously available, for C/PVE-related actions, although some receive grants from international organisations. Therefore, a large number of **programmes follow foreign actors' agendas**, with particular topics being given more emphasis if they are relevant to the donor. International organisations such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) are working on prevention but also on repatriation processes, currently with returnees from Syria.

Considering that Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a multi-confessional society, most respondents in this study believe that the religious and political institutions play an important role in everyday life. However, the **religious and/or political institutions' activity relating to the prevention of extremism is perceived and has proven to be insufficient**, or has negative connotations in certain instances. Moreover, all respondents agree that the role of religious institutions is extremely important and can have positive effects in the prevention of extremism. By contrast, the role of political institutions is significantly less visible in the prevention of extremism, but it strongly influences the formation of interpersonal and inter-ethnic relations – and even nationalist narratives in some cases. One of the major issues is the **ethno-political division of Bosnian society**, which significantly complicates resilience, and is often 'abused' through the formation of certain political narratives that are predicated on a high degree of correspondence between religious and national identity. Here, **religion is often used to promote political and other goals**, which can have corresponding societal effects. Also, there is a clear consensus among respondents that religious institutions enjoy a high level of trust and respect among their members, but at the same time there is a lack of rhetoric in religious rituals/rites about the risks leading to extremism. According to many respondents, there is certainly scope for them to play a positive role in the prevention of extremism in communities. Furthermore, **one of the positive examples of strengthening the resilience to extremism and bolstering cooperation and dialogue is the Interreligious Council in BiH** – but at the same time, it was emphasised that this body needs to have greater visibility on the ground.

When it comes to processes and factors that contribute to the reduction of extremism, all of the communities (Sarajevo, Brčko, Prijedor and Mostar) and respondents from these communities agree that key mechanisms are present in youth programmes, education, training and workshops. These initiatives demonstrate good practices that **encourage dialogue and interaction, which ultimately contribute to a better understanding of the Other and reduce the risk of extremism**. The respondents' answers clearly show that the activities of certain religious institutions (e.g. the Islamic Community in Brčko), through their workshops and debates, helped to enhance mutual understanding and strengthen the community's resilience to extremism. A similar positive example can be seen in

¹ The political institutions in this study are defined as any state institution, as well as the political parties that form an integral part of the state apparatus.

Prijedor where the high school programme includes discussions of different cultural and ethnic customs and religious holidays and offers opportunities for exchange of experiences. On the other hand, **the lack of political support** is a negative factor, but there is the example of the government of Brčko District, which always publicly condemns detected hate speech. Non-governmental organisations have been recognised as an important factor in the process of reducing the risk of extremism in communities, and their work is focused on organising various workshops and seminars with support from donors.

Overall, there is a need for a stronger link between state and religious institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, since these institutions can increase community resilience and reduce influences or factors that encourage extremism. Research also confirms that the prevention of extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina has proven to be more effective at the local level than at the entity and state levels.

3 Methodology

3.1 Serbia

The fieldwork in Serbia explored ethno-nationalist and religiously inspired extremism and their interconnections. Furthermore, it examined the legacies of the conflict and community polarisation. The analysis particularly looked for narratives of ‘othering’ (the definition of out-groups), threat perceptions, self-victimisation, and legitimisation of violence. Research was focused on the role of state and religious institutions in the process of mainstreaming extremist narratives in the public discourse. In particular, the research addressed the political ties between state, local institutions and far-right organisations, different treatment of Muslim and non-Muslim extremists by the Serbian authorities, and the impact of the Islamic community divisions on the radicalisation of the Muslim population. It also included the inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue and centre-periphery relations (Belgrade-Novı Pazar). It is important to stress that Islamist extremism in Serbia should not be equated with Salafism or Wahabism since these Islamist teachings can have moderate forms. Islamist extremism in Serbia is primarily related to takfirism and justification/use of violence against ‘non-believers’.

Fieldwork in Serbia was based on the following methods: 1) semi-structured interviews; 2) archival research; and 3) discourse analysis.

The fieldwork included 27 interviews with relevant representatives of state institutions (4 interviews), religious communities (4 interviews with formal leaders and 1 with an informal leader), local government officials, formal/informal political leaders (3 interviews with formal and 4 with informal leaders) and CSO representatives (11 interviews) in Belgrade and Novi Pazar. The interviews were conducted in both ethnic and religious communities. Archival research included official documents, political speeches and interviews, media and CSO reports, and other relevant publications. Two focus groups (one per field site) were planned but had to be cancelled because of the COVID-19 restrictions and substituted with additional interviews.

The fieldwork was conducted at two sites: Belgrade and Novi Pazar.

Belgrade is the capital and the largest city in Serbia. The entire state administration and most political parties, religious communities and media are based there. For the most part, the far right (and some Islamist) activities have been concentrated in Belgrade, including foreign fighters' recruitment for both Syria and Ukraine. One of the two Islamic communities (Islamic Community of Serbia), which is considered loyal to Serbia, is Belgrade-based. Although around 90% of the city's population are Orthodox Christians, there is a Muslim minority of approximately 30 000 people. Belgrade was also usually blamed for the marginalisation and underdevelopment of peripheral regions, such as Sandžak, which led to the central government's delegitimisation among the Bosniak population.

Novi Pazar is the largest city in the mostly Muslim-populated region of Sandžak. The city is a venue for all political and religious activities in this region. It is considered the Bosniak political capital (around 80% of the population are Muslims) and the seat of the other Islamic community (Islamic Community in Serbia), working under the auspices of Sarajevo. Novi Pazar was particularly relevant for the research since most of the Islamist activities in Serbia, including recruitment of foreign fighters, focused on this city. Like the whole of Sandžak, the city of Novi Pazar is affected by economic underdevelopment, with high rates of unemployment and poverty. Therefore, the entire socio-political situation keeps Novi Pazar in a constant latent conflict with Belgrade, both ethnic/religious and socioeconomic.

3.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

The fieldwork was conducted in the period from June to November 2021 in four selected communities/cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Sarajevo, Mostar, Prijedor and Brčko. These communities were chosen due to their specificities and relevance for the topic, as well as to provide the necessary contextualisation of the phenomenon of extremism in BiH's diverse society.

Sarajevo: All three main religious communities, as well as others, are present in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is ranked as the second largest community by the number of individual departures to Syria and Iraq. Despite its division into two administrative districts – an eastern part, which belongs to the entity of Republika Srpska, and the federal part – Sarajevo is a symbol of multiculturalism and religious diversity. It also has to contend with legacies of the Bosnian conflict (1992-1995). Key state institutions are located in Sarajevo.

Prijedor: Today, Prijedor is a mostly Serb-populated community. Prijedor was one of the towns where Bosniaks suffered some of the worst atrocities of the Bosnian War. The town also has the highest number of post-war refugee returns. Cooperation and relations between the religious and political institutions have been very important for post-conflict reconstruction in this community. Religious institutions play a very important role in overall community resilience, especially in light of the appalling war crimes and the lack of mutual trust between the ethnic communities in this town.

Brčko: A self-governing unit in the north of the country, Brčko does not belong to any of the Entities and has its own judiciary, legislative and executive authorities. This community is interesting for the research due to its political particularities that make Brčko an independent political unit within a

polarised state. In addition, Brčko has a very mixed ethnic population. According to the last (2013) census, Bosniaks make up 42.4% of the total population, Serbs 34.6 %, Croats 20.7%, and others 2.4%.²

Mostar: This is an example of a divided city, with Bosniaks on the east and Croats on the west side of the city as dominant ethnic groups. However, despite all kinds of divisions, inter-ethnic cooperation exists, whereas in political terms the city is completely blocked. Religious institutions have been a very important factor in public life due to political dysfunctionality and the lack of mutual trust as a legacy of the conflict.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 39 interviewees in the above-mentioned period – 13 in Sarajevo, 10 in Mostar, 8 in Prijedor and 8 in Brčko. Major questions the study attempted to answer include: i) What is the role of religious and political institutions in the prevention of extremism in any form?; ii) What is your perception of the current cooperation between religious and political institutions in countering religious and political extremism?; iii) What activities, aimed at preventing religious and political extremism, do actors from different types of institutions conduct? Selected respondents for the research were affiliated to a variety of institutions (institutions in a broader sense; different forms of organised agency), or more precisely to different state institutions, religious institutions, civil society organisations and international organisations. Respondents were selected on the basis of their professional engagement in the field of prevention and suppression of violent extremism and their broader activities in countering/preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) within programmes and initiatives of various organisations and institutions.

In accordance with the national laws of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the general ethical guidelines for research issued by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Political Science, the PAVE project's methodological framework and the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the identity of respondents was anonymised, kept private and will not be disclosed in this research. The only categorisation made by the project team related to the type of institutions from which the respondents come, in order to attain a broader view of institutional perceptions based on the sector to which the respondent belongs.

Given that the fieldwork was conducted at a time of uncertainty resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of Sarajevo project team faced a number of methodological challenges. A total of 12 interviews had to be conducted online (via Zoom) due to the changing circumstances on the ground, with some respondents required to self-isolate and occasional pandemic-related restrictions imposed in some communities, affecting two interviewees from Mostar, two from Brčko and eight from Prijedor. The remaining 27 interviews were conducted in a 'face-to-face' format, both at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo, and in the communities/cities selected for research. The circumstances described above sometimes led to the postponement of previously scheduled interviews, as well as to shifting of deadlines and amendments to the work plan of the University of Sarajevo's research team. Lastly, during the selection of respondents, the research team concluded that the circle of people who deal with these topics is very small, making it difficult to find interlocutors who had not previously participated in research within the general sphere of radicalisation and violent extremism.

² <http://www.statistika.ba/#link4>

4 Drivers of vulnerability

4.1 Serbia

4.1.1 Vulnerability to far-right extremism

Far-right extremist groups have been present in Serbia since the late 1980s and the beginning of democratisation and liberalisation of former Yugoslavia's political and economic system. **The wars that followed during the 1990s acted as catalysts in shaping the Serbian far right since they put (extreme) nationalism high on the political agenda, making it socially acceptable.** Another factor that led to the normalisation of the far right was Serbia's international position during the 1990s. Sanctions and isolation, culminating in the NATO bombing in 1999 and subsequent secession of Kosovo, increased xenophobia and produced strong anti-Western and anti-globalist sentiment among the population in Serbia. Consequently, the **Serbian public considered Western policy unprincipled and unjust**, which, combined with the country's economic failures, fostered national frustration and **self-victimisation** and strengthened far-right nationalism.

The international isolation of Serbia also brought the state to collapse, thus creating a parastatal (clientelistic) system that served to satisfy citizens' basic needs. This clientelistic system was based on informal networks, consisting of paramilitary groups, criminals, representatives of the regime, tycoons, football fan groups, and other groups that profited from such a system. After a short period of optimism following the fall of then president of Yugoslavia Slobodan Milošević (in 2000), a new context of political and economic transition, with its shortcomings (corruption, unemployment, etc.), created an atmosphere of social and national frustration for the generations who grew up during the 1990s. This created space for the **transformation of former paramilitary groups into various far-right movements and associations**. Some of them were integrated into formal state institutions, mainly the state security sector. These processes were visible in almost every aspect of life, with the most dramatic example being the assassination of Serbian prime minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003.³ He was killed by members of this parastatal system (former members of paramilitary groups) who felt threatened by his government's anti-crime agenda.

The parastatal system was rejuvenated since 2012 and the election win of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP), which is mainly led by former members of the Serbian Radical Party (related to paramilitary groups that were active during the 1990s wars). Nowadays, the SPP constantly plays the nationalistic card and courts far-right groups in Serbia. In the last nine years, especially since 2014 when Aleksandar Vučić became prime minister (in 2017, he became the president of the Republic of Serbia), the SPP has been collaborating, officially and unofficially, with various far-right groups. During this period, some of the most prominent far-right leaders, such as Miša Vacić (*Srpska desnica*) and Arnaud Goullion (*Solidarité Kosovo*), have been granted official government positions. Prominent members of the SPP have been seen **working with football fan groups which have not only been nationalist strongholds since the early 1990s but are also powerful criminal enterprises**, which raised many eyebrows about

³Stojanović, Milica (2021). "Manhunt: Tracking the Fugitive Killers of Serbian PM Zoran Djindjic". Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/12/manhunt-tracking-the-fugitive-killers-of-serbian-pm-zoran-djindjic/>. Cvijić, Srdjan (2021). "How the Virus of Criminal Authoritarianism Killed Zoran Djindjic". Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/11/how-the-virus-of-criminal-authoritarianism-killed-zoran-djindjic/>.

potential collaboration between the state and the mafia. Also, senior government officials do not shy away from supporting the work of far-right organisations such as *Levijatan*, which are openly hostile to migrants and minority groups and have an extreme-right ideology. It is suspected that members of this group have even managed to join the ranks of the military and police, which is another indicator that far-right groups have the support of the state in carrying out their work and spreading nationalist ideology in the state security apparatus. Therefore, **lack of legitimacy** and the **state's inability to provide services** to its citizens, along with a **strong parastatal system**, are the major factors of vulnerability when it comes to far-right extremism in Serbia.

Since **Orthodox Christianity** is considered the cornerstone of the Serbian national identity, almost all radical ethno-nationalist and some far-right organisations emphasise religious elements and include the values promoted by the SOC in their programmes and manifestos. Records of cooperation between the representatives of the SOC and these organisations are scarce. However, they often display similar attitudes when it comes to the issues of LGBTQ+ rights, the status of Kosovo, EU and NATO membership, the role of Russia, unification of the 'Serbian territories', 'war heroes', etc. Although the SOC does not officially support any political organisation, its reluctance to distance itself and condemn far-right organisations creates an impression of its approval and support. Lack of transparency and internal democratic procedures in the SOC adds to the image of the Church as being pro radical ethnonationalism/far-right.

With regard to the economy and finance, Serbia is a prime example of a **failed economic transition**, which led to **endemic unemployment**, created a strong and deep division between winners and losers of the transition ('have' and 'have nots') and induced **strong feelings of deprivation** among the latter. The feeling (or the perception) of inequality is a strong motivator for those who see themselves as underdogs in the present economic system. This is most often the case with the members of far-right groups. The failure of the state to provide wellbeing for a substantial part of its population is compensated for by the **parastatal system, which is based on illegal activities mainly connected with far-right extremism**. Far-right organisations and football fan groups often provide cover for criminal activities, serving as 'mediators' between criminal and political groups. Illegal funds are also used to finance foreign fighters in Eastern Ukraine. The state provides funding for part of the SOC's activities and makes significant fiscal contributions, including the return of properties in the process of restitution. It is especially important to remember that the SOC was the largest landowner before WWII with most of its properties confiscated by the post-war socialist regime.

The last three decades in Serbia have been marked by sweeping political and social changes, including **reforms in the education sector that have not been very successful, leaving Serbia with only 11% of the population with higher education**. The reforms in primary and secondary education brought comprehensive changes in the prescribed curricula. They emphasised nationalist interpretations of past historical events while introducing numerous stereotypes about other ethnic and minority groups in the country and the region, thus boosting an exclusionary mindset among the youth. Furthermore, there is an issue with religious education ('veronauka') in elementary and high schools. Religious education is an elective course, and pupils can choose between this course and civic education. This is a factor of vulnerability since it segregates pupils based on their religion (Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim) and is controlled by the religious communities (curricula, textbooks, teachers). Additionally, there is

no inter-religious communication or inter-religious education programme in the Serbian education system.

The Serbian government partially addressed the issues of radicalisation and extremism in the **National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism**, adopted in 2017. The Strategy focuses only on the issue of **Islamist terrorism** and does not tackle the other forms of violent extremism and radicalisation. It completely leaves out the issue of far-right extremism. Besides this Strategy, the official discourse of the Serbian government seldom mentions the issues of radicalisation and extremism, particularly their prevention and countering. The issue of **P/CVE does not feature at all in the Serbian public discourse**.

Although there is an institutional framework for fostering cooperation between religious communities via the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities (of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Serbia), very little is done in this respect. At the same time, there is a **lack of cooperation between the SOC and the two Islamic communities**. While these two religious communities traditionally show respect and understanding for each other, there is very little interaction between them, with no meaningful institutional dialogue (on extremism or other political issues). The Interfaith Council was established in 2010, but it has not convened yet.

Over time, CSOs have entirely monopolised the issue of violent extremism and P/CVE programmes. This created a form of '**CSO bubble**' where only CSOs are 'in charge' of the issue of extremism, with very little input by religious communities and state institutions on this issue.

4.1.2 Vulnerability to Islamist extremism

The Sandžak community is polarised inter-ethnically (between Bosniaks and Serbs), intra-ethnically (between different Bosniak political parties) and religiously (between two Islamic communities). Mistrust of the Serbian institutions is exceedingly high in Sandžak. The survey from 2016 showed that Bosniaks had less trust in state institutions than members of other ethnic groups: police (32%, compared to 39% at the national level), judiciary (15%, 20%), military (36%, 56%), religious institutions (54%, 42%), CSOs (39%, 15%), and local authorities (21%, 15%). The discrepancy between the national level (all citizens of Serbia) and the level of the Bosniak ethnic group is striking when it comes to trust in the military (discrepancy of 20%) and CSOs (24%). Religious institutions and CSOs are, by far, the most trusted organisations among Bosniaks.

The **unequal representation of minority groups in local and state institutions** is a further issue of concern. The population ratio in Novi Pazar is 80-20% in favour of Bosniaks, whereas representation in local institutions (police, judiciary, fire department, health service, etc.) is approximately 80-20% in favour of the minority Serbian population. Similarly, in the National Assembly, national minorities, which comprise approximately 20% of the total population in Serbia, have only 7% of seats.

The problem is also illustrated by the **different treatment of pro-Russian and anti-Assad foreign fighters**. So far, the Serbian judiciary has prosecuted four Serbian fighters coming back from ISIS-held territories, with three more being tried in absentia — all of them were convicted for terrorism-related offences and were sentenced to years in prison. At the same time, fighters coming back from Ukraine have been treated very differently, with almost all receiving suspended sentences rather than jail time.

Although not uncommon from a comparative legal perspective, this kind of behaviour has political and social consequences, signalling that some crimes 'are less bad than others' if a particular group perpetrates them. This unequal treatment has the potential to become a breeding ground for the reciprocal radicalisation of those who see this kind of practice as just another instrument for the continuation of 'culture wars' against Islam and Muslims in Serbia and the region.

The **conflict between the central government and Sandžak authorities** began during the 1990s when the major Bosniak party, the Party of Democratic Action (PDA), opted for Sandžak's secession (and integration with Bosnia and Herzegovina) or, alternatively, for it to be granted the status of an autonomous region in Serbia. The Serbian government rejected these demands as an attempted coup. This conflict led to the complete isolation, both political and economic, of Sandžak, which still continues today. The post-2000 governments tried to rectify the position of Sandžak by including its representatives in central state institutions. This led to **internal competition between the Bosniak parties in Sandžak** for the role of a minority coalition partner. In each of the governments since 2000, there has been at least one Bosniak party represented, thus creating animosity with those excluded. Over time, this conflict has intensified, which subsequently led to the radicalisation of the parties 'left behind'. Over the years, this form of **political manipulation evolved into a mechanism of ethnic regulation** with the potential to both radicalise and deradicalise the relations between Bosniak and Serbian communities and between different Bosniak parties in Sandžak. For example, the PDA, a branch of the Sarajevo-based party of the same name, could be considered a radical ethno-nationalist party, although it had periods of moderation and deradicalisation. **Co-optation** of the PDA in the Serbian central government (from 2008 to 2014) led to a moderation of its politics and ideology, but only for it to radicalise itself again after returning to opposition in 2014. The PDA is confronted with two other major Sandžak parties as well, namely the Sandžak Democratic Party (SDP) and the Party of Justice and Reconciliation (PJR). The former is traditionally loyal to the Serbian government, while the latter pursued a radical political agenda vis-à-vis the government (similar to the PDA's approach) until it was recently incorporated into it.

The Muslim population in Serbia is also affected by the **split in the Islamic community**, which is represented by **two rival organisations: the ICoS and the ICiS**, discussed above. This division is primarily political, a consequence of the above-mentioned mechanism of ethnic regulation. The Law on Churches and Religious Communities adopted in 2006 recognises the Belgrade-based ICoS as the only legal community. After a few unsuccessful efforts to unite the two Islamic Communities, the ICiS was officially founded in 2007, operating under the auspices of Sarajevo. The ICoS is affiliated with the PDA, while the ICiS shares the leadership with the PJR. This split continues despite various attempts to reconcile the two Islamic Communities, including mediation by Turkey between 2010 and 2014. This religious and political division opened the space in Sandžak for external fundamentalist influences. It is therefore considered one of the drivers of the Muslim population's vulnerability to radicalisation and extremism.

Additionally, Sandžak is one of the least economically developed regions in Serbia. For example, in 2016, the unemployment rate in Serbia was 15%, while the unemployment rate in Novi Pazar was 60%. It has a very young population (over 50% is under the age of 30) with very high poverty rates. The acute problem facing the region is a **lack of infrastructure and investment**. A study of the youth population's attitudes in Sandžak (mostly Muslims) shows that 30% of them identify unemployment as the main

problem facing their community. Almost 60% feel incapable of changing anything in their community. In comparison, 41% of respondents think that the state of Serbia is mainly responsible for solving local problems (9% opted for local government). The Bosniak population in Sandžak feels discriminated against and has very weak or no identification with the state of Serbia.

Both Islamic communities are funded by the Serbian government but also **receive financial donations from other countries**. Turkey financially supports the ICoS, while the ICiS receives donations from countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE. Salafis in Sandžak have also received support from Saudi Arabian charities, such as Al-Furqan, and the Bosniak diaspora in Sweden, Austria and the UK.

In relation to education, both Islamic communities have their maktabas (primary) and madrasas (secondary/higher education) for the training of clergy (imams). Some of them continue their education in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Saudi Arabia or Algeria. Schools run by Islamic communities in Serbia are not recognised as important factors of radicalisation as they mainly teach a moderate version of Islam. The issue of parajaamats in Serbia was never of major importance. Some of the Salafi masjids were parajaamats, but some of them were organised by the ICiS. A parajaamat used for recruiting members of the Roma population for the Syrian civil war was also discovered in the Belgrade suburb of Zemun. In 2017, the Serbian authorities demolished a religious building in Zemun, which officially belonged to the ICoS, explaining that it lacked a building permit. It remains unclear whether the real reason for the demolition of this improvised mosque was its utilisation for recruiting Islamist fighters. Nowadays, there are only a few parajaamats, and they are mainly marginalised.

Moreover, education in Sandžak is adversely affected by **segregation policies**, as a result of which Serbian and Bosniak pupils attend separate classes (based on their linguistic preferences and ethnic/religious affiliation). This inevitably feeds into different forms of separation and segregation in everyday life (outside the classroom) with very little or almost no inter-ethnic contact.

Besides a lack of dialogue and cooperation between the SOC and Islamic communities, a further factor of vulnerability is the **failure to establish any contact between the two Islamic communities** in Serbia. Although they teach the same version of Islam, the ICiS considers the ICoS to be a political construct by Belgrade and the PDA (from the period when the PDA was part of the central government), aimed at taking control of the whole Islamic community in Serbia. The establishment of the ICoS and the introduction of Turkish influence in the region are also perceived as an attempt to weaken the influence of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sandžak (since the ICiS is a part of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina).

4.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

According to the content analysis, cooperation between religious and political/state institutions in the prevention of religious and political extremism is not at a satisfactory level. In general, this interaction can be divided into two tracks: cooperation at the state level, and cooperation at the level of local communities. Most of the respondents pointed out that this relationship does not exist at the state level, or even if it exists to some extent, then it is not visible to the public. On the other hand, there was a tendency among some respondents to assert that some types of collaboration at the level of

local communities still exist but could be more constructive and fruitful. Therefore, there does not seem to be a systematic and clear approach within cooperation between religious and political/state institutions in countering religious and political extremism, which is a significant factor of vulnerability. When there is cooperation, it takes place on an *ad hoc* basis, generally in response to sporadic extremist outbursts or manifestations of some other form of extremism, and mostly takes the form of public condemnation.

There are various reasons for the **weak interaction between religious and political/state institutions in countering religious and political extremism**. First, there is widespread apathy in society towards the issue of religious and political extremism. Furthermore, the **permeation of ethno-political concepts within the religious matrix leaves room for misinterpretation of such types of cooperation within the public discourse**; this aspect must therefore also be considered. Also, the formal legal framework for cooperation and the issue of material and financial resources for the implementation of possible initiatives and projects are problematic. However, some respondents who were more actively involved in this issue provide positive examples of religious institutions' cooperation with international organisations in BiH and some non-governmental organisations in processes and activities related to the prevention of mainly religious extremism. First and foremost, the Islamic Community in BiH, together with the OSCE and the IOM, organised several activities in the field of prevention of extremism and advocacy of critical thinking. These initiatives had positive repercussions in public, especially in the context of the departure of fighters from BiH to foreign conflicts, which put the Islamic Community in BiH under some pressure. However, this type of cooperation did not involve interaction with political/state institutions. Based on the research conducted, it can be further concluded that (to some extent) there is collaboration between political parties and religious institutions, but this **interaction is mostly homogeneous because it occurs between the party/parties that predominantly belong to one ethnic group and a religious institution representing that ethnic group**. This cooperation is sometimes more or less visible, and sometimes **formal or informal**. However, this type of joint effort, although desirable, does not have a horizontal dimension that would include the interaction of political parties from one ethnic group with a religious institution representing another. In that sense, there may even be a risk that these types of relationship (although certainly desirable) could have a counter effect due to the **interpenetration of religion in political life**. In other words, the cooperation of one political party with a religious institution representing one's ethnic group may provoke a potential fear in other ethnic groups or political representatives from their own groups, as this could be seen as cooperation that is directed against them. Although this interpretation may seem tendentious, it is quite realistic in the BiH context due to the recent past – primarily the nature of the 1992-1995 war and the role of religious institutions in this context. It should be borne in mind that any form of vertical cooperation within a single community (as described above) in a heterogeneous, multicultural and religious society can lead to some sort of social exclusion, especially given BiH's history. On the other hand, there are also **positive instances of cooperation among religious institutions**, as in the case of the Interreligious Council in BiH, which emerged as a product of that partnership.

In conclusion, the interaction between political/state institutions needs to be strengthened in every respect. In instances where the collaboration is homogeneous and vertical, in particular, heterogeneity and horizontal inclusion should be increased.

5 Drivers of resilience

5.1 Serbia

The **parastatal control over far-right activities paradoxically also serves as a factor of resilience**. The government can influence these activities and prevent the groups concerned from committing violent acts. In this manner, the government can control their expressions of violence ('localised violence'). This form of control is most visible in the relationship between the government and football fan groups, where there have been no significant outbreaks of rioting and violence since 2012. The SPP has very good relations with football fan groups, with its leader being a member of one of them, which enabled it to integrate these groups into a parastatal network controlled by the current Serbian regime. Although the **regime has utilised football fan groups for various political and criminal purposes**, it has managed to reduce the violence between them.

The **legal system in Serbia recognises national minorities and guarantees their rights**. For instance, minority parties do not have to reach a threshold of 3% to be represented in the national parliament, and they have the right to form national councils as their governing bodies (e.g. the Bosniak National Council). In Sandžak, however, this institutional system is paralleled and dominated by a **parastatal clientelist network**. Social linking between local communities and central government depends on the position of local leaders in this network. Although a lack of institutional linking can be a factor of vulnerability, it can also be a factor of resilience. The regime co-opts political leaders from Sandžak into its clientelist network, providing them with funds and other benefits which allow them to develop and maintain their local clientelist networks in Sandžak. Most Salafis have been deradicalised and moderated through their integration into such networks. Therefore, **informal networks and practices play an essential role in P/CVE since they provide political and religious leaders with the means to control radicalised individuals and groups**.

The state in Serbia has also started to engage in **deradicalisation programmes for returnees from Syria and Ukraine**. The Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Serbia (Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities) has prepared deradicalisation programmes in cooperation with the representatives of religious communities in Serbia. These programmes should be implemented at the local, national and regional levels. Although this is just the beginning of the Serbian state's involvement in deradicalisation activities, it should be acknowledged as a driver of community resilience.

Another vital factor of community resilience is the **role of political and religious leaders in condemning acts of violence and intolerance**. Political and religious leaders from both communities (Orthodox and Islamic) unanimously denounced all those who went to fight in foreign conflicts or committed similar acts.

With regard to the economy and finance, recent years have been marked by the **increased transfer of funds from the central government to Sandžak's local authorities and investment in the regional infrastructure**. This is also related to the co-optation of political leaders from Sandžak into the clientelist network of the current regime in Serbia. The government also provides funding for both Islamic communities, allowing them to be **financially and operationally independent of donations and**

support from foreign foundations with a questionable reputation. Both Islamic communities are still quite dependent on the support from the Bosniak diaspora, which could be a factor of vulnerability since the diaspora had a role in recruiting foreign fighters. However, it could also be a factor of resilience, as the Bosniak population is generally well-integrated into Western societies, fostering social bridging between Sandžak and the West.

In relation to education, **the state financially supports religious education in all religious communities** in Serbia, both at the primary and the secondary levels. This support extends to other aspects of their regular activities, including developing religious communities' infrastructure. This kind of 'equal opportunity' policy portrays the state as an impartial and equal supporter of all religious communities in Serbia.

Although there is generally a lack of dialogue and communication between religious communities in Serbia, the issue of religious education is a topic on which they usually reach a consensus. The latest example is the **cooperation of all religious communities on the reform of religious education.** The SOC gathered representatives of all communities (including both Islamic communities) to discuss the position of religious education in the Serbian education system. Initiatives like this could foster further intra-religious and inter-religious dialogue since the SOC managed to gather the representatives of two rival Islamic communities in Serbia, which is a rare occurrence.

As mentioned above, religious education in maktabs and madrassas is a factor of resilience rather than vulnerability. Both Islamic communities adhere to the moderate Hanafi school of Islam and tend to **control radical influences from preachers educated in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.** Accordingly, the community was able to moderate the influence of Salafists in Sandžak and not the other way around.

Although Serbia has a history of inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, **religious communities traditionally express tolerance and respect toward each other.** They lack institutionalised cooperation and dialogue, but **often take a common stand toward the state,** especially when it comes to formal regulation of the religious communities' status. Furthermore, the social bonding within communities and social bridging between communities play an essential role in building community resilience in Serbia, especially in Sandžak. The community plays a vital role in the lives of individuals, providing them with a moral sense of right and wrong. Both Bosniak and Serbian communities in Sandžak strongly condemn any form of extremism, and although they are mostly segregated, they are **very tolerant towards each other.** These communities have a **long history of coexistence,** while the inter-ethnic incidents were mainly imported from the outside.

Some of the Bosniak political leaders from Sandžak have even decided to cut across the ethnic and religious boundaries and to step away from the logic of minority and majority divisions. There are two **trans-ethnic political parties,** including Bosniaks, Serbs and others, led by Bosniak political leaders from Sandžak: the Social Democratic Party of Serbia (affiliated with the SDP) and the PJR (formerly known as the Bosniak Democratic Community of Sandžak). The political expression of their will to (re)integrate Sandžak into Serbian society and renounce the division of politics into majority/minorities is also a driver of community resilience.

An important role in building community resilience in Sandžak is played by **civil society organisations.** Over the years, CSOs have emerged as **'substitute service providers' in turning the spotlight on the**

issues of radicalisation and extremism. CSOs in Serbia started the first CVE programme in 2012, supported by the US State Department and aiming to empower the youth in the prevention of radicalisation and to build trust between young people and the police by deconstructing stereotypes about the police, Islam and youth culture. Sandžak-based local CSOs (DamaD, UrbanIN, Forum 10, Svetionik⁴) have implemented several P/CVE projects over the years. They included research on risk factors affecting human security and assessment of public institutions' capacities to support it, the aim being to increase the resistance of the local community and young people to security threats and risks, including radicalism and extremism. Furthermore, DamaD developed a referral mechanism to prevent and counter extremism and radicalism.

The **CSO sector in Serbia has also recognised the importance of women as agents of prevention since they are the majority of P/CVE activists.** Although a high percentage of the population in Sandžak is very religious, this does not prevent women from participating in various social and political activities. On the contrary, they make up the majority of civil society activists in this region. This is partly due to adherence to the moderate version of Islam and the tradition of secularism inherited from the period of socialist Yugoslavia.

5.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

When we researched the role of various actors in the prevention of religious and political extremism in local communities in Prijedor, Mostar, Sarajevo and Brčko, representatives from each of the pivotal sectors in the community were included.

Security sector

The most difficult part of the research was to gather information on the functioning of the security sector, but the respondents stated that prevention is mainly carried out through the implementation of legal provisions that deal with this sector. Respondents also stated that within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is an Action Plan for Preventing and Combating Terrorism (2020-2025), which includes **clear guidelines on how community actors can contribute to the prevention of extremism.** Instances of good practice include intersectoral cooperation and access to prevention in the Brčko District, where security forces also play a significant role in prevention. "Every year, we organise a summer police school, where we try to teach young people about security and give them skills that show them their role in security – in order to understand that every citizen is important for security."⁵ In this community, there is also a 'school police officer' who, according to our interlocutors, contributes to the prevention of extremism.

Political institutions

According to the data provided by the research participants, political institutions are mainly focused on **preventive action through the adoption of legal solutions and monitoring of the implementation of the Action Plan for Prevention and Combating Terrorism** at the level of the Federation of Bosnia

⁴<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/38/initiatives-to-prevent-counter-violent-extremism-in-south-east-europe-a-survey-of-regional-issues-initiatives-and-opportunities>

⁵ Male representative from the police sector in Brčko.

and Herzegovina. An intersectoral approach to the prevention and management of extremism exists in Brčko, while in Prijedor, the ‘Community Safety Forum’ was organised, with one of its activities being the prevention of any form of violence. The Forum also promoted cooperation among political parties, and even attempted to achieve some harmonisation of the activities of different associations.⁶

Social welfare sector

The social work and mental health centres focus on working with groups at risk and thus offer opportunities for preventive action. "What the centres need to do is provide support to each family in a way that meets their needs. By meeting these needs, radicalisation is also influenced."⁷

Education sector

In the education sector, the implementation of universal **preventive interventions that are part of regular school activities** was mentioned, as well as the monitoring of factors that pose a risk to positive development – to which a significant number of schools respond. "In school, we have different programmes, and the most recognisable one is ‘Caring for Children – Shared Responsibility and Obligation’. Everything in the education sector is organised on an individual basis, from school to school. We include centres for social work, police and health centres. Each elder monitors any changes in their classes and writes in the student file. We organise a meeting of members of **the multi-sectoral team** and make an Individual Care Plan for working with students. We are always looking for a way to reach students. We are designing workshops, and we are sending them somewhere ... So far, it has been fruitful, and we are satisfied with the direction taken. It is rare for a student to go unnoticed in such instances. We also include parents and all those actors who are relevant to the student."⁸

In addition, **activities that promote the values of cooperation, tolerance and coexistence** are carried out. "As a teacher, I try to respect the specifics of the place where I live. I am a political scientist, and I am a biased man. I try to ensure that young people have the widest range of perspectives on a given topic through different insights. For instance, we have virtually no relationship with the Džemal Bijedić University [based in Mostar but on the Bosnian side with whom the Croat side does not cooperate], while we regularly cooperate with the University of Sarajevo and University of Banja Luka. There were mutual exchanges and visits by both students and lecturers. I have to admit it was an interesting experience and I was not indifferent to such occurrences. I was constantly attempting to be in circles where new networks and new ideas are being formed."⁹

Religious institutions

According to the majority of respondents, the primary prevention of extremism across all religious institutions and religions occurs through the **promotion of fundamental human values**. Cooperation between different religious groups has been institutionalised through the **Interreligious Council**, which was recognised by most respondents as a significant actor in the prevention of extremism. Although many problems cannot be solved at the institutional level, the interviewees consider the existence of

⁶ Male representative from the city administration in Prijedor.

⁷ Female representative from the social welfare centre in Mostar.

⁸ Female representative from the school in Prijedor.

⁹ Male representative from the education sector in Mostar.

such an institution to be a "symbolically good thing". For instance, **organised visits to places of suffering** are highlighted as a positive example of preventive action against political and religious extremism in BiH. Another positive example of the interaction of religious institutions at the local level is the **joint celebration of Eid** in Prijedor "with children from the St. Sava Grammar School. It was a great opportunity to meet, and it was covered by the media".¹⁰

It is also important to list actions and positive practices within each of the aforementioned communities. Thus, according to the respondents, the Islamic community's engagement can be recognised in relation to **youth-oriented actions** to prevent religious extremism, as well as in **substantial work with imams on the prevention of religious extremism**.¹¹ In addition, there has been significant implementation of an '**inclusive policy**' towards those members and communities that deviate somewhat from the official interpretation of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina (for which the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina is responsible). According to the respondents, the effects of inclusive policies "made these people realise that exclusivity leads nowhere, while society understood that they are not terrorists".¹²

On the other hand, the respondents mentioned the **Catholic School Centres project** as one of the most important actions by the Catholic Church in the prevention of politically and religiously motivated extremism. It was described as: "the most successful project in establishing Catholic schools where employees are dedicated to adopting human qualities. The first Centre was founded in 1994 and all students, regardless of religion, were involved. The Catholic Church has primarily worked through education and emphasised the idea of loving your own and respecting others."¹³

Civil society sector

The civil society sector mainly emphasises **work with young people and universal preventive action through education, training, youth clubs** and other formats. These programmes, in which participants are encouraged to connect and socialise, are designed for young people. "These are workshops that bring them together. It is an opportunity for young people to socialise and that is the most important thing. Most of our work aims to address the alienation of young people, where they return to the community and become active once the programme ends. It is a **peer-to-peer idea, where young people invite each other to participate**."¹⁴ Equally, activities are carried out with **parents** in order to recognise the first signs of extremism and radicalisation.¹⁵

International organisations

International organisations contribute significantly through **sponsorship and various programmes conducted by both the civil society sector and the state institutions**. Like the civil society organisations, international organisations are largely attempting to fill the gaps in the school sector and educate young people on the topics of critical thinking and emotional intelligence. When describing the work of international actors, one of our respondents said that "foreign organisations

¹⁰ Male representative from a religious institution in Prijedor.

¹¹ Male representative from a religious institution in Prijedor.

¹² Male representative from a religious institution in Brčko.

¹³ Male representative from a religious institution in Sarajevo.

¹⁴ Female representative from the civil society sector in Mostar.

¹⁵ Male representative from the civil society sector in Prijedor.

have developed methodologies and programmes for young people that enable them to interconnect, socialise and spend some time together".¹⁶

6 Conclusion

When exploring the interplay between state and religious actors and their influence on community propensity to become vulnerable or resilient to patterns of violent extremism, the PAVE teams in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia focused on a number of different factors including i) legitimacy of formal state institutions and formal and informal religious institutions, ii) interaction between state, religious leaders, civil society and NGOs/CSOs, iii) exploration of political systems and their regional and international complexities, including security institutions, judicial institutions, public policies and political discourses, iv) economic issues and resources, including regional, national and international funding and its impacts, and v) education systems involving the management of religious schools and affairs. Additionally, the impact of dialogue and cooperation between different actors, both vertically and horizontally, was explored, as was the role of programmes and initiatives designed to ensure resilience on a community level. The actors researched span three levels: state institutions, formal and informal religious institutions and leaders, and civil society.

In relation to **Bosnia and Herzegovina, the state and political institutions were not highly visible or involved in prevention of violent extremism** despite their role to do so. However, they strongly influence the formation of inter-ethnic relations and here the state was perceived as a contributor to the nationalist discourses and narratives. The role of religious institutions was seen as an important factor in inter-religious and state-related cooperation and dialogue as **religious communities and leaders enjoy a high level of trust within Bosnian society – as opposed to high levels of mistrust of state institutions and the dysfunctional administrative bureaucracy**. The **lack of direct and ongoing communication between religious and political/state institutions** in Bosnia and Herzegovina around the issue of radicalisation and extremism is seen as a major vulnerability factor. This communication is virtually non-existent at the state level (some exceptions have been observed at local level) and when it happens it is on an ad hoc basis and usually in response to manifestations of extremism that have already taken place, generally in the form of public condemnation. Another vulnerability factor is **permeation of ethno-political concepts into the religious matrix**, which leaves room for misinterpretation, as well the general state of apathy in society regarding the issues of religious and political extremism. With regard to resilience, **NGOs and CSOs are seen as being the most important actors in the prevention of ethno-political radicalisation** and are the most significant factor in reducing the risk of extremism. **Youth programmes, education activities and workshops**, in addition to **training**, were seen as most useful in fostering inter-ethnic communication and cooperation. The activities of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, sometimes in conjunction with the OSCE and IOM, were highlighted as a positive example in the field of prevention and advocacy of critical thinking.

¹⁶ Female representative from an international organisation in Mostar.

In relation to Serbia, **both the state and religious institutions are participating actors in normalising and mainstreaming extremist narratives** and contribute to socioeconomic underdevelopment and the spread of radical ideologies, inter-religious/inter-ethnic discrimination and hate speech. This is a major vulnerability factor. Additional vulnerability factors are i) political ties between state/local institutions and far-right organisations, ii) different treatment of Muslim and non-Muslim extremism, iii) centre-periphery relations, and iv) a 'culture of extremism' that had been developing in the region since the 1990s conflicts. Religion plays an essential role in this 'culture' since it was – as a constituent factor of nationhood – often the main diacritic between the 1990s warring parties. The state institutions' passivity towards increasing extremism is also a factor of vulnerability. The research distinguishes between far-right extremism and Islamist extremism in Serbia, showing that the **main driver behind far-right extremism is the strong parastatal system** currently operating in Serbia where there is a failure of the state to provide wellbeing for its citizens and instead the system is based on illegal activities, connections with far-right organisations, football hooliganism and clientelism. **Far-right groups and football fans often serve as cover for criminal activities and as mediators between criminal and political groups.** Paradoxically, this **parastatal system is both a component of vulnerability and an aspect of resilience.** Indeed, the parastatal control over far-right activities means that the government can influence these activities and prevent the groups concerned from committing violent acts. In this manner, the government can control the expression of localised violence. In addition, there has been an upsurge in P/CVE activities in recent times, spearheaded by CSOs in the area, creating a '**CSO bubble**' with regard to the issue of extremism. This is also a factor of both resilience and vulnerability – resilience as a mitigating factor in response to growing ethno-nationalism in the region, and vulnerability in terms of lack of engagement with P/CVE efforts from formal state institutions.

With regard to gender and vulnerability/resilience to extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, all respondents, from both state/political and religious institutions, firmly believe that **women could be seen as important actors in the prevention processes.** Women's contribution was seen as a cohesive factor in the case of returnees and their children – women were more involved in working with them through mental health and social work centres. There is some perception also that women have been unfairly neglected in religious communities in the past (in terms of employment) but positive changes are happening at present.

Regarding the gender role and vulnerability to radicalisation and extremism in Serbia, the findings show that, besides being the actors of prevention, **women also have a role in supporting or promoting radical and extremist attitudes.** This role is not only passive, in the sense that they only follow their men into extremist activities, but also active, particularly when it comes to far-right extremism. Women actively participate in far-right politics and even lead some of the far-right organisations in Serbia. This phenomenon of women's radicalisation and motivation to join extremist groups is **largely under-researched** in Serbia and calls for further empirical study. Furthermore, there is an evident **lack of conceptualisation of the role of women** in these situations, since almost none of the stakeholders or interviewees recognised it as an issue.

7 Recommendations

7.1 State and religious institutions

- Development of national and local P/CVE strategies that would include all relevant actors, the state, religious communities, local institutions, CSOs and the education system.
- Development of programmes and mechanisms for preventing radicalisation and for deradicalisation at both the national and the local level.
- Reform of primary and secondary education that would encourage young people to develop skills in civic engagement, critical thinking and media literacy – all necessary prerequisites to develop multi-perspective perceptions of the past and tolerant, open-minded worldviews.
- Reform of religious education in primary schools by introducing the history of religion as a mandatory course and religious courses as elective ones. Also, introducing inter-religious and civil control of religious education programmes and curricula.
- Starting the dialogue between the state, the Serbian Orthodox Church and two Islamic communities in Serbia. This dialogue should be institutionalised at the national level but also at the local community level.
- Support for inter-religious dialogue and activities carried out by the Interreligious Council in BiH.
- Development of specific security, social and educational programmes for ‘vulnerable local communities’, with an emphasis on increased participation of local religious communities, youth and women.
- Involvement of all religious communities in BiH, recognition of extremism, and joint implementation of programmes, primarily through work with young people.
- Open dialogue, debates and cooperation of all state institutions with all religious communities, or heterogeneous cooperation that excludes ethnic, national or religious divisions.
- Regular consultations (and/or reporting) by state and religious institutions on all extremism-related issues of potential relevance to religious communities and on which religious communities could act preventively.

7.2 Civil society

- Adoption of a more sensible approach towards the state and religious communities regarding P/CVE, because without the involvement of these actors, P/CVE will remain ‘a CSO bubble’, an externally imposed activity in Serbia.
- Development of programmes to promote a culture of tolerance and peace, particularly programmes that would focus on depolarisation and re-humanisation of formerly warring parties.

- Creation of a space for open dialogue about critical P/CVE issues (schools, universities and public discussions), as well as for community work with young people, and embracing the role of community leaders in this process.
- Challenging of traditional gender roles that hinder women's participation in private and public life (while avoiding a backlash from conservative communities), with a focus on their financial dependence, poverty and illiteracy (especially in rural areas).
- Improved coordination between the CSO sector and local state institutions through the implementation of local community-specific youth training programmes.
- Greater involvement of local religious leaders in CSO-led actions, especially in the high-risk communities.

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