

“Examining the issue of radicalization in the Western Balkans: The cases of Serbia and Bosnia”

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Executive summary

My aim is to examine radicalization in the Western Balkans by qualitatively comparing Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. I intend to analyze religious and nationalist radicalization in the two countries, examine specific actors regarding each case and the factors that lead to their emergence, rise and potential consolidation.

I first review of the literature on radicalization and related terms such as extremism, ethno-nationalism, Far-Right and Islamist radicalization. I will focus on the different interpretations and definitions given by various scholars and institutions before presenting the working definition of this thesis by McCauley and Mosalenko. Moving on, I will address the situation in the context of Serbia and Bosnia by making an overview of the phenomena, the factors that fuel radicalization, the actors, their ideology, aims, and ties and how the radicalization process occurs in each context.

Serbia is the country in the Balkans where ethno-nationalism has the deepest roots. The presence of ethno-nationalist actors in Serbia, both institutional as well as non-institutional, is the strongest among the ex-Yugoslav states. The one actor that is examined is the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) of Vojislav Šešelj, an institutional extreme right party and the most successful electorally party of the Far-Right family in Serbia and the Balkans. My focus is on the factors that led to its emergence in the early 90s, its ideology and political aims. SRS capitalized on Milošević's aggressive foreign policy and military operations and the sanctions and embargo on Serbia which had devastating effect on the economy and the standards of living as well as the charisma of its leader. Its simplistic, xenophobic and polarizing agenda and ideology based on the Chetnik legacy attracted the unemployed, the middle class whose standards of life significantly decreased, the disappointed by the internal turmoil voters of the ruling party and the Serbian refugees from Croatia, Kosovo and Bosnia who were forcibly displaced. The second actor is extremist militant Serbian Action (SA), a non-institutional actor that belongs to the "new wave" of Serbian ethno-nationalist actors which emerged in the late 2000s and whose ideology is based on traditional Serbian nationalism, the legacy of the wars of the 90s, a sense of victimhood as a result of Serbia's humiliation along with neo-fascist and neo-Nazi elements. The economic stalemate of the state and the mass unemployment, the mainstreaming of nationalist discourse, the suspicion of the Serbian society towards everything that is perceived as Western such as LGBT+ and the ambivalent stance of the authorities towards such actors have created a fertile ground for the emergence of groups, organizations and movements such as SA. The activities of actors like SA in such environment have affected the social and political life and pose danger, not as much in terms of electoral success, but in terms of normalization of ethno-nationalist positions and the use of violence towards marginalized groups and what they perceive as the "enemy".

Regarding Bosnia, the country with the largest Muslim majority and overall significant religious and ethnic diversity, I will focus on the issue of religious radicalization and more particularly Islamist radicalization and ultraconservative and radical ideologies such as Salafism and Takfirism which were first introduced during the Bosnian war (1992-95) when Arab mujahedeen arrived in the country to assist their fellow Muslims. Since then, these

foreign and imported ideologies have developed and impacted the Bosnian society aiming to deconstruct the Bosnian secular and liberal interpretation of Islam and replace the Bosniak identity with a Muslim one. The issue of Islamist radicalization came back into the spotlight after the terrorist attacks in Europe. The main concern that Bosnia might become a hotbed for radicalization and an Islamist safe-haven proved to be improbable since the majority of the Bosniak population rejects these radical ideologies. However, Salafists capitalize on the personal grievances, social alienation and hardships of individuals which are reinforced by the slow progress of the country on every level. Just like in the case of Serbia, the legacy of the wars of the 90s and a sense of victimhood reinforce the “single narrative” of Salafists which blames the West and especially the Bosniak Islam for the misfortunes of the Muslim population; this simplistic narrative provides individuals with a sense of belonging but also mental and practical support. Overall, the socio-economic conditions, poverty, unemployment and the political stagnation along with the ever present ethnic tensions among the different ethnic groups in the country create the right conditions for radicalization of the youth and marginalized members of the society. One important aspect regarding Salafists operating in Bosnia is their ties with the diaspora and the European Salafist networks as well as countries such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States which provide the necessary logistical support and resources that allow the further establishment of radical Islamist actors in Bosnia and from there to the wider regions (Sandžak, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania).

I conclude my research with an overview of the cases and a test of how the theoretical framework applies in context in focus. Additionally, I present the common characteristics of Islamist and nationalist radicalization in the examined countries. The legacy of the Yugoslav wars, the sense of victimhood arising from the atrocities of the wars, the securitization of the “Other”, the similar socio-economic issues that both societies face along with the fragile and polarizing modus vivendi contribute to the creation of a parasitic relation between these two different manifestations of radicalization.

Introduction

Radicalization has become one of the most challenging issues for the established and functioning EU democracies. The societies' defenses across the EU are not as strong as we thought and hoped that they were. For Europe, one can say that the past decade has been one of the most, if not the most, turbulent periods of the post-World War II era. After the end of the Cold War, Europe enjoyed two decades of uninterrupted peace, prosperity and further consolidation of liberal democracy and its values across the continent.¹ However, this period was violently disrupted by back to back crises; first it was the European debt crisis, followed immediately by the Syrian refugee crisis and the still ongoing migrant crisis and lately the covid-19 pandemic.² These crises had a negative impact on the cohesion and sense of unity in a number of European countries.³ Both societies and politics have undergone significant changes during the aforementioned period. On a societal level, radicalized groups and individuals spread hateful ideas and sometimes act upon them by committing violent actions.⁴ On a political level, populist radical parties have emerged, challenged the political establishment both domestically and on a European level and in many cases managed impressive wins, had significant gains and proved that polarizing politics were here to stay.⁵

Keeping that in mind, I would like to center upon this group of countries in the EU's backyard known as the Western Balkans. The Western Balkans consist of the countries that emerged after the Yugoslav wars of the 90s and the collapse of Yugoslavia which have not yet joined the European Union; Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo plus Albania. The Yugoslav wars in the 90s were a result, among others, of nationalistic sentiments that reached an all-time high after decades of suppression under Tito's reign.⁶ In that sense, radicalization in the region has been examined in relation to the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

After the end of the Yugoslav Wars, the newly independent states started a slow and turbulent process of democratization aiming to reach the Western democratic standards required in order to become members of the EU and NATO. Thus, the focus shifted towards

¹ "The history of the European Union", European Union, https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en & "1998–2009 The unification of Europe", Virtual Centre for Knowledge about Europe (CVCE), <https://www.cvce.eu/en/education/unit-content/-/unit/02bb76df-d066-4c08-a58a-d4686a3e68ff/7da094ef-0718-4bba-b54a-4e218856f4cb>.

² Zhongyuan Wang, "From Crisis to Nationalism?: The Conditioned Effects of the COVID-19 Crisis on Neo-nationalism in Europe", *Chinese Political Science Review* (2021): 1–20.

³ Josef Janning, "Crisis and cohesion in the EU: A ten year review", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, February, 2018 & Claire Busse, Rafael Loss, Jana Puglierin, Pawel Zerka, "The crisis that made the European Union: European cohesion in the age of covid", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December, 2020.

⁴ Peter Gill, "Explaining Intelligence Failure: Rethinking the Recent Terrorist Attacks in Europe", *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 33 (2019): 1–25.

⁵ Manuela Caiani and Paolo Graziano, "Understanding varieties of populism in times of crises", *West European Politics*, vol. 42, no. 6 (2019): 1141-1158.

⁶ Tone Bring, "The Peaceful Death of Tito and the Violent End of Yugoslavia", in *Death of the Father: An Anthropology of the End in Political Authority*, ed. John Borneman (Berghahn Books, 2004): 148.

the democratization process in the Western Balkans and the adoption and implementation of the reforms required reaching the standards set by the EU. During this period only Croatia and Slovenia have managed to join the EU and only the latter can be considered a consolidated democracy. It was not until the breakout of the migrant crisis and the rise of ISIL and the foreign fighter phenomenon when the issue of radicalization in the Balkans started attracting the general interest again for two reasons. The main reason was the fear of the potential emergence of European “homegrown” radical Islamist actors. The other reason which did not attract as much interest was the concern of the rise of radical and extreme right-wing actors as a response to the migration crisis and the rise of ISIL just like it happened in EU countries such as Austria, France, Germany, the UK and Spain where parties with anti-Islamic and anti-immigration agendas had significant gains.⁷ If the past can be an indicator, one can say that Western Balkan societies are vulnerable to radicalization and despite the major steps forward and the implementation of reforms on every level (political, societal, economic), they have numerous internal and bilateral issues to resolve. The concepts of nation, ethnicity and religion remain the core elements of the division among the Balkan populations and societies. Additionally, high unemployment rates, inequality, limited access to education, very little and weak state presence, corruption and marginalization of ethnic, religious and social minorities also contribute to the rise of radicalized actors.

Generally, it is of vital importance for the Western Balkans to be part of these institutions that champion liberal democracy and free market economy and whose core values are the rule of law, human rights, equality, freedom and dignity.⁸ Many issues that are considered obvious and are well-established in Western societies are not in the Western Balkans which still struggle with many social and political matters. The Western Balkans are standing in a crossroad and as long as there is no clear path and actual progress in the integration and accession process, the societies of Western Balkan countries will become even more vulnerable to radicalization which is the focus of this particular thesis as well as to external influence from actors such as Russia, Turkey, China and the Gulf states.⁹ As mentioned above, the ongoing disputes of identity and religion, feelings of injustice, social exclusion and grievances along with dreadful economic conditions create the perfect mix for the rise of radicalized actors as a reaction to all aforementioned issues.

In this thesis, the focus is on the different aspects of radicalization; nationalist radicalization and religious radicalization. The first concept is related with radical and extreme right-wing politics and beliefs and its cornerstone is ethnic identity. This phenomenon is prevalent in Serbia and among the Bosnian Serbs in Republika Srpska and the Serbian minority in Kosovo, but also in North Macedonia especially among the ethnic Macedonian population. The

⁷ Saira Khan, “Institutionalised Islamophobia: The Rise of European Nationalism against Freedom of Religion for Muslims”, *The Asian Yearbook of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law*, vol. 4 (2020): 330-348.

⁸ European Union, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, *Official Journal of the European Union C83*, Vol. 53 (2010).

⁹ Barbora Chrzová, “Introduction”, in *Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors*, eds. Barbora Chrzová, Anja Grabovac, Martin Hála, Jan Lalić (Prague Security Studies Institute, 2019).

second concept, religious radicalization, is mainly connected with the Muslim population of the region in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also with the Muslim populations in the region of Sandžak, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania. The rise of the so-called Islamic State and the recruitment of Balkan fighters brought the issue into scholarly spotlight. It is important to underline the historical, political and societal interconnection between the Western Balkan countries in many aspects. Ethnic and religious minorities are present in every country and that is one reason why the issue of radicalization is also a means of interconnection between the neighboring countries.

There are many reasons why I am examining radicalization in the Western Balkans. I am really interested in examining this phenomenon in the context of the countries of the Balkan region, focusing on Serbia and Bosnia, whose progress towards the European and Euro-Atlantic integration has been slow and full of obstacles many of which are related with the issues of radicalization and extremism. These countries do not have the tools and resources of the EU members-states whose societies became deeply divided and polarized after the rise of religiously and politically radicalized actors. Hence, I believe that it is important to further examine and analyze the issue of radicalization in the Western Balkans, the backyard of the EU, keeping in mind that this phenomenon is not new in the region; religious and nationalist radicalization have been present ever since the early 90s and during the Yugoslav Wars, the aftermath of the wars, the difficult period of the democratic transition and has remained an important issue during the past decade. Additionally, better recording, examination and understanding of the radicalized actors of the region is vital in order to better assist these societies in dealing with these actors on their way forward given the fact that external actors like Turkey, Russia, the Gulf States, Iran and China are heavily involved and invested in establishing their presence in the region of utmost strategic importance for the West.¹⁰

My aim is to analyze the factors that lead to emergence, rise and potential establishment of religious and ethno-nationalist (or nationalist) radicalization in Serbia and Bosnia. In order to do so, I will present a literature review of radicalization and related terms such as extremism, Far-Right and Islamist radicalization. I will introduce some of the different interpretations and definitions given by various scholars and institutions as well as the working definition of this thesis. I will then address the situation in the context of Serbia and Bosnia. Regarding Serbia, I will make an overview of the phenomenon of nationalist radicalization and extremism, the ideology, aims, ties of the two actors that I will examine, the Serbian Radical Party and the movement Serbian Action, and how the radicalization process occurs in the Serbian context. Similarly, I will do the same for the Bosnian case focusing on Islamist radicalization and extremism. Finally, I will examine how the theoretical framework applies in my cases and examine whether Islamist radicalization and ethno-nationalism share any common characteristics and whether they “feed off” each other despite appearing as polar opposites and conflicting ideologies.

¹⁰ Haris Ćutahija, Alba Cela, Azra Karastanović, Zoran Nechev, Ivan Nikolovski, Strahinja Subotić and Demush Shasha, “The strategic role of external actors in the Western Balkans”, *Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Political Academy of the Austrian People's Party, Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik* (2020)

In this thesis I will try to examine and analyze the topic using a qualitative approach. The research method that I will mainly use is that of comparative analysis of a small number of cases. The data that I have collected is based on material published by the actors examined as well as secondary sources such as the existing literature regarding radicalization and extremism, journal articles, conference papers and proceedings, material published by national and international institutions such as reports by think tanks and political organizations, newspapers and sources such as the European Western Balkans, Balkan Insight and Balkan Investigative Reporting Network. My research follows up on earlier studies of the phenomena of religious radicalization and ethno-nationalism in the region of the Western Balkans by Věra Stojarová, Valery Perry, Dusan Kecmanovic, Vlado Azinović, Edina Bećirević, Jovo Bakić and Isidora Stakić among others and aims to answer specific questions related to the issue of radicalization.

Theory – Literature review

Radicalization

The term “*radicalization*” is an extremely complicated one and the existence of various interpretations, theories and explanations as to what this phenomenon is and what accounts for it. The vast majority of scholar agrees that radicalization is a specific process towards extremism. The most general definition is by Peter Neumann who describes radicalization as “*what goes on before the bomb goes off*”.¹¹ However, this is a very broad definition which on the one hand helps one understand that radicalization is a process that leads up to somewhere – “the bomb” – but on the other hand does not offer much else in a sense of providing specific limitations.

Radicalization and extremism are not new phenomena to the world. However, it was the 9/11 attacks that brought the issue of radicalization and extremism at the top of the agenda of officials around the world while inevitably linking radicalization and extremism with Islam. Still, Islamic terrorism, especially in Europe, was considered an external and not an internal threat. However, the 2004 bombings in Madrid which were the first attacks executed by individuals who were radicalized in Europe and not abroad alarmed the European governments and the European Union.¹² The definition of radicalism according to the European Union is the following; “*a phased and complex process in which an individual or a group embraces a radical ideology or belief that accepts, uses or condones violence, including acts of terrorism within the meaning of the Directive on combating terrorism, to*

¹¹ Peter R. Neumann, “Introduction”, in *Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence – Papers from the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence*, ed. P. R. Neumann (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2008): 3–7.

¹² Manni Crone, “Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body”, *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 3 (2016): 587-604.

reach a specific political or ideological purpose".¹³ One can see that the EU regards radicalization as a process while underlining the acceptance, use and tolerance of violence.

At this point, I would like to cite the working definitions of radicalization according to certain European governments and security services which are the responsible agencies which confront these cases. The United Kingdom's Home Office broadly outlines radicalization as the *"the process by which people come to support, and in some cases to participate in terrorism"*.¹⁴ The Dutch policy regarding radicalization specifies it as *"a process that involves an increasing willingness to accept and act – perhaps violently – on even the most extreme implications of an ideology. Radicalisation can also be seen as the process by which individuals move from lawful activism towards extremism and, subsequently, terrorism"*.¹⁵ This definition outlines different stages of the radicalization process. The Danish Government suggests that the radicalization process can be quick or long and is triggered by different factors that lead to different forms of involvement and *"it can assume forms such as support for radical views or extremist ideology, and it can lead to acceptance of violence or other unlawful acts as a means to achieve a political/religious goal"*.¹⁶ Finally, Sweden describes radicalization as the process in which *"those who commit ideologically motivated acts for political or religious reasons have gone through a process in which they have gradually come to adopt a violent ideology or accept violence as a legitimate method which the scope of a political or religious ideology"*.¹⁷ What is worth-mentioning in this definition is the clear distinction and reference to both politics and religion. In my view and despite certain limitations, the broadness of these definitions allows the agencies to be more effective in their response to radicalized actors across the spectrum, from jihadists to far-right extremists and neo-Nazis.

I have decided that the working definition that I will use will be the one given by McCauley and Moskaleiko. The reason for that is that their definition distinguishes the different aspects (cognitive, emotional and behavioral) and levels of radicalization (individual, group and mass), thus providing, in my opinion, a complete and multilayered framework which allows one to better comprehend and examine this complex phenomenon. According to them, "political radicalization" is the process of *"change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the*

¹³ Migration and Home Affairs, "Counter terrorism and radicalization", *European Commission* https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/counter-terrorism_en.

¹⁴ "CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Counter Terrorism", Home Office, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97995/strategy-contest.pdf

¹⁵ Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories", *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 4, No. 4 (2011), pp. 7-36.

¹⁶ Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, "An Introduction to the Danish approach to countering and preventing extremism and radicalization", *DIIS - Danish Institute for International Studies*, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/195784/DIIS_Report_2015_15.pdf

¹⁷ Stefan Löfven and Alice Bah Kuhnke, "Actions to Make Society More Resilient to Violent Extremism", *Government Communication 2014/15:144*, 2014, <https://www.government.se/contentassets/ef243295e51d4635b4870963b18bfa89/actions-to-make-society-more-resilient-to-violent-extremism-2014-15-144.pdf>

ingroup".¹⁸ What is interesting and useful in this definition is the reference and distinction between the cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects of radicalization.¹⁹ Even though they are different aspects, they are also interconnected in a sense that they can explain the change from radical believing and feeling to radical behavior and acting upon these radical beliefs and feelings.

As mentioned, McCauley and Moskalkenko's work also suggest that there are different levels of radicalization; the individual, the group and the mass level of radicalization. Individual radicalization may occur by personal victimization, political grievance, joining a radical group – the slippery slope which describes the gradual and step by step radicalization and joining a radical group due to personal connection with an already radicalized person. Group radicalization occurs in like-minded groups when they internally shift towards the more extreme opinion and position, when the groups is under isolation and threat which leads to high levels of cohesion and pressure for agreement and identification among group members, in competition with others for the same base of support, in competition with state power and in within-group competition as a result of internal conflict. Similarly with group radicalization, mass radicalization happens in conflict with an outgroup, but on a mass/national level. The term "jijitsu politics" describes mass mobilization by otherwise not easily mobilized people as a result of the state response to an act of violence. Mass radicalization can also happen in conflict with an outgroup using hate as the mobilizing factor; violence and hate against a dehumanized enemy transcends age, gender, or civilian status. Finally, capitalizing on the death of people who lost their lives fighting for the struggle (martyrs) can also lead to mass radicalization.²⁰ In the next chapter, we will examine certain cases from Serbia and Bosnia that prove that indeed radicalization can happen in different level as McCauley and Moskalkenko suggest.

Extremism

Another term that will be used in this thesis and is related to radicalization is "extremism". Overall, extremist ideology can be considered any ideology that opposes a society's prevailing core values such as democracy, freedom, equality and human rights. The definition used by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue is in my opinion the best to describe extremism in which it is referred as "*the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based 'in-group' over all 'out-groups', and propagates a dehumanising 'othering' mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of Human Rights. [...] They may do this through non-violent and more subtle means, as well as through violent or explicit means. Extremism can be advocated by state and non-state actors alike*".²¹ These definitions applies to religious radicalized actors in the case of Bosnia as well as in the case of the two nationalist actors in focus in Serbia (SRS –

¹⁸ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalkenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism, Terrorism and Political Violence", vol. 20, no. 3 (2008): 415-433.

¹⁹ Maja Halilovic Pastuovic, Gillian Wylie, Karin Göldner-Ebenthal, Johanna-Maria Hülzer and Veronique Dudouet, "Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism: A Conceptual Framework", *Trinity College Dublin and Berghof Foundation* (2021)

²⁰ McCauley and Moskalkenko, *Mechanisms of Political Radicalization*, 2008.

²¹ Pastuovic, Wylie, Göldner-Ebenthal, Hülzer, Dudouet, *Preventing and Addressing*, 2021.

state actor, SA – non-state actor) since both aspects of radicalization include the development of a collective identity and justify violence. The term “violent extremism” essentially distinguishes violent from non-violent extremism keeping in mind that both oppose the democratic order and its values of pluralism, rule of law and human rights.²²

Finally, one term that is extremely important for my analysis is that of reciprocal also known as cumulative extremism. Creating the “Other” as a mobilizing factor is vital for any individual/movement or organization/ community. Defining “who and what we are” is very important, but at the same time not enough on its own; one also needs to define “who and what we are not” in order to create an opponent who is a threat and a mobilizing reason. Overall, the sense of victimhood within the ingroup is equally important with the demonization and/or dehumanization of the outgroup because it leads to further polarization and potentially to violence between the opposing groups. The symbiotic relationship and the interconnection that is developed between opposing extremist groups is called reciprocal/cumulative extremism and the process reciprocal radicalization. Having said the above, it is important to point out that the levels of this exchange may vary or not even be reciprocal in a sense that a connection may exist but only one group benefits from it.²³

Ethno-nationalism/nationalism

At this point I will present an overview of the concept of ethno-nationalism/nationalism as an umbrella for far-right radicalization and extremism which are prevalent in countries such as Serbia to both institutional (see SRS) and non-institutional level (see SA) . Generally, nationalism is the notion that the uniqueness of an identity is based on the common history, race, language, religion, culture and territory and the one’s loyal lies to the nation and not the state.²⁴ Nationalist discourse divides the world into nations which are the source of political power and safeguard the freedom of the people.²⁵

Walker Connor points out the difference between ethnic group and nation by underlining that “*until the members (of the ethnic group) are themselves aware of the group’s uniqueness, it is merely an ethnic group and not a nation*”.²⁶ Similarly, Anthony D. Smith suggests that nation is a “*named social group, with common historical memories and mass culture, occupying an historic territory or homeland*”. The nation is a community of shared culture and history that bears the characteristics of a family. It is the genealogy rather than territory the element that defines the nation.²⁷ Still, the idea of a historic homeland, a land

²² Pastuovic, Wylie, Göldner-Ebenthal, Hülzer, Dudouet, *Preventing and Addressing*, 2021.

²³ Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism through Community Resilience in the Balkans and MENA Project, “Milestone No. 2: Glossary of Key Terms”, *Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism through Community Resilience in the Balkans and MENA*, Berghof Foundation (2020).

²⁴ Peri Pamir, “Nationalism, Ethnicity and Democracy: Contemporary Manifestations”, *The International Journal for Peace Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1997).

²⁵ Anthony D. Smith, “Nationalism and the Plight of Minorities”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2-3 (1994): 186–198.

²⁶ Ma Shu Yun, “Ethnonationalism, ethnic nationalism, and mini-nationalism: A comparison of Connor, Smith and Snyder”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1990): 527-541.

²⁷ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and the Plight*, 1994.

of the ancestors, is also central in ethno-nationalistic discourse. Robert J. Kaiser specifies homeland as “*a sacred place set aside by God for the nation ... God’s chosen people*”. The linkage between blood and soil legitimizes the desire to live in the historic homeland; hence, areas beyond the border can also be considered parts of the homeland.²⁸

Ethnic-minorities are also a key element of ethno-nationalism especially in the Balkans. In every Balkan country smaller or larger ethnic minorities exist and these minorities identify with their fellow countrymen across the border as a result of perceived political and cultural inequalities and outright discrimination within their state.²⁹ For example, Bosnian Serbs complain that they are disfavored in comparison to the Bosniak majority in Bosnia or the Albanian majority in Kosovo and they are denied opportunities regarding the economy, politics and culture. Also, irredentist views and positions are also very common characteristics of ethno-nationalism especially in the Balkans where borders between the newly emerged states was a result of violence and war not a result of bilateral and international agreements accepted by all sides. The idea of a Greater Serbia manifests as the creation of a nation-state in which all ethnic Serbs will be united and citizenship will be equivalent of ethnicity.³⁰ Another crucial aspect to the identity of a nation are its national symbols such as anthems and flags, collective memories, myths and traditions which lie at the core of the nation, they are its *raison d’être*.³¹ The perfect example of this is the position of Kosovo within the Serbian identity. The Kosovo issue is not a territorial one. It is an existential issue since Kosovo is considered by Serbs as their holiest and most historic region, the cradle of Serbian civilization.³²

Smith also highlights three specific steps that operate as the basis for mobilization within the ethnonationalistic doctrine of culture and identity and are relevant with what I will examine in the following chapter. The first step is the re-definition process which makes clear the ethnic boundaries between “*us*” and “*them*”. This process is exclusive and divides the people between the ones that are compliant with what is considered as the national identity on the basis of common culture and the ones that are not compliant with those characteristics. The second step is the re-education process which teaches “*the genuine membership in the true culture of the ancestors, unsullied by contact with modern civilization*”.³³ The final step is the regeneration and politicization of culture itself. During this process the primordial elements are promoted while the external ones are rejected since the desired ancestral culture can only emerge without external elements.³⁴

²⁸ Robert J. Kaiser, “Homeland making and the territorialization of national identity”, in *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World*, ed. Daniele Conversi (Routledge, 2003): 231.

²⁹ Peri Pamir, *Nationalism, Ethnicity*, 1997.

³⁰ Sonja Biserko, “Extremism: A Follow-up to the Greater Serbia Project”, in *Extremism – Recognizing a Social Evil - Helsinki Files, Vol. 34*, ed. Sonja Biserko, (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2014): 9.

³¹ Anthony D. Smith, “Dating the nation”, in *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World*, ed. Daniele Conversi (Routledge, 2003): 64.

³² Steven Woehrel, “Kosovo: Historical Background to the Current Conflict”, *CRS Report for Congress* (1999)

³³ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and the Plight*, 1994.

³⁴ *ibid.*

Lastly, I would like to touch upon the relation between ethno-nationalism and democracy. In many cases, nationalistic sentiments and rhetoric are result of democratic pluralism. A functioning democracy can deal with such toxicity and does not muzzle nationalistic actors. However, one should not forget that over time people might rally behind nationalistic and/or populist claims opposing inadequate democratic forms. In cases like the countries that emerged after the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia, the re-emergence (or maintenance or “mainstreaming”) of nationalism is a result of both the forced and incomplete democratic and economic transition. The rejection of communism promised, among others, prosperity. When the lives of people are not getting better, nationalist views and voices emerge and rise.³⁵

Far-Right

The next term that I would like to introduce is “Far-Right” which is interconnected with ethno-nationalism. Nowadays the issue of Far-Right remains as timely as ever. Post-WW II, the European far-right evolved and changed, managed significant gains and suffered devastating loses and while it seemed that the 21st century would be the time in which these ideologies would shrink even more, a series of developments such as the economic crisis and especially the refugee and migrant crisis contributed to their re-emergence from the political margins and their establishment as legitimate political forces.

Prominent scholar Cas Mudde argues that it is important to distinguish the different subgroups under the vague umbrella of the Right. Thus, the term “*far-right*” describes those parties on the far-right of the left-right continuum that are “*anti-system*” and hostile towards liberal democracy, its values and principles. Mudde also points out two different sub-groups within the far-right political family; “*extreme right*” and “*radical right*”. According to him, “*the extreme right rejects the essence of democracy, that is, popular sovereignty and majority rule*” and has revolutionary characteristics while “*the radical right accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers*” and has reformist characteristics.³⁶ More notably, radical right is related to cultural and ethnic nationalism while extreme right is related to both ethnic and racial nationalism. Regarding the latter, it preaches the superiority of the white race whose survival can be undermined by racial mixing. It is also against the “*Jewish dominance*” and calls for the control, deportation or even extermination of “*inferior race and racial enemies*” of the nation.³⁷ According to Mudde, there are four core elements which consist the basis of extreme right ideology; *xenophobia, nationalism, law and order and welfare chauvinism*.³⁸

Moving on, I would like to mention the interconnection between populism and the Far-Right. Mudde and Kaltwasser suggest that populism is a “*thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps,*

³⁵ Peri Pamir, *Nationalism, Ethnicity*, 1997.

³⁶ Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Polity Press, 2019): 6.

³⁷ Nikki Sterkenburg, “Far Right Extremism – A Practical Introduction”, *RAN Centre of Excellence* (2019).

³⁸ Cas Mudde, *The ideology of the extreme right* (Manchester University Press, 2000): 179.

*“the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”.*³⁹ The two scholars’ argue that the mix of populism with another ideology (Far-Right or Radical Left), is necessary in order to provide complete and appealing answers to the demands of the citizens.⁴⁰

At this point, I would like to mention the usual targets/enemies of the Far-Right. Even though each case is unique and has its own characteristics, there are some common enemies which usually apply to all far-right actors. The “Other” can be a religious threat (Muslims and Jews/Zionists), an economic threat (capitalists and the ruling elites) or an ideological one (globalists, leftists and Marxists). Additionally, ethnic minorities like the ones in Bosnia and Serbia and generally multiculturalism can never work as a result of incompatible biological, ethnical and religious differences. Feminists and the LGBT+ community are also targeted as they are a threat to the societal status quo.⁴¹

Islamist radicalization and extremism

The terms “(violent) Islamist extremism” and “Islamist radicalization” describe the different forms of activism and violence which is promoted by Sunni and Shia radical and extremist actors such as the Salafist actors in Bosnia that will be examined in the next chapter. The actors that will be analyzed belong to the most conservative interpretations and ideologies of Islam, mainly Salafism and Takfirism. Such actors claim that they practice the “true Islam”, reject the four legal schools within Sunni Islam; Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i and the conservative Hanbali as well as secular legislative authority and liberal democracy. The wide spectrum of Islamist extremism includes a variety of different actors; from jihadist movements and militant Islamist groups to street proselytizing groups, advocacy groups and humanitarian organizations. Having said that, my description applies to Islamist extremist cases and not at all to the multiple legitimate and significant advocacy, humanitarian and proselytizing groups and organizations that operate in accordance to national and international law and do important and necessary humanitarian and charitable work and operations.⁴²

Another thing that needs clarification is that not all Salafists are violent. Purist Salafists rejects violence and political activism and have close ties with the Saudi religious and political elites. Activist Salafists reject democracy, even if the leadership and ruling elites are Muslim. They are engaged within their local community, demand compliance with the Islamic principles, criticize improper behavior and condemn the West and Arab and “godless” states preventing the establishment of an Islamic state. Finally, Militant/Jihadi Salafists are more extreme from Activist Salafists as they consider violence as a necessary instrument against the enemies. The protection of Muslim populations and the promotion of what is considered as the true interpretation of Islam justify violence.⁴³

³⁹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A very short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 19.

⁴¹ Nikki Sterkenburg, *Far Right Extremism*, 2019.

⁴² Magnus Ranstorp, “Islamist Extremism – A Practical Introduction”, *RAN Centre of Excellence* (2019).

⁴³ *ibid*

Regarding Salafist narratives, there are three different yet interconnected framings; the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational. The diagnostic frames underline the threats towards Islam and Muslims based on narratives of victimization, oppression, humiliation and injustice that Muslims endure using examples from war zones and conflicts as well as everyday life Islamophobic examples. The prognostic frames include narratives that suggest ways for dealing with the threats of Islam and Muslim populations, justifying violence and aiming to make the individual feel their contribution and role as important. Lastly, the motivational frame intends to mobilize and engage. The eternal salvation, the sense of belonging and the establishment of the caliphate are among the common narratives along with the obligation to live according to the Sharia.⁴⁴

Following the overview regarding the key term of radicalization as well as terms related to the issue, I will exclusively center upon examining the cases of Serbia and Bosnia and how the theory applies in their case. Before moving on I would like to present the hypotheses that I am testing. First of all, I am suggesting that the use of violence by the actors that will be examined (Serbian Radical Party, mainly during its peak in the 90s, Serbian Action and militant Salafists) is the main means of achieving their goals, thus the further consolidation of those actors will threaten democracy and its values in Serbia and Bosnia. Moving on, I am suggesting the misleading image of Islam-related actors, the idea of “Islamist safe heavens” in Bosnia and the view of it as an “Islamist hotbed” is based on oversimplifications and political aims which capitalize on the establishment of Islamophobic agendas. Finally, I am suggesting that both Islamist and nationalist radicalization in the cases of Bosnia and Serbia share certain common characteristics despite being positioned on opposite side of an ideological spectrum.

Radicalization in the Western Balkans

In this thesis, I chose not to focus on the Balkans as a whole in a sense that the countries that have already joined the EU have reached the specific standards, goals and conditions for membership in the EU based on the Copenhagen criteria.⁴⁵ Despite the setbacks and problems that arose after the accession of these countries, I believe that being members of the EU offers them more tools and resources in order to effectively regulate and deal with the issue of radicalization in comparison to the countries of the Western Balkans. Following the pan-European interest on Islamist extremism the Western Balkans’ governments followed on their EU counterparts’ footsteps and attended to the fight against Islamist extremism. However, while Islamist radicalization and extremism were in the spotlight, ethno-nationalism and far-right radicalization and extremism also grew as a natural consequence of the inability to effectively deal with the legacy of the past conflicts, the

⁴⁴ Magnus Ranstorp, *Islamist Extremism*, 2019.

⁴⁵ European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations, “Conditions for membership”, European Commission https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en.

incomplete state-building process and up to certain degree the securitization of Islam in general.⁴⁶

There are many reasons, why I chose to examine Serbia in regards to ethno-nationalism and far-right extremism. Looking at Serbia, one could argue that country has not been able to come to terms with its nationalistic past two decades after the downfall of Slobodan Milošević; the rise of ethno-nationalism with an emphasis on religion, tradition, conservative values and the historic myths of the nation in the post-Tito era were strengthened by Serbia's isolation by the international community during the wars of Yugoslavia, the sanctions and of course the 1999 NATO bombings.⁴⁷ During that period, the Serbian ethnic identity became a unifying factor and still plays a unifying and mobilizing role unlike individuality and otherness which are deemed undesirable.⁴⁸ This identity is embodied everywhere in Serbia; from culture and education to state and foreign policy and as a result far-right extremism per se is not perceived as a major threat or an urgent issue. To this day, Serbia is the mother-state to many Serbs that live outside its borders, mainly in Bosnia and Kosovo, and that fuels the sentiments and discourse of nationalist actors based on the perception of a community whose members share the same language, culture, beliefs, habits, myths, collective memories.⁴⁹ The chauvinist rhetoric used almost exclusively by the Far-Right in Europe has become mainstream in Serbia. Major political parties, state and non-state actors and the Orthodox Church have adopted and capitalized on an ethno-nationalist discourse on numerous issues (LGBT+ right and the issue of Kosovo).⁵⁰ Additionally, the close political and cultural ties between Serbia and Russia which has developed a network of cooperation with local far-right and mainstream actors also facilitates the rise of ethno-nationalism.⁵¹ Finally, the socio-economic conditions in the country favor the rise and establishment on ethno-nationalist actors as well.

Regarding Islamist radicalization, which in the context of the Western Balkans is exclusively related to Muslim identity, I will examine the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Generally, the Islamic legacy of the region is interconnected with the Ottoman Empire and the Hanafi School which is a tolerant and open to modernity school.⁵² The outbreak of the Yugoslav wars opened the doors to various Islamic ideas and ideologies such as Salafism and Takfirism which were imported by mujahedeen from the Middle East, mainly veterans of the Soviet–

⁴⁶ Sonja Stojanović-Gajić, "Security Issues in the Western Balkans", *CSF Policy Brief No. 05 - Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkan Summit Series* (2018).

⁴⁷ Richard Garfield, "Sanctions and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: assessing impacts and drawing lessons", *Humanitarian Practice Network* (2003) <https://odihpn.org/magazine/sanctions-and-the-federal-republic-of-yugoslavia-assessing-impacts-and-drawing-lessons/>.

⁴⁸ Marko Babić, "Defining political extremism in the Balkans. The case of Serbia", *Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2015): 73-90.

⁴⁹ Milovan R. Subotić and Miroslav Mitrović, "Hybrid nature of extremism – Cohesive characteristics of ethno-nationalism and religious extremism as generators of Balkan insecurity", *Vojno delo*, vol. 70, no. 1 (2018): 22-33.

⁵⁰ William W. Hagen, "The Balkans' Lethal Nationalisms", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 78, no. 4 (1999): 52-64.

⁵¹ Arlinda Rrustemi, "Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe: The Influences of Russia, Croatia, Serbia and Albania", *Hague Centre for Strategic Studies* (2020)

⁵² James Kenneth Wither, "Salafi – Jihadists: a Threat to the Western Balkans?" in *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, eds. Filip Ejdus and Predrag Jureković, Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe (2015): 41.

Afghan War, who initially came to aid of the Bosniak people during the 1992-1995 war in the country.⁵³ Generally, these ideologies were foreign to the Muslim population of the region but at the same time seemed appealing given the poor social and economic conditions of the newly born states.⁵⁴ The most influential countries of the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Egypt and Iran were actively engaged by providing human resources, financial aid, supplies and equipment to the Muslim populations of the Balkans⁵⁵.

In my opinion Bosnia is the more suitable case study of Islamist radicalization for two main reasons; first, it was the first country in which these radical and ultraconservative Islamic schools and ideologies were initially introduced in the Balkan context, hence the roots are deeper than in other countries. In Bosnia, the presence of different Islamist groups (groups related with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafist groups which are not necessarily violent but in general reject Western values and a smaller number of jihadist groups)⁵⁶, creates a diverse environment where ideological different actors compete and interact. Second, the presence and engagement of such actors is more visible and obvious in Bosnia where religion is one of the basic components of ethnic identity when it is least evident in the case of Albania which has remained a mostly secular state.⁵⁷ As for Kosovo, the close ties with Albania have led to a leaning towards ethno-nationalism especially regarding Kosovo's continuing unresolved status quo issue.⁵⁸ Another point is the existence and operation of a significant number of para-jamaats (parallel or illegal mosques for praying, teaching and sometimes recruitment), a term coined by the official Islamic Communities of the region to describe such spaces. These places have been considered by many scholars as well as state and European authorities as a serious social and security problem and potential hotbeds of radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters (especially in the 2012-2016 period).⁵⁹ Usually, para-jamaats operate in close cooperation with the country's diaspora especially with radical imams and community leaders in abroad usually in Austria, Germany, and Scandinavia. These diasporic connections have better organizational level and significantly more resources than their counterparts in the Balkans and that leads to an interdependent transnational relation between the Balkans, European and the Middle-East.⁶⁰

⁵³ Majda Ruge, "Radicalization Among Muslim Communities in the Balkans: Trends and Issues", *Senate Committee on Foreign Relations - Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation / Hearing on: Southeast Europe: Strengthening Democracy and Countering Malign Foreign Influence* (2017).

⁵⁴ Marko Babić, "Radicalization in the Western Balkans A.D. 2016: Challenges and Suggestions", *The Aspen Institute Policy Paper* (2016).

⁵⁵ Peter Andreas, "The Clandestine Political Economy of War and Peace in Bosnia", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2004): 29-51.

⁵⁶ James Kenneth Wither, *Salafi – Jihadists*, (2015): 42.

⁵⁷ James Kenneth Wither, *Salafi – Jihadists*, (2015): 41.

⁵⁸ Timothy Less, "Could the Kosovo story end in Greater Albania?", *Open Democracy*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/could-kosovo-story-end-greater-albania/>

⁵⁹ Peter R. Neumann, "Foreword" in *Between salvation and terror: Radicalization and the foreign fighter phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, ed. Vlado Azinović (School of Political Sciences & Atlantic Initiative, 2017): 14.

⁶⁰ Sonja Stojanović-Gajić, *Security Issues*, 2018.

Ethno-nationalism and far-right extremism in Serbia

In the 90s, Serbia fought deadly wars in Croatia and Bosnia and withdrew from Kosovo after the NATO bombing campaign while internally it was called to deal with the turbulent reign of Slobodan Milošević. The archetypical Serbian ethno-nationalist actor, the extreme-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS) of Vojislav Šešelj, rose to power after the 1992 elections and became one of the dominant political and social forces of the country. To this day it remains the most successful far-right party in Serbia and the wider region in electoral terms.⁶¹ After the end of the war, the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić by former state security forces, the never-ending struggle for power between liberal and illiberal actors including SRS along with the highly politicized role of the Orthodox Church created further turmoil and uncertainty in Serbia.⁶² The period that followed, despite the high hopes of the citizens and the initial positive steps forward, did not bring the desirable results as corruption, inequality and injustice prevailed. The incomplete democratic and economic transition along with the authoritarian tendencies on behalf of the ruling elites and the deadlock on issues such as Kosovo's status led to a fragile modus vivendi which proved ideal for the rise and establishment of new generation of nationalist actors like Serbian Action.⁶³

Before moving on and examining our case studies, I would like to make an overview of the basic principles and positions of the far-right actors of Serbia including SRS and SA. First of all, all these actors advocate for ethnically based politics while also expressing a strong desire to redefine state boundaries along ethnic lines. Moreover, for all these actors the wars of the 90s are points of reference in a two-fold way; not only they glorify the war criminals (Radovan Karadžić, Ratko Mladić) and the ethnic cleansing operations of the time, they also capitalize on a sense of victimization which originates from the view that the secessionist nationalism of the other Yugoslav republics was encouraged by the West and that the only people that truly suffered were the Serbs. They also admire controversial figures of the WWII period such as Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović and are adamant advocates of Nazi-collaborators like Dimitrije Ljotić. In the vast majority of cases, these actors are also violent and target marginalized groups such as LGBT+, Roma, migrants, religious and ethnic minorities. Other characteristics are their vicious anti-Westernism (anti-EU and anti-NATO), their pro-Russian/Eurasian stance and the promotion of Orthodox Christianity (Saint-Savaism denomination) as core element of the Serbian national identity.⁶⁴

I would also like to draw a line across these nationalists actors in order to differentiate neo-Nazi actors from the ones that do not fall into this category despite the fact a number of their positions and programs contain certain elements of this kind. More specifically, SRS, even though in the past it cooperated on some occasions with neo-Nazis and despite certain

⁶¹ Mudde, Cas. "Populist Radical-Right Parties in Europe Today" in *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies*, eds. John Abromeit, York Norman, Gary Marotta, Bridget Maria Chesterton (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 295–307.

⁶² Valery Perry, "Defining, Framing and Contextualizing Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: An Introduction to the Volume" in *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia*, ed. Valery Perry (ibidem Press, 2018): 31.

⁶³ Jovo Bakic, "Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia", *Friedrich Eber Stiftung* (2013).

⁶⁴ William W. Hagen, *The Balkans' Lethal*, 1999.

fascist components of its ideology, it is considered a non-neo-Nazi party focusing more on issues such as the status of Kosovo, the unification of all Serbs in one state and the rejection of the West in favor of closer ties to Russia.⁶⁵ To the contrary, SA is a group that is usually labeled as “neo-Nazi”, even though its members deny such allegations and rally under the triptych “God - King – Homekeeper”.⁶⁶ There are academics and observers who suggest that SA is closer to clerical fascist *Obraz* than to openly neo-Nazi groups such as the National Machine of Goran “Fuehrer” Davidović.⁶⁷ Still, the iconography that the group has adopted⁶⁸ as well as its international links and ties with the convicted criminals of Golden Dawn in Greece and the National Democratic Party of Germany hint that its ties to neo-Nazism might be closer the group wants to publicly admit.⁶⁹ One other aspect that I would like to point out regarding the neo-Nazi character of groups, organizations and movements like SA is the ambiguous abbreviations of their names; NS stands for the National Machine but also the National Socialists, NSP of the People's Freedom Movement also stands for the National Socialist Party and NSF stands for both the National Serbian Front and the National Socialist Front. Similarly, the abbreviation of the Serbian Action which is SA is the same with the abbreviation of the Nazi’s paramilitaries, the Brownshirts (*Sturmabteilung*).⁷⁰

Serbian Radical Party (SRS)

First of all, I would like to underline that I choose to distinguish three different time periods in SRS’s history. The first one is from 1991 to 2003. During this period SRS was one of the dominant players of the domestic political scene. The end of this successful period was marked by the surrender of the leader of the party, Vojislav Šešelj, to the ICT. The second one is from 2003 to 2008 when the party was led by Tomislav Nikolić and second in command Aleksandar Vučić (current President of Serbia). Under that leadership the party became less radical and embraced the EU perspective of Serbia while remaining extremely popular. The split that followed imprisoned Šešelj’s dismissal of the new direction of the party was a blow for SRS and led to its marginalization and decreasing of popularity.⁷¹ The notorious leader could not accept the U-turn towards the West that instead of “*investments, jobs and bread*” brought “*drug addiction and homosexuality*” to Serbia.⁷²

The post-Nikolić/ Vučić era has been marked by a steady decline in the polls and a return to the hardline positions of the past, mainly after the return of Šešelj from The Hague from

⁶⁵ Cas Mudde, “Extreme-right parties in Eastern Europe”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2000): 5-27.

⁶⁶ “Serbian Action”, Serbian Action, January 20, 2010 <https://akcija.org/serbian-action/>.

⁶⁷ Barbara N. Wiesinger, “The Continuing Presence of the Extreme Right in Post-Milošević Serbia”, *Balkanologie*, vol. 11, no 1-2 (2008).

⁶⁸ Isidora Stakić, “Serbian Nationalism and Right-Wing Extremism” in *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, eds. Filip Ejdus and Predrag Jureković, Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe (2015): 139.

⁶⁹ Nenad Radicevic, ““We Are Their Voice”: German Far-Right Builds Balkan Alliances”, *Resonant Voices Initiative*, October 22, 2019, <https://resonantvoices.info/we-are-their-voice-german-far-right-builds-balkan-alliances/>.

⁷⁰ Tadej Kurepa, “Serbian Neonazis on Hold”, *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, March 26, 2019, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article48308>.

⁷¹ Jovo Bakic, *Right-Wing Extremism*, 2013.

⁷² Vojislav Seselj, *Ideologija srpskog nacionalizma* (Serbian Radical Party, 2006): pg. 12

where he accused his ex-associates as members of an international conspiracy aiming at selling out Kosovo⁷³ and called them “traitors”⁷⁴. Over the years new nationalist and extremist far-right and neo-Nazi parties and groups such as SA have emerged in the new socio-economic environment and SRS’s dominant role has inevitably reduced. However, SRS remains by far the most important far-right actor in Serbia in terms of electoral success and membership as well as a point of reference regarding institutionalized ethno-nationalism in Serbia.

SRS was established in 1991 from the merge of parties from the far-right of the political continuum, mainly the Serbian Chetnik Movement and the National Radical Party during the Second Patriotic Congress which was held in Kragujevac.⁷⁵ It capitalized on the major developments of the early 90s such as Milošević’s aggressive foreign policy and military operations and the sanctions and embargo that were imposed to Serbia by the international community which had devastating effect on the economy and the standards of living. It is important to remember that it was not just SRS that mainstreamed ethno-nationalism and xenophobia which were rather products of the time. Still, SRS successfully took advantage of the widespread despair and uncertainty by targeting “enemies” of Serbia; Croats/Ustaše (from the Croatian puppet state of WW2), Albanians and Muslims which describes the same language-speaking Bosnian population which were considered traitors to both religion and nation.⁷⁶ One really interesting piece of statistical data regarding the early 90s suggests that by May 1993, 76% of the Serbian population had xenophobic views.⁷⁷ I am using this statistic in order to make clear that the environment in Yugoslavia was ideal for the rise of actors such as SRS. The same happened for example in Croatia as well. During that decade, SRS became one of the main players in Serbia alongside the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) of Milošević. Even though they did not always see things eye to eye, SRS managed significant wins during that decade and it was more successful when it supported the ruling SPS (1997) than when it did not (2000).⁷⁸

SRS’s programme has not changed dramatically over the years even though it has somehow adapted to the circumstances. At its core lies the Chetnik legacy and idea of a homogenous Greater Serbia.⁷⁹ Right from the start, SRS has been arguing in favor of the ethnical and territorial unification and protection of Serbia.⁸⁰ SRS’s ethno-nationalist ideology is characterized by xenophobia which was widespread at the time and remains so today as a result of the problematic and slow transition which have affected socially and economically

⁷³ Antonela Riha, “Why Serbia’s Leaders Fear Vojislav Seselj”, *Balkan Transitional Justice*, 5 December, 2014, <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/12/05/why-serbia-s-leaders-fear-vojislav-seselj-1/>

⁷⁴ Ivica Petrovic, “Serbian politician Vojislav Seselj acquitted of war crimes”, *Deutsche Welle*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/serbian-politician-vojislav-seselj-acquitted-of-war-crimes/a-19152374>

⁷⁵ “Istorija”, *Srpska radikalna stranka* <https://www.srpskaradikalnastranka.org.rs/istorija.html>

⁷⁶ Jovo Bakic, “Extreme-Right Ideology, Practice and Supporters: Case Study of the Serbian Radical Party”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2009): 193-207.

⁷⁷ Jovo Bakic, *Right-Wing Extremism*, 2013.

⁷⁸ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “Elections in Serbia”, *Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe* <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/serbia>.

⁷⁹ Ivana Nikolic, “How Serbia Changed its Mind about World War II History”, *Balkan Transitional Justice*, February 6, 2020 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/06/how-serbia-changed-its-mind-about-world-war-ii-history/>.

⁸⁰ Věra Stojarová, *The Far Right in the Balkans* (Manchester University Press, 2013): 48.

the Serbian society and a polarizing “*us against them*” mindset (the *enemy* can be anyone that contrasts the traditional Slavic, Orthodox and Eurasian values). Furthermore, despite its ambivalent stance towards religion in general, the SRS supports the values of church conservatism based on Saint-Savaism, an anti-Western Slavophile Christian Orthodox approach of the interwar period which essentially instrumentalizes religion for the purposes of Serbian supremacy and nationalism.⁸¹

In the 90s, the mobilization of the Serbian electorate by the SRS was the result of two developments. First, its populist ethno-nationalist program was tailored to address the needs and fears of the unemployed, the middle class whose standards of life significantly decreased and also the Serbian refugees from Croatia, Kosovo and Bosnia who were forcibly displaced. Second, SRS managed to attract the protest voters who were disappointed by the regime’s internal disputes and the widespread sense of humiliation and had no other significant alternative to turn to. More specifically, the politicization of the real and contrived threats alongside the consolidation of ethno-nationalism in the public discourse mobilized the voters (over time border regions tend to show above average support for SRS)⁸² while the uncertainty about the day after affected the society and created tension.⁸³

In addition, it is important to highlight the relation between football hooliganism and far-right politics and the mobilization of the voters at the time of the Yugoslav wars; the notorious Delije, Red Star Belgrade’s ultras, were amongst the first who openly embraced ethno-nationalism and its symbols and became the electoral and membership basis of both the SRS and the paramilitaries units related with Šešelj and the Party of National Unity of Željko “Arkan” Ražnatović.⁸⁴ Many consider the 1990 football match in Zagreb between Dinamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade as the first unofficial battle of the Yugoslav Wars. Members of the Bad Blue Boys of Dinamo and the Delije of Red Star would meet a few months later on actual battlefields.⁸⁵ Arkan, prominent leader of the Delije and one of the three powerful players at the time alongside Šešelj and Milošević⁸⁶, led the notorious paramilitary organization “*Serbian Volunteer Guard*” also known as “*Arkan’s Tigers*” during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia. Just before his assassination, Arkan had been indicted by the ICT and charged with crimes against humanity, violations of the laws or customs of war and grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Mikuš, Marek, *Frontiers of Civil Society: Government and Hegemony in Serbia* (Berghahn Books, 2018): 125-127.

⁸² Jovo Bakic, *Extreme-Right Ideology*, 2009.

⁸³ Věra Stojarová, *The Far Right*, (2013): 64.

⁸⁴ Věra Stojarová, *The Far Right*, (2013): 129.

⁸⁵ Orlando Crowcroft, “Red Star Belgrade vs Dinamo Zagreb: The football match that ‘started a war’”, *Euronews*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/05/13/red-star-belgrade-vs-dinamo-zagreb-the-football-match-that-started-a-war>

⁸⁶ Blaine Harden, “Serbia’s treacherous gang of three”, *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1993/02/07/serbias-treacherous-gang-of-three/921507ce-0588-47d2-9da4-d1e61f9f7c53/>

⁸⁷ Communications Service of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, “Case Information Sheet - (IT-97-27) - Željko Ražnatović “Arkan””, *International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia*

One very interesting aspect about SRS is its publishing activities. Ever since its establishment, it has been publishing the party's monthly journal "*Greater Serbia*"⁸⁸ and the political and historical books (more than 250 and some of them written while imprisoned in The Hague) written by the party leader, Vojislav Šešelj, the youngest PhD holder in Yugoslavia and former Professor of the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo and of the Law School in Belgrade.⁸⁹ I believe that such publications which propagandized SRS's extreme positions and were loosely in line with Milošević's propaganda must have an impact to citizens who were isolated from the outside world given the regime's tight grip on media and misinformation campaign.⁹⁰

Moving on, I would also like to highlight that Šešelj himself was the one of the main reasons of attraction and mobilization of the voters. Šešelj is a well-educated man and a skillful and ingenious orator which was beneficial for his rise and the party's growing popularity given the fact that the target group of the party was and still remains the lower strata of the society (peasants, workers and the losers of the transition).⁹¹ One should not forget that he refused any representation and acted as his own lawyer while on trial on the ICT in The Hague for inciting crimes against humanity and war crimes. Even though not convicted, it is well known and reported that his communications and acts contributed to the perpetrators' decision to commit the crimes alleged.⁹² He delivered fiery speeches in regions where ethnic cleansing took place soon after (Vukovar in Croatia in 1991 and in Hrtkovci in Vojvodina in 1992), he openly advocated for the use of violence for the creation of a Greater Serbia and the violent removal of non-Serbs from specific regions and villages and giving orders to his own paramilitary units operating in Bosnia and Croatia.⁹³ The party and personally Šešelj have also been accused of playing an active role in the recruitment, formation, financing, supply, support and direction of paramilitary groups such as the "*Serbian Chetnik Movement*", the "*Šešeljevci*" (men of Šešelj) and the "*White Eagles*" which committed series of war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia.⁹⁴ His trial in the ICT in The Hague along with his violent character and actions (verbal and physical attacks against political and non-political opponents) which attracted the media and secured him significant airtime gave Šešelj a reputation of a strong and decisive party leader able to mobilize the electorate and keep the party together.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ "Velika Srbija", *Srpska radikalna stranka*

<https://www.srpskaradikalnastranka.org.rs/izdavastvo/casopis-velika-srbija/>

⁸⁹ "књиге Војислава Шешеља", *Srpska radikalna stranka*

<https://www.srpskaradikalnastranka.org.rs/izdanja-prof-dr-vojislava-seselja>

⁹⁰ Kent Fogg, "The Milošević Regime and the Manipulation of the Serbian Media", *European Studies Conference* (2006)

⁹¹ Věra Stojarová, *The Far Right*, (2013): 128.

⁹² Radosa Milutinovic, "Seselj Verdict: Did Nationalist Speeches Cause War Crimes?", *Balkan Transitional Justice*, April 10, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/10/seselj-verdict-did-nationalist-speeches-cause-war-crimes-04-09-2018/>

⁹³ Daniel Bochsler, "The party system of Bosnia", in *Party politics in the Western Balkans*, eds. Vera Stojarová, Peter Emerson (Routledge, 2013): 165.

⁹⁴ "The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Vojislav Seselj - Case No. IT", *The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia*.

⁹⁵ Věra Stojarová, *The Far Right*, (2013): 129.

Regarding SRS's transnational links, the party had developed close ties two major parties the wider European far-right family; Jean-Marine Le Pen's National Front and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. It was also close to Franz Schönhuber, leader of the far-right German party The Republicans.⁹⁶

Nowadays, SRS has been marginalized. Its downfall has been mainly a result of the normalization of nationalism in the public discourse by the ruling elites. What is known as "*democratic nationalism*" has been mainstreamed through legal norms and historical revisionism.⁹⁷ The "*enemies*" of Serbia are still the West, the Muslims, Albanians and Croats, but gradually new far-right political parties and extremist groups which do not cooperate with SRS but share almost the same ideology and wish to mobilize the same part of the electorate. The votes and support of the losers of the transition, the uneducated, the unemployed, the youth, the unskilled and semi-skilled workers are up for grabs for all nationalist actors from the most extreme and marginal ones to SRS to the ruling SNS of Aleksandar Vučić.⁹⁸ The total domination of SNS which combines pro-Western, but also certain ultraconservative and pro-Russian characteristics which align with SRS's positions have had a devastating impact on SRS. Still, regarding his party marginalization, Šešelj lacks the willingness for self-reflection and self-criticism; according to him, SRS's losses are a result of limited resources, his block from all social media platforms, his boycott from the media which are under the control of the government, electoral tampering and the emergence other ethno-nationalist actors.⁹⁹

The following tables show the electoral results of SRS over the years proving the rise and establishment of the party from the mid-90s until the departure of Nikolić and the party's downfall.

LEADER OF THE PARTY	YEAR OF THE ELECTION	PERCENTAGE – SEATS
Vojislav Šešelj	1992	22.58 % - 73/250 Support to the Government
Vojislav Šešelj	1993	13.85 % - 39/250
Vojislav Šešelj	1997	28.08 % - 82/250 Coalition Government
Vojislav Šešelj	2000	08.60 % - 23/250
Tomislav Nikolić *	2004	27.62 % - 82/250
Tomislav Nikolić *	2007	28.60 % - 81/250
Tomislav Nikolić *	2008	29.46 % - 78/250
Dragan Todorović *	2012	04.63 % - no seats
Nemanja Šarović *	2014	02.01 % - no seats
Vojislav Šešelj	2016	08.10 % - 22/250
Vojislav Šešelj	2020	02.05 % - no seats

⁹⁶ Jovo Bakic, *Extreme-Right Ideology*, 2009.

⁹⁷ Isidora Stakić, *Serbian Nationalism*, (2015): 144.

⁹⁸ Jovo Bakic, *Extreme-Right Ideology*, 2009.

⁹⁹ "Nismo se ni prodali ni predali, nastavljamo političku borbu", *Srpska radikalna stranka*, <https://www.srpskaradikalnastranka.org.rs/intervjui/nismo-se-ni-prodali-ni-predali-nastavljamo-politicku-borbu.html>.

LEADER OF THE PARTY	YEAR OF THE ELECTION	PERCENTAGE
Vojislav Šešelj	1992	SRS supported Slobodan Milošević for President.
Vojislav Šešelj	1997	27.30 and 49.1 % (1st) Invalid – low turnout
Vojislav Šešelj	1997	32.20 and 37.60 % (2nd)
Tomislav Nikolić **	2000	05.88 % (3rd)
Vojislav Šešelj	2002	23.20 % (3rd) Invalid – low turnout
Vojislav Šešelj	2002	36.10 % (2nd) Invalid – low turnout
Tomislav Nikolić *	2003	47.90 % Invalid – low turnout
Tomislav Nikolić *	2004	30.60 and 45.40 % (2nd)
Tomislav Nikolić *	2008	40.00 and 48.00 % (2nd)
Jadranka Šešelj	2012	03.78 % (7th)
Vojislav Šešelj	2017	04.51 % (5th)

* Acting leaders of SRS while Vojislav Šešelj was incarcerated in the ICT in Hague.

** The 2000 elections were for the position of the President of FR Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro).

Both tables were created using information and data from the following sources: Adam Carr's Psephos Election Archive¹⁰⁰, OSCE¹⁰¹, Center for Free Election and Democracy (CeSID)¹⁰², ACE Project - The Electoral Knowledge Network¹⁰³, Inter-Parliamentary Union¹⁰⁴, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)¹⁰⁵, IPU Parline¹⁰⁶ and Laslo Sekelj work on elections in Yugoslavia.¹⁰⁷

Serbian Action (SA)

Serbian Action (SA) is the other Serbian ethno-nationalist actor that I will examine. It is a relatively new movement compared to SRS and without the institutional status and

¹⁰⁰ "Republic of Serbia", Psephos - Adam Carr's Election Archive, <http://psephos.adam-carr.net/countries/s/serbia/>

¹⁰¹ "Elections in Serbia", Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/serbia>

¹⁰² "Izdanja", Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju (CeSID) - Center for Free Election and Democracy (CeSID), <http://www.cesid.rs/izdanja/oko-izbora/> and "Rezultati izbora", Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju (CeSID) - Center for Free Election and Democracy (CeSID), <http://www.cesid.rs/u-fokusu/rezultati-izbora/>

¹⁰³ "Serbia", ACE Project – The Electoral Knowledge Network, <https://aceproject.org/regions-en/countries-and-territories/RS>

¹⁰⁴ "SERBIA - Narodna skupština (National Assembly)", Inter-Parliamentary Union, http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2355_arc.htm

¹⁰⁵ "Republic of Serbia", ElectionGuide - International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/242/>

¹⁰⁶ "Serbia", IPU Parline, https://data.ipu.org/node/151/elections?chamber_id=13558

¹⁰⁷ Laslo Sekelj, "Parties and Elections: The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Change without Transformation", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2000): 57-75.

legitimacy of the latter. I am using the term “movement” which is used by SA itself since it is not officially registered as an organization or a party.¹⁰⁸ As mentioned earlier, SA is part of the wider group of ethno-nationalist actors that emerged after the country reached a level of relative stability in the late-2000s. It is common for far-right extremist and neo-Nazi organizations and groups to split in smaller groups as a result of internal disagreements or simply create new ones if the existing ones are banned by the authorities. Similarly, SA was born from the ashes of the banned National Machine of Goran“Fuehrer” Davidović which was formed by former members of the neo-Nazi Blood and Honor Serbia.¹⁰⁹

SA self-describes as an “*Orthodox Christian national-revolutionary movement*” and part of the “*pan-European national front against Zionist-Atlantic occupation*” of Europe. Its militant character can be described by the paradigm of “*the combat Serbian Orthodoxy*” which conceptualizes the “*struggle of the sword against evil*”.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the members of SA oppose the concept of liberal democracy which they presume is a product of the immoral West that does not correspond to Serbian values and ideals of the ancestors in terms of spirituality and culture. Thus, they use the derogatory term “*demonocracy*” and condemn it as a mix of egoism and materialism.¹¹¹ Another interesting aspect that reinforces the claim that SA is a neo-Nazi actor is its aim to preserve the Serbian national being by “keeping the biological heritage” of the ancestors.¹¹² In my opinion, the use of the term “biological” should be another alert about the nature of SA since terms like that are common among neo-Nazis.¹¹³

As mentioned earlier, the ideology of the movement can be summed up by the triptych “*God-King-Homekeeper*” and it favors what they call Orthodox integration instead of Euro-Atlantic integration. Moreover, SA does not accept labels such as “*right-wing*” and “*extreme*”; it argues that nationalism and the struggle for social justice cannot be separated and by supporting this idea it belongs to what is known as Third Position Groups whose ideology can loosely be described as a mix of ideas across the left-right political continuum with strong neo-fascist implications.¹¹⁴ According to the SA-sponsored magazine “*The Army of Changes*”, SA belongs to the “*metaphysical right-wing which combines national revival*

¹⁰⁸ “Gde živi ekstremizam?”, *Centar za podršku ženama, Antifašistička koalicija and Fondacija za otvoreno društvo*, <https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/052a67a1f32f0485ca11202764d2ae60/gde-spavaju-ekstremisti/index.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Ognjen Zorić, “Srbija: Jednu neonacističku organizaciju zamenila druga”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, May 14, 2012, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-jednu-neonacisticku-organizaciju-zamenila-druga/24580530.html>.

¹¹⁰ Marko Babić, *Defining political extremism*, 2015.

¹¹¹ Marko Babić, *Defining political extremism*, 2015.

¹¹² “Serbian Action”, *Serbian Action*, January 20, 2010, <https://akcija.org/serbian-action/>.

¹¹³ “Origins of Neo-Nazi and White Supremacist Terms and Symbols”, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, <https://www.ushmm.org/antisemitism/what-is-antisemitism/origins-of-neo-nazi-and-white-supremacist-terms-and-symbols>.

¹¹⁴ “Third position on the web”, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/third-position-web>

with social justice and differs very much from the so-called right-wing politics because it is not controlled by anyone”.¹¹⁵

Even though the SA is not a political party, it has a political and economic program while advocating for a certain way of life based on spiritual discipline and duties.¹¹⁶ The basis of SA's spirituality lays to the teachings and positions of Saint Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, a major figure of the Serbian Orthodox Church who is even compared to Saint-Sava and, according to unofficial data, is also Serbia's most popular author since the fall of Communism.¹¹⁷ Velimirović is the “*spiritual patron and protector*” of the movement. At this point I would like to highlight that Velimirović is considered controversial among many due to his extreme positions on certain issues. Additionally, he was declared an anti-Semite, a traitor and a fascist by the Communist authorities in the aftermath of World War II and that is why he did not return to Yugoslavia.¹¹⁸ The political and economic program of the SA encompasses elements of National Socialism regarding the sectors of the economy along with the idea of Greater Serbia, the re-establishment of monarchy and a strong presence of the Church. Communism and capitalism are deemed as equally evil and any legal action against SA by the “*corrupted elites*” is considered proof of the legitimate struggle of SA for Serbia.¹¹⁹

As mentioned, SA lacks the institutional status and legitimacy of the SRS, thus it is very difficult to easily track and monitor its members who choose to operate “underground” mainly after the passing of the “*Anti-discrimination Act*” which illegalized the public gatherings of neo-Nazi or fascist organizations as well as the display of such emblems and symbols in public, even though this phenomenon has not died off.¹²⁰ SA benefits from the ambivalence of the Serbian judiciary system towards far-right extremist actors. The ban of National Machine and Obraz by the Constitutional Court were positive developments, but the rejection of a similar request regarding SNP 1389 proved problematic. By not banning a group with these characteristics (similar to SA), you obliquely legitimize such actors. Another issue is the lack of mechanisms that would clench the implementation of the Court's decisions.¹²¹ Without further engagement from the authorities these actors either change their names and status or simply form/join other groups just like SA.¹²²

Following the ban of the National Machine and Obraz, some of their members formed SA, took over their contacts and followed its footsteps in terms of networking. Regarding the leadership, SA was founded by a young lawyer in 2010 and the majority of its members are

¹¹⁵ Marko Babić, *Defining political extremism*, 2015.

¹¹⁶ “Начела духовне дисциплине”, *Serbian Action*, April 20, 2010, <https://akcija.org/nacela-duhovne-discipline/>

¹¹⁷ “Наша Крсна Слава”, *Serbian Action*, March 31, 2010, <https://akcija.org/nasa-krsna-slava/>.

¹¹⁸ Jovan Byford (2006) Distinguishing ‘Anti-Judaism’ from ‘Antisemitism’: Recent Championing of Serbian Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2006): 7-31.

¹¹⁹ “Политичко-економски програм”, *Serbian Action*, April 20, 2010, <https://akcija.org/program/>.

¹²⁰ Republic of Serbia, *Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination in the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade: 2009, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No 22

<http://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/en/legislation/republic-of-serbia-legislation/>.

¹²¹ Isidora Stakić, *Serbian Nationalism*, (2015): 140-41.

¹²² Marina Lažetić, ““Migration Crisis” and the Far Right Networks in Europe: A Case Study of Serbia”, *Journal of Regional Security*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2018): 131–178.

young men 20-32 years old.¹²³ In the current socio-economic and political environment dissatisfied citizens, especially the young unprivileged population, are the main target of SA.¹²⁴ The Serbian youth is poorly educated in a sense that the education and especially the history that they are taught at school are based on the ethno-nationalist myths and narratives of the past (mainly WWII and the Yugoslav wars).¹²⁵ The youth is also deeply affected by unemployment (steadily between 30-50% over past decade)¹²⁶. Adding to that mix their upbringing in the aftermath of the wars which affected almost every Serbian family and the disastrous for the economy sanctions, one can understand why Serbian youth is negatively prejudiced against the West and what is perceived as Western values and why it is vulnerable to the influence of movements like SA and their hateful narratives.¹²⁷

The first few years since its establishment one could see stickers, graffiti and insignia of the SA everywhere in Serbia targeting “enemies”, tagging “territory” and also supporting allies from abroad just like it did in 2013 after the arrest of the leadership of the Greek neo-Nazi criminal organization Golden Dawn¹²⁸, thus creating a sense of mass movement even though that was not the case. Gradually, SA became well-known for attacking “*internal enemies*” such as Roma, migrants and LGBT+ (unlike SRS in its heyday which focused more on the “*external enemies*” of Serbia).¹²⁹ In 2014, citizens of Belgrade found leaflets full of hate-speech against the Roma population of Serbia encouraging Serbs to get organized and defend the homeland against Roma using violence. The leaflets were signed by SA.¹³⁰ Moreover, members of SA tried to organize an event on “*communist crimes*” as a student movement at the occupied Faculty of Philosophy. Eventually, the rest of the students and anti-fascists across Serbia did not allow that to happen.¹³¹ On another occasion, on the day of the day of Remembrance of the Srebrenica massacre, the city of Belgrade was full of SA posters with the photo of Ratko Mladic and the message “General, thank you for Srebrenica”.¹³² In many cases, members of SA have intervened and attacked participants in

¹²³ Vuk Z. Cvijić, “OTKRIVAMO Pravnika na čelu nacističkog stroja”, *BLIC*, December 5, 2014, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/otkrivamo-pravnik-na-celu-nacistickog-stroja/pmrg5wp>.

¹²⁴ Marina Lažetić, *Migration Crisis*, 2018.

¹²⁵ Eva Dangendorf, “Challenges of nationalism on the education system and political culture of post-war Serbia”, *DRC Summer School on Regional Co-operation*, 2005, <http://drcsummerschool.eu/proceedings?order=getLinks&categoryId=4>.

¹²⁶ Aaron O’Neill, “Serbia: Youth unemployment rate from 1999 to 2020”, *Statista*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812963/youth-unemployment-rate-in-serbia/>.

¹²⁷ Arlinda Rrustemi, *Far-Right Trends*, 2020.

¹²⁸ Radio Slobodna Evropa, “Ministarstvo pravde Srbije: Nemamo predmet u vezi sa bivšim grčkim poslanikom”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31122025.html>.

¹²⁹ Luke Kelly, “Overview of research on far right extremism in the Western Balkans”, *K4D Helpdesk Report* (2019).

¹³⁰ Branka Mihajlović, “Rasistički leci u poštanskim sandučićima Beograđana”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, December 1, 2014, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rasisticki-leci-u-postanskim-sanducicima-beogradjana/26719183.html>.

¹³¹ Tadej Kurepa, *Serbian Neonazis*, 2019.

¹³² Ljudmila Cvetković, “(Ne)suočavanje sa genocidom: U Beogradu muk”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, July 11, 2014, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/obelezavanje-genocida-u-srebrenici/25453952.html>.

various events dealing with the troubled past of Serbia¹³³ and have organized gatherings and marches in memory of Dimitrije Ljotić, leader of the fascist Zbor during the interwar period and the years of WWII, and Milan Nedić, Prime Minister of the puppet government of Yugoslavia, two persons that SA considers heroes and advocates for their rehabilitation.¹³⁴

Furthermore, just like in the case of SRS in the 90s, the football ultras are a pool for potential members and usually members between far-right actors like SA and hooligan groups overlap. The majority of the Serbian hooligans have adopted far-right and neo-Nazi iconography and symbols and they project ultraconservative, ethno-nationalist and anti-Western positions against Croats, Albanians, Muslims, LGBT+ and people of color through their banners, chants and songs.¹³⁵ SA is also usually amongst the organizers of the protests against LGBT+ (Pride parade), Kosovo's independence and the presence of migrants and Roma in Serbia. In these kinds of events, the Serbian Church is actively engaged as well, thus providing further legitimacy to actors such as SA. Overall, SA and other extremist actors operate closely with the Orthodox Church since their views on certain issues (Kosovo, LGBT+) align. The securitization of the "Other" leads to legitimization of the use of extraordinary measures such as physical violence in order to answer to the threat.¹³⁶ SA presents in its very active comment and blog section Roma people as thieves and dirty, LGBT+ as sinners and immoral persons and migrants as a threat to Serbian women.¹³⁷ The aim of declaring a group a security threat is that violence against such threat becomes self-defense and gradually becomes normalized.¹³⁸ Also, engaging on sentimentally charged issues which dominate the public discourse allows actors like SA to express their collective identities before the Serbian society.

SA's online presence is also worth-mentioning; its well-designed website along with its "informal" character (not a political party – "we are all in this together" mentality) makes its presence more attractive, especially to younger audiences. The comment sections and the blog of the movement are regularly updated. The visitor can also find updates and information regarding publications of books and magazines of SA such as "Bojcke smehe" and the bulletin "Awakening" as well as interviews with international allies and updates on

¹³³ Norbert Šinković, "Novi Sad: Neonacisti prekinuli tribinu o Nediću", *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, November 21, 2015, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/novi-sad-neonacisti-prekinuli-tribinu-o-nedicu/27378862.html>.

¹³⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Regarding the situation with the glorification of Nazism and the spread of Neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation* (2019) https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/-/asset_publisher/bb3NYd16mBFC/content/id/3193903#50

¹³⁵ Anja Vladislavljevic and Ivana Jeremic, "Croatian and Serbian Hooligans: Football Foes Share Love of Hate", *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*, June 19, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/19/croatian-and-serbian-hooligans-football-foes-share-love-of-hate/>.

¹³⁶ Barry Buzan and Ole Waver, *Regions and Powers: the Structure of International Security* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 491.

¹³⁷ "Коментар", *Serbian Action*, <https://akcija.org/komentar/>. - "Блог", *Serbian Action*, <https://akcija.org/blog/>.

¹³⁸ Isidora Stakić, *Serbian Nationalism*, (2015): 139.

their actions and information about SA's activities. Overall, apart from propagandizing its positions and ideology, SA uses online platforms and social media in order to whitewash itself and like-minded actors and individuals while also attacking what the ones perceived as the enemy (Roma, Muslims, Albanians, Croats, LGBT+).¹³⁹

Regarding its transnational links, SA is part of a wider network of ethno-nationalist/neo-Nazi/far-right extremist actors. Members of SA participated in an international gathering of National Socialists in Warsaw and in a similar event in Timisoara.¹⁴⁰ Apart from the close cooperation with the Greek Golden Dawn, SA has ties with the Italian neo-fascist movement Forza Nuova¹⁴¹. It has also close cooperation with the German neo-Nazi NPD despite NPD's ties with Croatian neo-Nazis and extremists.¹⁴² Additionally, the neo-Nazi groups of Serbia have developed close cooperation with Russian actors in the country such as the Night Wolves and the Cossacks.¹⁴³ Also, Member of SA joined the pro-Russian forces in Eastern Crimea, thus returning the favor to the "Orthodox brothers" who came to Serbia's aid during the war in Kosovo.¹⁴⁴

Religious radicalization – Islamist extremism in Bosnia

Bosnia is the second country that I will examine regarding radicalization and particularly Islamist radicalization. Just like all the ex-Yugoslav republics Bosnia was caught in the middle of the deadly conflicts that led to the dissolution of the Federal Republic. It is fair to say that Bosnia paid the highest price during the wars as the most multi-ethnic (ethnic Serbs, ethnic Croats and Bosniaks) and multi-religious (Orthodox Christians, Catholic, Muslims) of the republics because Croatia and Serbia wanted a piece of Bosnia. In the case of Serbian and Croatian nationalism this has not changed (Greater Serbia, Greater Croatia).

Bosnia remains the country with the biggest Muslim population among the countries with Muslim majorities in the Balkans (the other two are Albania and Kosovo). As mentioned, one of the reasons why I chose Bosnia as my case study about Islamist extremism is the fact that religion lies at the core of the Bosniak national identity while Albanian nationalism has a predominantly secular character.¹⁴⁵ I would like to underline again that I am not identifying Islam and Muslim believers in Bosnia with religious radicalization and extremism; on the contrary, it is extremely important to remember that the majority of Bosniaks reject this imported alternative ideologies and interpretations of Islam which contradict the prevalent

¹³⁹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Regarding the situation*, 2019.

¹⁴⁰ Vuk Z. Cvijić, *OTKRIVAMO Pravnik*, 2014 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/otkrivamo-pravnik-na-celu-nacistickog-stroja/pmrg5wp> .

¹⁴¹ Ivan Ejub Kostić, "Islamophobia in Serbia – National Report 2019", in *European Islamophobia Report 2019*, eds. Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez (SETA - Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, 2020): 23.

¹⁴² Nenad Radicevic, *We Are Their Voice*, 2019, <https://resonantvoices.info/we-are-their-voice-german-far-right-builds-balkan-alliances/> .

¹⁴³ Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Way Forward in Analyzing External Actors' Influence Project, "Briefing Paper VI: External influence in extremism & radicalism", *Prague Security Studies Institute*

¹⁴⁴ "Юридические последствия для иностранцев, воюющих в Украине", *USAID, Documentation Center and Української Гельсінської спілки з прав людини*, 2017, <https://helsinki.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Bro.pdf>

¹⁴⁵ James Kenneth Wither, *Salafi – Jihadists*, (2015): 41.

Hanafi School of Islam which originates from the Ottoman period and whose doctrines are considered among the most progressive and liberal among the schools of Sunni Islam.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, almost five decades of Communist rule had an impact to all religions of the region which operated with specific limitations. Naturally, Balkan Islam and Bosnian Islam in our case specifically adapted to the political and socio-economic circumstances developed in the atheistic and often anti-religious state and they followed a less conservative and a more flexible path compared to the more conservative practices that were dominant in the Middle-East.¹⁴⁷

Since 1990, the majority of the Bosniak population and diaspora constitute the body of the Islamic Community (IC) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the official religious organization and highest representative body of the Muslim populations of the wider Balkan region excluding Albania and Kosovo.¹⁴⁸ The main characteristic of Bosnian Islam is its secular and pluralistic character. It is also civic and non-violent and has adapted to the multi-religious and power-sharing environment of the post-war Bosnia.¹⁴⁹ Bosnian Islam accepts and supports the principles of liberal democracy while at the same time it is also nationalized in a sense that the Bosniak religious and national identity are interconnected and the limits between the two are somehow blurry.¹⁵⁰ My focus, though, is not on the Islamic Community and the majority of the Muslim population of Bosnia but on the ideologies and interpretations of Islam that emerged during the war and have taken a root in Bosnia ever since. They returned to the spotlight after the rise of ISIL and the terrorist attacks across Europe which led to widespread concern about “home-grown jihadis” and the foreign fighters’ phenomenon.

As already explained, the conservative interpretations of Islam (Hanbali School, Salafism) along with the militant ideology of Takfirism were first introduced during the Yugoslav wars when Arab mujahedeen and da’is (preachers who invite people to Islam-proselytizing) from Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan and other countries joined their coreligionists in the Balkans and formed the El Mujahid unit. However, apart from assistance in the battlefields, these mujahedeen also declared their religious beliefs and doctrine while also condemning and undermining the existing one. During the war, the mujahedeen operated their twofold duties (fighting and proselytizing) from the mountainous regions of the Zenica-Doboj Canton while the El Mujahid unit had its base in Zenica.¹⁵¹ I am not going to delve into the actions of these mujahedeen during the war and their relationship with the Bosnian Army. I will start from the post-war period, when many of these fighters, despite the objections of the West, obtained Bosnian citizenship and settle across the country. Post-war, the stronghold of

¹⁴⁶ Christie S. Warren, “The Hanafi School”, *In obo in Islamic Studies*, May 28, 2013, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0082.xml>.

¹⁴⁷ Ahmet Alibašić, “The profile of Bosnian Islam and What Western European Muslims Could Benefit From”, *Akademie der Diözese Rottenburg Stuttgart* (2007).

¹⁴⁸ “Islamska zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini”, *Islamska zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini* <https://www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php/islamska-zajednica/o-islamskoj-zajednici>.

¹⁴⁹ Xavier Bugarel, “The role of Balkan Muslims in Building a European Islam”, *European Policy Centre Issue Paper*, no. 43 (2005).

¹⁵⁰ Ahmet Alibašić, *The profile*, 2007.

¹⁵¹ Sead Turcalo and Nejra Veljan, “Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Atlantic Initiative and Berghof Foundation* (2018).

Salafists became the isolated Gornja Maoča whose leaders have developed close ties with the strong Salafists from Europe, mainly Austira, and the US. From there, money and resources are distributed across Bosnia and regions such as Sandžak. In the aftermath of the war, Salafist presence is also noticeable to Dubnica, Ošve, and Liješnica.¹⁵²

More recently, Salafists have moved towards the big urban centers of the capital Sarajevo, Tuzla, Travnik, Zenica and Bihać where numerous para-jamaats (parallel or illegal mosques for praying, teaching and sometimes recruitment) have been established along with a network of business, charities and community centers which logistically support the new establishments.¹⁵³ Para-jamaats which continue to operate outside the jurisdiction of the IC (14 out of 38 signed the Protocol to join the IC) remain the main issue and are perceived as potential hotbeds for radicalization.¹⁵⁴ Before moving on, it is necessary to underline that not all Salafists in Bosnia are violent despite their radical beliefs nor all para-jamaats are linked to violent extremism. However, all Bosnian foreign fighters (around 260)¹⁵⁵ who joined ISIL and the al-Nusra Front had attended para-jamaats in Bosnia prior to their arrival in Iraq and Syria.¹⁵⁶

Number of foreign fighters from Bosnia (2012-15)	Number of returned persons from Syria/Iraq	Number of persons killed in Syria/Iraq	Number of person that remain in Syria/Iraq
260	43 men 6 women	44 men 2 women	77 men 48 women 46 children

*The table was created based on data from the Extremist Research Forum.*¹⁵⁷

Focusing on the drivers of Islamist radicalization in Bosnia, I would like to point out some general “push factors” and “pull factors” while highlighting that every case has its own unique characteristics. The push factors are drivers that reflect the social, economic, political and cultural conditions. The pull factors such as personal relationships, attraction to the charitable work of Salafists, the draw of social networks, the use of radical online platforms, attraction to a charismatic cleric, a sense of belonging and empowerment in conjunction with the push factors are the ones that directly influence an individual regarding radicalization and potential recruitment.¹⁵⁸ In the case of Bosnia, identity (ethnic and religious aspects) has become the main way of defining your position in the society as a result of the weak, dysfunctional and corrupted state for Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs and

¹⁵² Sead Turcalo and Nejra Veljan, *Community Perspectives*, 2018.

¹⁵³ Vlado Azinović, “The foreign fighter phenomenon and radicalization in the Western Balkans: Understanding the context, 2012-2016” in *Between salvation and terror: Radicalization and the foreign fighter phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, ed. Vlado Azinović (School of Political Sciences & Atlantic Initiative, 2017): 14.

¹⁵⁴ Edina Bećirević, “Bosnia and Herzegovina Report”, *Western Balkans – Extremist Research Forum* (2018).

¹⁵⁵ Shpend Kursani, “Literature Review 2017 – 2018: Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans”, *Western Balkans - Extremism Research Forum* (2019).

¹⁵⁶ Edina Bećirević, “Salafism vs. Moderate Islam – A rhetorical Fights for the Hearts and Minds of Bosnian Muslim”, *Atlantic Initiative* (2016).

¹⁵⁷ Edina Bećirević, Majda Halilović and Vlado Azinović, “Literature review: Radicalization and violent extremism in the Western Balkans”, *Western Balkans – Extremist Research Forum* (2017).

¹⁵⁸ USAID Policy, “The development response to violent extremism and insurgency”, *USAID* (2016).

Croats. Additionally, identity is a dividing factor among ethnic groups in a sense that it is interconnected with a sense of victimhood and trauma originating in the dreadful events of the war and the glorification of war criminals.¹⁵⁹ The socio-economic environment of Bosnia also plays an important role; social exclusion, poverty, deprivation and unemployment also contribute to the radicalization of Bosniaks. The country has one of the worst unemployment rates in Europe (around 19%¹⁶⁰ - around 40% youth unemployment¹⁶¹), hence a big part of the society is potential target. Records have shown that the majority of the radicalized individuals who joined ISIL and the al-Nusra Front had some common traits; many had been unemployed, poorly educated and usually had criminal records. The simplified narratives of Salafists are attractive to marginalized and vulnerable individuals. The “single narrative” of Salafism targets the West and corrupted regimes in the Middle-East who are responsible for the plights of Muslims. In Bosnia, even though the West is also targeted because it did not prevent atrocities such as the Srebrenica genocide, the main target of the da’is is Bosnian Islam itself which is branded as immoral, odd and incorrect. Individuals who faced hard times (psychological issues, drug addiction, alcoholism, broken families) become more radical because the Salafist narrative offers them not only a sense of belonging but also mental and practical support and a certain militant and ultraconservative lifestyle that allows them to channel their bitterness and anger towards what are perceived as the reasons that led to their alienation in the first place.¹⁶²

In general, it is necessary to remember that even though Turkey is considered the patron-country that oversees the Muslim population of the Balkans because of their common Ottoman past and supports them economically, politically and culturally mainly through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia are also actively engaged ever since the war. Similarly with what Turkey does, Saudi Arabia has also established organizations such as the Active Islamic Youth with branches all over Bosnia that support the revival of Islam. Through some of them and specifically through the King Fahd Mosque and Cultural Center in Sarajevo which enjoys extraterritorial sovereignty funds are channeled to Salafist activities. Overall, the aim of both violent and non-violent Salafists is the deconstruction of the Bosniak Islamic doctrines and identity and the establishment of a Muslim identity based on Salafism that surpasses the national one.¹⁶³

Another important aspect of Islamist radicalization and extremism in Bosnia is the aspect of education. Due to the lack of provisions regarding education and the reform of it in the Dayton Agreement education is controlled and defined by the two political entities of the country, Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, the educational system is segregated, the curricula especially the “national subjects”, History

¹⁵⁹ Edina Bećirević, *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 2018.

¹⁶⁰ Aaron O’Neill, “Bosnia-Herzegovina: Unemployment rate from 1999 to 2020”, *Statista*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/453933/unemployment-rate-in-bosnia-herzegovina/>

¹⁶¹ Aaron O’Neill, “Bosnia and Herzegovina: Youth unemployment rate from 1999 to 2020”, *Statista*, April 1, 2021 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/811689/youth-unemployment-rate-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

¹⁶² Edina Bećirević, *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 2018.

¹⁶³ Sead Turcalo and Nejra Veljan, *Community Perspectives*, 2018.

and Geography, are ethnically-oriented while the majority of the schools are mono-ethnic.¹⁶⁴ Also, religious education in madrassas (mainly in the ones financed by Saudi Arabia and other Arabic countries) can sometimes be a reason of concern, if it promotes Salafism. Also, it is very common that young Bosniaks are granted scholarships to study in the Middle-East where they study the most conservative and radical Islamic teachings. The most worrying issue though is education that takes place in para-jamaats (again not in all cases – Salafism can be non-violent); some of them are led by clerics educated in the Middle-East while some are led by persons with no official education who had themselves attended lectures in para-jamaats. In any case, the targets are young people, usually unemployed, right after high-school who had been involved with drug and alcohol use and petty crimes. These people attend the para-jamaats in order to try something new or just to find a way out from hardships.¹⁶⁵ The main topics discussed by the di'as in the para-jamaats are about religious worldview, doctrines and ethics as well as regulations and guidelines for everyday life. Salafi di'as criticize the secular nature of Bosnia Islam, Shia Islam and Sufism and Western values. Salafi discourse focuses more on one should not do in his everyday life than what one should do. In my opinion, what contributes the most to one's radicalization is the constant cultivation of an identity and a sense of solidarity and belonging which opposes the enemy of the true Muslim faith; the "Other" (the West, the immoral Bosnian Islam, Serbs and Croats) is purposely denigrated and dehumanized.¹⁶⁶

Researchers have identified three stages regarding the gradual radicalization and recruitment of individuals in the para-jamaats. The first stage (*human touch*) is the interaction between an individual and a person of authority usually a di'as or a cleric. The second stage (*peer-to-peer interaction*) is basically the socialization between like-minded persons who also attend the para-jamaats. The last stage is crucial when it comes to the recruitment of young persons. During this stage the goal is the alienation and even separation from the biological family and the inclusion into a new family based on Salafi ideology.¹⁶⁷

After examining interviews with individuals and focus groups conducted under the research project "*The Extremist Research Forum*", a series of patterns were identified that confirm some of the points that were analyzed above. Many members of the focus group (Salafists which accepted the IC's authority) dismissed ISIS, however all of them knew individuals that went to Syria and Iraq. The description was always the same; they were "*manipulated*" or "*misused*" or looking for a way out of a rough life. Ines Midžić (alias Salahuddin al-Bosni) who was killed in Syria was encouraging Bosniaks via propagandistic videos to either join the ISIL or to fight for the struggle in Bosnia using explosives or poison and kill imams of the mainstream interpretation of Islam.¹⁶⁸ Midžić was raised in extreme poverty by his

¹⁶⁴ Irene Baraldi, "Post-conflict education in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A challenge to peace", *Mediterranean Affairs*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.mediterraneanaffairs.com/education-bosnia-herzegovina/>.

¹⁶⁵ Sead Turcalo and Nejra Veljan, *Community Perspectives*, 2018.

¹⁶⁶ Edina Bećirević, *Salafism vs. Moderate*, 2016.

¹⁶⁷ Vlado Azinović, *The foreign fighter phenomenon*, (2017): 14-5.

¹⁶⁸ Meliha Kešmer, "SIPA ima informacije o pogibiji dva državljana BiH u Siriji?", *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-dzihadisti-sirija/29096569.html>

grandfather marginalized by the local community after been rejected by his father and abandoned by his mother. People close to him pointed out that after starting working for the Islamic NGO Solidarnost (no proof of connection with Salafists) editing videos. Prior to his arrival in Syria, his behavior gradually had changed; he became alienated by his social circle, started using religious vocabulary and spending time with a professor of religious studies.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, Samir Begić joined the al-Nusra Front despite the efforts of his family to prevent him from doing so.¹⁷⁰ Before leaving Bosnia, friends noticed that he changed his praying ritual in the mosque. Moreover, his girlfriend rejected him after asking her to wear hijab and change her “modern” name.¹⁷¹ Both family and friends spoke about a “sheik” that influenced Begić after attending his lecture. This person proved to be the notorious Salafist Bilal Bosnić who is imprisoned for recruiting young Bosniaks for the Islamic State.¹⁷² According to Begić himself, his new “brothers” saved him (he was selling drugs while working in a coffee shop) and gave him a purpose. His Facebook profile was full of posts related to Bilal Bosnić and his network that had close ties with Austian Salafists.¹⁷³

Some of the most prominent figures along with Bilal Bosnić were his predecessor Nusret Imamović who was based in Gornja Maoča and was advocating in favor of Sharia Law and the use of violence.¹⁷⁴ After joining the al-Nusra Front he was put on the UN Al-Qaida Sanctions List for recruiting Bosnians to fight for the Front.¹⁷⁵ Another one is Bosnian imam Muhamed Porča operating from the Tawhid mosque in Vienna. He has been receiving significant funds from the Middle-East to finance his operations and he had developed close ties with both Imamović and Bosnić.¹⁷⁶ The Tawhid mosque and Porča himself have been under constant pressure and monitoring by the Austrian authorities over the past couple of years especially after the latest attack in Vienna whose attacker proved to have regularly visited the mosque prior to the attacks.¹⁷⁷ The most radical case is Nedžad Balkan (alias Abu Mohammed), whose Bosnian citizenship has been revoked, based in Vienna originating from Sandžak. He leads the organization “*Word of the Truth*” with branches in both Bosnia and Sandžak region and actively preaches violence against non-believers and also other “immoral” Muslims. In 2019 he was persecuted by the Austrian authorities for hate speech,

¹⁶⁹ Edina Bećirević, *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 2018.

¹⁷⁰ “Samir Begić iz Tršca nova žrtva na ratištima Sirije”, *Bosna Press*, February 7, 2014, <https://bosnapress.net/samir-begic-iz-trsca-nova-zrtva-na-ratistima-sirije/>.

¹⁷¹ Edina Bećirević, *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 2018.

¹⁷² Igor Spaic, “Bosnia: Salafist Leader Gets Seven Years for Recruiting Boys to Islamic State”, *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, November 6, 2105, <https://www.occrp.org/en/blog/4579-bilal-bosnic-salafist-leader-gets-seven-years-for-recruiting-boys-to-islamic-state>.

¹⁷³ Edina Bećirević, *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 2018.

¹⁷⁴ Sead Turcalo and Nejra Veljan, *Community Perspectives*, 2018.

¹⁷⁵ United Nations Security Council, “Nusret Imamovic”, *ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions List* (2016) https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/nusret-imamovic.

¹⁷⁶ Sead Turcalo and Nejra Veljan, *Community Perspectives*, 2018.

¹⁷⁷ “Austria closes Vienna mosque after deadly attack”, *DW*, November 6, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/austria-closes-vienna-mosque-after-deadly-attack/a-55523158>.

terrorist association and membership in a criminal organization.¹⁷⁸ Balkan, despite denying the allegations, has been accused of being crucial to the radicalization of Mevlid Jašarević who attacked the US Embassy in Sarajevo in 2011 and previously had spent time in Vienna.¹⁷⁹

Generally, one of the most concerning aspects of Islamist radicalization in Bosnia are the transnational links (Austria, Sweden, Germany, Netherlands) of the domestic actors. As mentioned, Bosnian Salafists have close cooperation with a network of actors in Austria and Germany. They provide logistical support (expertise, resources and funds) for Salafists in Bosnia and other Balkan regions. The international network of Salafists is also engaged in developing a strong online presence by producing propagandistic material focusing on emotional topics such the Srebrenica massacre, the situation in Palestine and Syria emphasizing on children's suffering.¹⁸⁰ The Gulf States and mainly Saudi Arabia have been investing heavily since the war in Bosnia in the promotion of a more conservative Islamic doctrine. However, even if one does not suggest that Saudi Arabia promotes exclusively violent extremism, one should be cautious of the various NGOs and enterprises operating in Bosnia. Additionally, one cannot overlook the fact that young people facing unemployment and limited opportunities can easily be manipulated and becoming Salafists if this a requirement for the grant of a scholarship for studies in the Middle-East or a job opportunity.¹⁸¹

Discussion

After reviewing both manifestations of radicalization by using the basic principles of the theory that were analyzed previously, I will try to see how it applies in the cases that were examined. First of all, keeping in mind McCauley and Moskaleiko's position regarding the justification of intergroup violence and sacrifice in defense of the ingroup, it is clear that it applies to both the Islamist and ethno-nationalist actors that were examined. Šešelj was among the strongest advocates of the use of violence to defend Serbian interests and the implement the idea of Greater Serbia during the Yugoslav wars and even though he was not convicted, his ties with paramilitary units are common secret. Newly emerged SA is a violent militant movement or in its own words a "*national-revolutionary movement*". The vocabulary and terminology used by SA and of course its activities and members' actions prove the violent character of the movement in reaching its goal and serve its interests. Similarly, the radicalization process by Islamist actors in Bosnia, as mentioned, gradually transforms from a cognitive process to a violent one (acting upon the militant

¹⁷⁸ "Nedžad Balkan ponovo uhapšen u Beču, početak suđenja za terorizam čekat će iza rešetaka", *Klix.ba*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/svijet/nedzad-balkan-ponovo-uhapsen-u-becu-pocetak-sudjenja-za-terorizam-cekat-ce-iza-resetaka/190802048>.

¹⁷⁹ Johannes Saal and Felix Lippe, "The Network of the November 2020 Vienna Attacker and the Jihadi Threat to Austria", *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2021) <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-network-of-the-november-2020-vienna-attacker-and-the-jihadi-threat-to-austria/>

¹⁸⁰ Sonja Stojanović-Gajić, *Security Issues*, 2018.

¹⁸¹ Edina Bećirević, *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 2018.

Salafist/Jihadist/Takfirist ideology and becoming a foreign fighter and traveling to Syria and Iraq).

As for the different levels of radicalization (individual, group and mass) as described by McCauley and Moskaleiko, I would argue that only SRS managed to mobilize and radicalize on a mass level. In the 90s, SRS conducted a successful propaganda campaign aiming to dehumanize the enemies of Serbia, Muslims and Croats; the hate against the enemies mobilized the Serbian electorate. After the war, I believe that its electoral success was a direct result of capitalizing on the devastating impact of the NATO bombing campaign and Šešelj's struggle in the ICT (a martyr and a victim of anti-Serb powers). In the case of SA, I would suggest that that radicalization occurs mainly on a group level; the Serbian far-right extremist scene is full of competitive actors aiming at the same base of support while also competing with state power; adopting extreme positions and acting on them aims to attract new members or strengthen ingroup cohesion and identification. In the case of Islamist radicalization in Bosnia, individual radicalization is more common; Salafist networks target individuals with certain characteristics and lead them to a radicalization fueled by their personal struggles and social alienation.

At this point and based on the analysis of the previous chapters, my aim is to examine if there are any common characteristics between the process of Islamist radicalization in Bosnia and process of ethno-nationalist radicalization in Serbia and whether these two diametrically opposed, in theory, manifestations feed off each other. First of all, both manifestations initially gained momentum in the 90s which they retained to a certain degree in the post-war period. After decades of the enforced Yugoslav identity, national (in Serbia) and religious (in Bosnia) identities were used in order to create and provide the collective ethnic identity and mobilize the people. The newly emerged collective identities were exploited and became the fuel of the conflict especially in the 1992-1995 Bosnian war. Their parallel course continued after the wars whose legacy lies at the very core of both manifestations. Both discourses consider their respective group to be the loser and the victims of the conflict while also both blame to a large extent the West. On the one hand, Islamists accuse the US and the West that they did not intervene to prevent the atrocities that the Bosniak population suffered by the Bosnian Serbs highlighting the Srebrenica massacre. On the other hand, the Serbian nationalist discourse focuses mainly on the NATO bombing campaign which left the country in ruins as well as the crimes of the Croatian forces against the Serbian population Krajina in Croatia.¹⁸² It is interesting that both Islamists and nationalists share similar feelings towards the West and institutions such as the UN, the EU and NATO. Moreover, both discourses not only point out who the loser of the conflict was and who was to blame, but they also emphasize on who they consider as the immoral winner, thus creating this polarizing relation between their own people who are the victims, the West who did not help and the enemy who triumphed by committing atrocities which were tolerated by the external actors which did not intervene in time.

¹⁸² Nemanja Rujevic, "Anniversary of Operation Storm: The crimes others committed", *Deutsche Welle*, August 03, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/en/anniversary-of-operation-storm-the-crimes-others-committed/a-18624692>

Another common characteristic is the political, social and economic failure of the post-war period which initially was full of hope and high expectations. To this day neither Serbia nor Bosnia has managed to join the EU and NATO. The slow democratization process and flawed economic transition allowed the survival of radical actors who capitalized on the people's discontent.¹⁸³ The post-war politics in both Serbia and Bosnia are dominated by politicians who had ties with the previous regime and both countries are considered hybrid regimes with democratic as well as authoritarian elements.¹⁸⁴ The radicalization of the losers of transition in Serbia and Bosnia is a result of the inability to provide answers and solutions to grievances as well as everyday needs many of which are rooted in the past and the unresolved issues of the 90s that were mentioned above and reinforced by the socio-economic developments of present. The widespread poverty and unemployment, especially among the youth, along with political corruption and state capture by the ruling elites feed radicalization. Last but not least, the existence of ethnic minorities in both countries (Bosnian Serbs in Republika Srpska and Bosniaks in Serbian Sandžak) is another issue that equally fuels Islamist and ethno-nationalist actors. Real and perceived injustice, marginalization and discrimination create the ideal environment for the establishment of radicalism as an answer to these issues. Sometimes, the perception of a threat is all that is needed in order to destabilize an already strained situation.

In my opinion, another proof that these two manifestations of radicalization feed off each other, apart from their common characteristics that were described in the previous paragraphs, the concept of the "Other" is pivotal in both nationalist and Islamist discourse. Dehumanizing and demonizing the "Other" (hating Serbs, Christians – hating Bosniaks, Muslims) creates a sense of insecurity of the ingroup which along with the sense of victimhood that lies in the collective trauma and memory of the near past (NATO bombings for Serbs – the Srebrenica massacre and the Sarajevo siege for Bosniaks) leads to the mobilization and radicalization of one's supporters in order to answer to the threat. By reinforcing the idea of the internal (LGBT+, Roma) and external enemies based on the dehumanizing narratives that arise from the past, the "Other" is presented as an existential threat, thus allowing radicalized actors to achieve ingroup cohesion and legitimization of violence as a defense mechanism.¹⁸⁵ In both cases, the identity of the ingroup is interconnected with the identity of the outgroup. After defining the characteristics of the ingroup and its needs, the focus is shifted towards the enemy which becomes the target of aggression and hate. Overall, the system of beliefs of both Islamist and nationalist actors is based on the perceived incompatibility of the outgroup to adapt and accept what the ingroup demands, thus reinforcing the and superiority of the ingroup.

¹⁸³ Vedran Džihic, Gazela Pudar Draško, Sead Turčalo, Klodiana Beshku and Ivan Cerovac, "Overcoming the Democratisation Deficit in the Western Balkans: A Road to (No)Where?", *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Belgrade*, 2018.

¹⁸⁴ Faruk Hadžić, "The political psychology of extremism; "naturalness" of the phenomenon in the Western Balkans", *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, vol. 11 (2020): 250-267.

¹⁸⁵ Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism through Community Resilience in the Balkans and MENA Project, "Milestone No. 2: Glossary of Key Terms", *Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism through Community Resilience in the Balkans and MENA*, Berghof Foundation (2020).

Finally, based on the theory and the evidence arises from analyzing the case studies, the initial hypotheses have been confirmed. To begin with, the Islamist extremists in Bosnia and SRS and SA in Serbia are indeed in favor of using violence as a means to reach their goals and strategic aims and they have proved that they are ready to act upon their extreme ideologies. Even SRS which is the less radical of the two Serbian actors remains loyal to its extreme principles which stem from the ideology of the Chetniks. The rise and success of SRS took place in an authoritarian environment, so its participation in elections should not be considered an embrace of democratic pluralism. Its current political marginalization should not mislead us from the fact that in the 90s it was among the main political players with significant power and its leadership and members had close ties and/or joined paramilitary units which committed war crimes and ethnic cleansing. As for SA and the various Islamist extremists in Bosnia, one should always remember that they simply reject liberal democracy and its values. Their aim is the abolishment of the current political and socio-economic system and that can only happen with the use of force. Hence, further rise, consolidation and mainstreaming of such militant actors will undermine the fragile Serbian and Bosnian democracies and values such as human rights and will create further threats to the security and stability of these countries and the wider region.

Regarding the various different Islamic schools and denominations in Bosnia, it is important for reason and rationality to prevail; Bosnian Islam is not radical. On the contrary, it is rather secular compared to the Islamic practices of other regions. It respects liberal democracy and multiculturalism and does not encourage hatred of non-Muslims. However, there are indeed radical Islamist actors which operate in Bosnia with ties to Europe and the Middle-East that practice the most conservatives and/or militant interpretations of Islam, advocate in favor of violence and recruit personnel for terrorist organizations such as ISIL and the al-Nusra Front. Still, the idea of "Islamist safe heavens" in Bosnia and the view of the country as an "Islamist hotbed" do not correspond to the true situation which is more complicated. Radicalized actors need close monitoring and further counter-extremism initiatives must be created. Additionally, oversimplifications and the spread of panic and fear by actors which capitalize on the establishment of Islamophobic agendas must also be addressed by the authorities since misinformation and uncertainty fuels radicalization.

As for the common characteristics of Islamist and nationalist radicalization in the cases of Bosnia and Serbia, as we saw earlier, there are undoubtedly certain shared characteristics among the different actors despite being positioned on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. Events like the wars, the military and paramilitary operations and the crimes committed at the time as well as the current socio-economic and political conditions in Bosnia and Serbia fuel through different narratives the different manifestations of radicalization. Finally, as long as the "Other" is securitized and presented as an existential threat, then further mobilization and justification of the use of violence in order to answer to that threat will occur.

Conclusion

The issue of radicalization and its two manifestations, nationalist and Islamist radicalization, is one of the most urgent and complex issues that societies across the Europe and the world are called to face. The economic crisis, the refugee and migrant crisis and the on-going pandemic showed us that societies are not as resilient to radicalization as we thought based on the progress and development of the post-Cold War period. Focusing on the group of countries at the South-East border of the EU, the Western Balkans, the situation is even more complicated due to a series of concerns such as the slow democratization process, the economic stagnation and the problematic legacy of the 90s' wars and the unresolved issues that arise from it. In this rather small region, the division among neighbors which in this case are Serbia and Bosnia, in the basis of ethnicity and religion is extremely deep. Unfortunately, the common problems that hold the region back as a whole, the unique characteristics of the countries and the lack of resources and tools fuel the issue of radicalization and threaten Serbia and Bosnia and as a result the EU. Examining and understanding the issue of radicalization, the factors that fuel it, the actors and their ideology in the context of Serbia and Bosnia is vital in order to be better prepared to assist these countries in dealing with these actors on their way forward towards the European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Serbia was and still remains the country in which ethno-nationalism has the deepest roots from all the ex-Yugoslav countries dating back to the regime of Slobodan Milošević which created the right conditions for the rise of institutional actors such as the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) of Vojislav Šešelj which was the one of the two actors that were examined. SRS is a party that dominated the political arena and also developed close ties and co-operation with paramilitary units. Even though SRS is marginalized today, it still strives to return to the spotlight and, in my opinion, it should never be considered as an irrelevant actor as long as its charismatic leader remains actively engaged. It is important to understand the developments that led to its rise and establishment because many of the issues that contributed in the success of radicalized actors in the 90s still remain unanswered creating an unstable political environment in Serbia. Thus, by examining SRS which is the most successful nationalist party in Serbia and the wider region, one can more effectively understand ethno-nationalism in the Serbian context keeping in mind that the politicians that have been dominating the leadership of the country over the past 15 years come from SRS. The other actor that was examined in the Serbian context was militant extremist Serbia Action, a movement that belongs to the "new wave" of ethno-nationalist actors and even though it lacks the institutional status of SRS it was analyzed because it compiles all the characteristics of a modern extremist group with the unique aspects arising from the Serbian political and socio-economic context. Serbian nationalist actors must remain under close inspection despite the lack of electoral success (noting that not all of them participate in elections) and institutional marginalization; it is the normalization of their ideas, the alignment of their agendas with mainstream parties and the ambivalent stance of state institutions and authorities towards them that allow their establishment as legitimate actors of the political and social life. Additionally, their close ties with the Church and Russia as well a global network of like-minded actors must be investigated and regulated because it constitutes a major threat to the Serbian society.

Bosnia is probably the most ethnically and religiously diverse country in the region and the country that suffered the most during the Yugoslav wars. Bosnia was examined in regards to religious radicalization and more specifically Islamist radicalization. Ever since the arrival of Arab mujahedeen to assist their fellows Muslims during the war, ultraconservative and radical doctrines and interpretations of Islam have established their presence in the country. As a result, radical actors have emerged predominantly within the Bosniak community aiming to alter and deconstruct the Bosnian secular and liberal interpretation of Islam. The issue came back into the spotlight, especially after the terrorist attacks in Europe. The main concern was the Bosnia which was considered a hotbed for radicalization and an Islamist safe-heaven. As we saw, this is not the case. In general, the Bosniak population rejects these radical ideologies. However, the socio-economic conditions and the political stagnation along with the unanswered ethnic tensions create a fertile ground for radicalization. The European and domestic authorities must focus on addressing the issue which is, in my opinion, a product of the all the aforementioned issues. As long as the needs of the youth and marginalized groups are not answered, Salafists will capitalize on this. They will continue spreading their hateful doctrine aiming towards the most vulnerable and alienated members of the society. Finally, the transnational links of these actors must be taken into further consideration and be investigated because it is the diaspora and the European Salafist networks as well as countries such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States which provide the necessary logistical support and resources that allow the further establishment of radical Islamist actors in Bosnia and from there to the wider regions (Sandžak, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania).

To sum up, the issue of radicalization in the Western Balkans has not proved to be the immediate threat that the European authorities expected especially regarding Islamist radicalization given the rise of ISIL and associated groups. However, it is a complex issue that is fed by ethnic and religious divisions that are very much present in Bosnia and Serbia. The mix becomes way more flammable considering the dreadful state of the economies of these countries and the severe unresolved sociopolitical issues dating back to the 90s' conflicts. Keeping in mind that both manifestations feed off each other and that both have an extensive presence Bosnia and Serbia and the rest of the Western Balkans, I genuinely believe that the issue of radicalization must be handled with care and the necessary caution. The interconnection of local and international, marginal and mainstream actors with institutional and non-institutional status in addition to the series of problems that negatively impact the Western Balkans' societies must be taken into consideration.

The prosperity and progress of the Western Balkans that is undermined by actors across the spectrum of radicalization must be safeguarded through the cooperation of both domestic, regional, European and international actors. This is not an issue that affects only Serbia or only Bosnia. Negative developments in the region will have a spillover effect to the wider region, the EU and beyond. Actively assisting the weakest countries of Europe such as Bosnia and Serbia that lack the resources and tools to deal with radicalization on every level is nothing less than vital for the stability and security not only of the region, but Europe as a whole.

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