

ARTICLE

Lack of good governance contributes to growth of radical Islam in the Western Balkans

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The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia provided an opportunity to radical Islam to gain a foothold in the Western Balkans. Religious activists, mainly from Saudi Arabia, used the chaotic situation of the 1990s to increase their political and religious presence. Money flowed to the region to finance schools that propagate Wahhabism, a rigid anti-Western form of Islam. Radical Islam is thus not new to the region. More recently alarm bells started to ring after it became known that approximately one thousand fighters from the Western Balkans had joined the ranks of Islamic State (IS). Immediately questions were asked whether the region has a serious problem with radical Islam and whether this could be a threat to Europe.

So far no terrorist attacks have originated from the region but that so many young people – mainly from Bosnia and Kosovo – joined IS in Syria and Iraq is disturbing news (see Table 1). What explains this phenomenon? Is radical Islam on the rise in the region? Are these two countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo, and their governments able to cope with it? And what role is there for the West to play?

Table 1 . Country Estimates: Foreign Terrorist Fighters

Country	Foreign Fighters
Albania	150-200
Bosnia-Herzegovina	320
Kosovo	300
Macedonia	150
Montenegro	14
Serbia	70
France	500
Belgium	420-500
United Kingdom	700
Spain	120

Without ignoring cultural factors such as the growth of conservative Islam and the larger role of religion as defining identity, this article – apart from sketching the historical and political backgrounds – puts emphasis on certain internal factors that make it harder to tackle radical

Islam such as the lack of good governance and social exclusion. To better understand the lure of radical Islam the importance of historic events should not be overlooked. The solidarity of the Muslim world – in all its forms – during the wars of the last century and its continued commitment afterwards also have to be mentioned.

This article focusses on two, post-conflict countries with Muslim majorities that are potential candidates to become members of the EU, i.e. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH): the local background

In June 2015, an IS promotional video featuring five foreign terrorist fighters from the Western Balkans was posted on the internet. One of them calls on his “fellow Muslim brothers” to join IS and attack non-Muslims: “For those of you that can’t come here, fight over there [...] If you can, take poison and put it in their drinks and their food. Let them die. Kill them in every place, whenever you can.”

Stories like this as well as stories of local young men joining IS have set the tone with regard to radical Islam. They have been used by local media and politicians representing the other ethnic entities to spread fears about an explosive growth of radical Islam. The president of Republika Srpska (RS) – the Serb-dominated entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina – Milorad Dodik argued that Muslim politicians provide the logistics for terrorists while Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović warned that thousands of foreign terrorist fighters are returning and will destabilize the region. This antagonistic attitude, that puts the interethnic relations under pressure, has a historical background which still plays a role also in Kosovo and Macedonia (with its large Muslim minority).

During Tito’s Yugoslavia the 1974 Constitution granted more rights to the Muslims than some of the neighbouring countries. Their community was recognized as a constituent nation and its members free to travel and enjoy religious education abroad. This – combined with the strict secularization introduced by Tito – helped create a liberal form of Islam. At the same time the open borders allowed for contacts with international Muslim networks which helped initiate a political Islamic movement in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Alija Izetbegović, who wrote his “Islamic Declaration” in 1970 propagating a Pakistan-style model of Islam, laid the basis for this movement that would become a leading Islamic party.

There was a fierce reaction by the authorities at the time, who used strong arm tactics to stop the growth of his movement. In 1983, Izetbegović was convicted of acting against the state. As the nationalist disintegration of Yugoslavia unfolded, his Declaration was republished and Izetbegović established the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), which is still the major party in the country, now led by his son Bakir. Alija Izetbegović became the first president of an independent BiH and wartime leader.



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The Stari Most bridge in Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) was destroyed during the 1992-1995 armed conflict, and later rebuilt.

But also via another route the influence of Islam grew. During the 1992-1995 armed conflict thousands^[1] of Mujahedeen travelled to the country to combat alongside the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most of them were religious fanatics, competing with each other to increase their influence during and after the war, when many of them stayed. Due to its financial backer Saudi Arabia and support from elsewhere in the Middle East in particular Wahhabism – a rigid puritan strand of Islam that promotes religious intolerance – was able to gain a foothold in BiH thereby creating a religious basis for radicalization. Charitable organizations, schools and training camps were set up.

According to Bosnia-Herzegovina's intelligence sources there were and are around 3,000 followers of Wahhabism that pose a potential risk. Most of them belong to the lower social classes, living under *Sharia* law in isolated small villages. Their children are educated in Arabic. In 2010, the police raided Gornja Maoca arresting the leader of the Wahhabi movement in the country and seizing weapons, explosives and money.

There are several factors, apart from clear religious motives, that explain why this Salafi version of Islam and its radicalized followers – that is actually very unpopular with the vast majority of Muslims in Bosnia and the official Islamic institutions – were still able to gain some ground and why links to terrorist networks were established. The war itself, in which Muslims suffered disproportionately, access to weapons (there are approximately 750,000 illegally held weapons), the logistical support of organized crime networks, the bad socio-economic situation and the crisis of more liberal values have been and are important explanations. Lack of good governance to cope with the phenomenon is another very significant one.

Political context of present day Bosnia

The Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) signed in 1995 to end the war, framed the constitution of the country. Since all three entities – Serb, Croat and Bosnian – had to be allowed a proper place, the political system is complex and inefficient. The country is formally composed of two political entities, Republika Srpska and the Bosniak-Croat Federation. It is a highly decentralised state with a mixture of a parliamentary and a presidential political system. Each political unit has its own governing body, with an accumulation of 700 elected state officials and more than 140 ministers. The state system claims approximately 60 percent of the national budget.

The international community remains important: The EU High Representative, Austrian diplomat Valentin Inzko, is working with the national institutions, reports to the EU and the UN on the situation in the country and is the highest authority within BiH. To make things even more complicated, there are overlapping law enforcement jurisdictions; furthermore, rivalries between political, police, security and judicial institutions make it difficult to act effectively.

The DPA promoted the organisation of political life and society along ethnic lines. And while the solutions for the country's many challenges have to be found in the political domain, the politicians have not been able to formulate them. The political elites have an interest in maintaining the *status quo*: emphasizing their ethnic profiles and nationalist agendas they keep winning elections, thus remain in power and control the (public) resources. Change has to come from the bottom-up (citizens and civil society) and top-down (the international community).



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“The armed conflicts from the 1990s still influence daily life in the Western Balkans.” Picture taken in Bosnia.

BiH and Kosovo are still *de facto* protectorates of the international community. They are lagging behind in the EU accession process due to a lack of reform-mindedness. As a consequence, the EU's strategy for BiH changed from reform-related conditionality to tackling the socio-economic challenges it faces.

Republika Srpska leader Dodik is supporting the Croats in their demand for a separate Croatian entity, while the ruling Bosniak party, SDA, sees this as a proof that Croats and Serbs want to divide BiH, something they say will not, and cannot, happen in a peaceful way. The hostile discourse of the ethnic leaderships and their obsession with the ethnic balance is – like the weakness of the rule of law – one of the factors limiting the capacity of the state to confront radical Islam.

The EU's strategy for Bosnia-Herzegovina changed from reform-related conditionality to tackling the socio-economic challenges it faces

“We have lived in a radicalized political context for more than two decades already. This is radicalism we have all gotten used to. We could say that the political crisis young people witness daily may also be a contributing factor towards the Salafist narrative and other religious and nationalistic extreme views that are becoming attractive,” writes Edina Bečirević from the Faculty of Criminal Justice, Criminology and Security Studies at the University of Sarajevo.^[2] In addition, the “overlapping law enforcement jurisdictions” as well as “personal, political and institutional rivalries” contribute to a lack of central control which adds to the already mentioned lack of capacity to properly address Islamist threats.

This is a core problem. And to make matters even worse, detaching organised crime networks, that provide logistical support to radical Islam networks, from state structures – the two strongly intertwined during the conflict – has proven to be difficult.

Kosovo: status issues cover for lack of reforms

One of the most pro-American Muslim countries in the world, i.e. Kosovo, has the highest number of foreign terrorist fighters per capita. Its government has recently arrested 14 imams and shut down 19 organizations for “inciting hatred and recruiting for terrorism”. As it did with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Saudi Arabia gave financial support during and after the war with Serbia to religious organizations and radical imams in Kosovo who promote political Islam “through different programs mainly with young, vulnerable people, and they brought in a lot of Wahhabi and Salafi literature”^[3]

With a lack of economic prospects, enduring high unemployment, low educational standards and nepotism everywhere, many young Kosovars choose to leave the country. Despite Kosovo's government ‘Brain Gain Fund’, meant to help stop emigration, in 2015 alone over 37,000 Kosovo citizens requested asylum in Germany and 10,000 in Hungary (out of a total of 1.8 million inhabitants).

While most of those leaving the country are heading towards the West, around 200 Kosovars obtained scholarships to study Islam in Saudi Arabia to become Wahhabist preachers back home. With some success they penetrated the Muslim community of Kosovo that – comparable to Bosnia – has its roots in a liberal form of Islam. Their influence increased with

the war in Syria and they were suspected of encouraging young people to join IS. When it became known that two Kosovo citizens committed suicide attacks in Turkey and Iraq, the state took suppressive measures which stimulated a number of them to hide in small, poor and rural communities. Although Kosovo has been confronted with the same issues as Bosnia – the historical context, identity issues and governance problems – it is more centralized which should make it easier in theory to deal with the issue of the foreign fighters.

Political context

Hopes were high that the international community would do a better job in Kosovo after the war of 1999 than it did in BiH, and support Kosovo in establishing a modern constitution that would transform the country into a multi-ethnic state protecting fundamental rights and respecting the rule of law. However, today Kosovo is still ethnically divided, corrupt, with a weak economy and a political environment that is partly still dependent upon Washington and Brussels. The political agenda is dominated by statehood issues, relations with Serbia and – given the ethnic link – Albania.

The international partners more or less share these preoccupation. After the 2014 parliamentary elections the opposition agreed to form a coalition and end the long-running rule of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK). However, for the sake of stability, and after Western interference, a coalition with the PDK was eventually formed that would continue the political dialogue with Belgrade. This outside meddling undermines the accountability of elected local leaders. Most parties operate in a very pragmatic way doing whatever is needed to hold on to power and protect the resources of their interest groups. The pattern was repeated in 2017 when partners from the West put pressure on some parties after the elections to form a government friendly to Belgrade.

Kosovo is still ethnically divided, corrupt, with a weak economy and a political environment that is partly still dependent on Washington and Brussels

The EU presence in Kosovo is most visible through the European Union rule of law mission (EULEX); with its police and judicial personnel of around 3,200, EULEX is the largest mission deployed by the EU. It focuses on providing support to the rule of law institutions and has executive competences until the transition of these powers to local authorities is completed. EULEX has been criticised for not having laid the proper foundations of a system capable of maintaining the proper rule of law, tackling corruption and organised crime.

The EU has put pressure on Kosovo and Serbia to start a dialogue and cooperation in a number of areas. One of the motives was to allow Kosovo to further develop its institutional capacity covering the whole of its territory. It turns out to be a slow process with a lot of political obstacles. Although the agreement has been ratified by the Kosovo parliament, opposition representatives argue that this EU brokered deal will actually lead to the creation of a new Republika Srpska, a Serb-dominated entity in the North that threatens the sovereignty of the Republic of Kosovo.



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The Mustafa Pasha Mosque in Macedonia. “Religion has come to play a more visible role in the daily life in the Muslim areas, this can however not be labelled as a complete Islamisation of these societies.”

For years now politics and the public debate have been dominated by statehood issues to the detriment of much needed action in other areas such as the economy, the rule of law and dealing with radicalisation. Laws have been adopted – for example penalising (recruitment of) foreign fighters – and implemented, but there are no clear policies to address the causes of radicalisation. Similar to BiH, the strategy and tactics in the fight against radicalisation and terrorism in Kosovo are guided by the international community. This fight therefore lacks local ownership and a serious commitment from the corrupted local political elite.

Conclusions

Radicalization is an issue in the Western Balkans, but one should not forget that large parts of the region are either catholic or orthodox. Although religion has come to play a more visible role in the daily life in the Muslim areas, this cannot be labelled as a complete Islamisation of these societies. There have been no IS attacks in the region nor have attacks elsewhere in Europe originated from the region.

On the other hand one should not ignore potential risks. Much has yet to be achieved in tackling the causes of radicalisation. The complicated and still not finished transformation of these former communist countries has led to a lot of socio-economic inequality which divides their societies. The lack of proper functioning public institutions allows for the persistence of a corrupt political system which is seen as symptomatic for a society that only delivers for the elite (and its children).

This, combined with the social exclusion of many young people who find themselves cut off from economic opportunities, leads to situations in which many of them turn away from politics and try to emigrate, while some of them go searching for self-respect, purpose and belonging in isolated Islamized communities, such as we can find in, for example, some cities in France. Given the ghettoization of urban areas it is not too difficult to create zones closed to outsiders that can harbour terrorists. It is evident that improving the governance of these countries will be an important step in the right direction which deserves to get priority. But much more must be done – for example regarding socio-economic development – to root out radicalisation completely.

The EU's strategy towards the Western Balkans is stability first, democracy and fundamental rights second. The Union tends to turn a blind eye to autocratic leaders, who pose a threat to democracy, as long as they deliver on stability and regional cooperation. The EU often seems unwilling to put pressure on the local elites to pursue effective reforms aimed at improving governance and fighting corruption. In combination with inequality and high (youth) unemployment, this creates frustrations amongst large parts of the population in these two countries which partly explains (there are, as mentioned above, other factors like religion and identity) the growth of nationalism and radical Islam. The EU has not only taken a backseat in this regard, but has also indicated it will not accept new members from the Western Balkans in the foreseeable future, thereby offering an alibi to local politicians to do as they like.

It is obvious the EU could have a bigger impact. It could do more to help create an environment in which radical Islam would have less appeal than is the case at present. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are not the only countries that have to cope with this phenomenon. Some of the EU member states have a lot of experience in dealing with radical imams coming from abroad, in dealing with returned foreign fighters and in involving the broader Muslim community in tackling radicalism. These countries should work together with the Western Balkan countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Brussels should offer its support to improve community policing in order to increase control of the territory and provide better information on what is happening locally. To better counter radicalisation and defend liberal Islam, grass roots awareness initiatives aimed at young people involving civil society and academia should be set up in order to fight social exclusion, marginalisation and to help young people in developing critical thinking. Improving the communication and cooperation between the security services in the Western Balkans is of course another obvious step to take.

Finally, changing politics is a prime objective. With their winners-take-all mentality and their often very nationalist discourse political leaders contribute to polarization in politics and society instead of developing policies that promote inclusive multi-layered identities. All efforts to create a more inclusive society which would stimulate especially young people to engage instead of leaving or seeking isolation in radical Islam, will be in vain if parties and politicians only pursue their own narrow interests.

Noten

[1] The International Crisis Group (ICG) reports that over 12,000 Bosnia-Herzegovina passports were given to foreign fighters after the war ended in 1995.

[2] I. Spaić, 'Experts Tackle Religious Radicalization of Young Bosnians' (<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/experts-tackle-religious-radicalization->

of-young-bosnians-03-30-2017)', analysis and interviews in Balkaninsight, March 2017.

[3] F. Makolli, Director of Kosovo's counterterrorism police, in an article in the *New York Times*, C. Gall, May 2016.

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