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## **Extreme Moderates: Understanding Low Levels of Violent Extremism in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

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**Abstract:** How can low levels of violent extremism in enabling environments be explained? The post-war history of Bosnia-Herzegovina has been marked by prolonged political crises, economic instability, and precarious security for citizens. The combination of a relatively young, unstable democracy and social grievances creates fertile soil for different forms of radicalization and the proliferation of various extremist ideologies. This has, in turn, allowed extra-institutional groups to challenge formal institutions. Despite this, there have been few violent extremist attacks, and those that have been carried out were small-scale and failed to expose any deep reservoir of violent extremism. What, then, does this deviant case reveal? Utilizing social movement theory and political opportunity structures, this article explores how structural conditions in the political and discursive space of Bosnia-Herzegovina affect the protest repertoires of extremist movements. Two main arguments are put forward. First, extra-institutional groups must be understood as rational actors with broader claims that exceed the use of violence. Second, distinguishing between radicalization that links to violent extremism and radicalization that aims to initiate societal change through non-violent means can help us better understand the dynamics behind societal change in fragile environments.

**Keywords:** violent extremism, social movements, political opportunities, discursive support, enabling environment

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

How are low levels of violent extremism in enabling environments to be explained? Though considerable attention has been paid to why political violence escalates, the same cannot be said for cases of non- or limited escalation (e.g., Bjørgo and Gjelsvik 2017; Cragin 2014;

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Simi and Windisch 2020). Both social movement organizations and militant groups rarely resort to violence initially, and few carry out as much violence as they appear capable of (see Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012; Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Chermak, Freilich, and Suttmoeller 2013; LaFree, Morris, and Dugan 2010). When approaching the varying impact of ideological extremism, it is therefore necessary to make a distinction between contexts where extremism morphs into violence and contexts where it does not (Mishkova et al. 2021, 5). The point at which violence occurs is when, to use Futrell, Simi and Tan's (2018) term, 'the right context' emerges – that is, when political opportunities arise, threats appear imminent, groups feel disenfranchised, and frustrations set in.

Some environments are more prone to violence than others. These *enabling environments* are contexts in which a combination of various renders the emergence of violent extremism more likely (Mishkova et al. 2021, 5). The former Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter referred to as BiH or Bosnia) is one such case. Following the fall of communism, a wave of democratization processes swept across the world, culminating in dramatic changes in Central and Eastern Europe. One result of this was an upsurge in the 1990s of what Sidney G. Tarrow termed 'ugly' movements (Tarrow 2011, 14). Rooted in ethnic and nationalist claims, religious fanaticism, and racism, they were partly responsible for the eventual break-up of Yugoslavia. The legacy of these movements endured beyond the end of the war in BiH in 1995 and today manifests in a variety of ideologies based on ethnic nationalism, secessionism, and religious extremism. Though experts disagree on the largest threat currently facing BiH, they concur that ideological extremism of various strains is on the rise (see, e.g., Azinović 2018; Bećirević 2018). Violent extremism in the country is typically viewed through two distinct, yet in some instances intertwined, lenses: as religiously driven, predominantly associated with Islamist extremism, which came to a head following the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and as ethnonationalist-motivated extremism, which reached its peak during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s (Mishkova et al. 2021, 5). While the former is considered to be imported, the latter originates from the region itself.

The post-war history of BiH has been marked by prolonged political crises, economic instability, and precarious security for citizens. The combination of a young, unstable democracy, state dysfunctionality and social grievances creates fertile soil for different forms of radicalization and the proliferation of various extremist ideologies. Given the context, one would therefore expect there to be more violent incidents than has been the case. However, despite this decade-long deteriorating situation, there have been few attacks in the country traceable back to violent extremism, and those that have been carried out were small and yielded no wider plots (Bassuener et al. 2021, 74).

What, then, can explain the low levels of violent extremism in BiH? This study applies social movement theory to answer this question, exploring the structural conditions that may explain low levels of violent extremism in a context that appears to enable it.

Adding a case of non-occurrence to the field can contribute to our understanding of the conditions that protect certain areas from outbreaks of violence – and, in turn, what fosters resilience against such violence flaring (Malkki 2020). With this in mind, this paper provides a thorough assessment of the political opportunities available to Bosnia’s extremist movements, on the assumption that the presence or absence of such opportunities may either facilitate or block paths to violence. While recognizing that individual-level factors are important for understanding why extremism turns violent (Džuverovic 2013), the focus of this paper is on examining the phenomenon from a macro-level perspective.

Social movements are ‘networks of individuals and organizations with common identities and conflictual aims that use unconventional means’ (della Porta 2013, 16). Such movements – which need not be clearly demarcated organizations – involve meeting collective challenges based on common purposes and social solidarities, through sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities (Tarrow 2011, 163). This collective action becomes contentious when deployed by those who lack regular access to representative institutions or stable resources controlled by others (Tarrow 2011, 10). Unconventional means refers to tactics that are unorthodox, at times dramatic, and exist in the grey zone in terms of legitimacy (della Porta 2013, 16).

Social movements on the far-left have traditionally been addressed through mobilization theories, while far-right groups have been studied through ‘breakdown’ or political theories (Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012, 7). Whereas mobilization theory stresses that the emergence of collective action should be addressed by looking at the conditions that enable discontent to be transformed into mobilization – social movements as rational actors –, breakdown theory views violent action as arising from social control mechanisms losing their restraining power, often due to chronic unemployment, family instability and/or disruptive migration (Useem 1998). Accordingly, breakdown theory has for long identified unconventional forms of collective action as crisis behavior (Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012). Not only has this led to far-left and far-right movements being studied through different theoretical and analytical lenses; it has also resulted in a limited understanding of social movements – on both ends of the political spectrum – as rational, purposeful, and organized actors (Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012, 10).

Moreover, existing studies on political violence across a wide range of political ideologies has predominantly focused on Western societies and has been limited to either comparisons of supporters of left- and right-wing causes, or to addressing Islamist extremism only (Jasko et al. 2022). However, previous theorizing suggests that there might be greater parallels in the propensity for violence between Islamist extremists and right-wing extremists than with their left-wing counterparts, as the two appear to share key traits such as fundamentalism, closed-mindedness, authoritarianism, and dogmatism (Jasko et al. 2022). This paper aims to fill this void by addressing low levels of violence among right-wing and Islamist extremists in BiH through a comparative analysis of two movements.

The paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review and theoretical framework based on social movement theory and political opportunities is presented. A short chapter describing the research design and case selection follows, before the paper's findings are presented in the analysis chapter. Finally, the paper concludes with discussing the research question, asking how low levels of violent extremism in enabling environments ought to be explained, and which lessons can be drawn from this study to the wider universe of extremist movements in enabling environments.

## Violent Extremism – And Its Absence

Violent extremism has been considered a threat to national and transnational security for decades, but first after 9/11 did it become a high priority, evident through the Bush Administration's global 'war on terror' (Snow 2011, 342). As a result, violent extremism has more than often been considered in close relation to terrorism and has mostly been studied through the lens of terrorism- and war-studies, resulting in a highly politicized *extremism* term. However, radicalization does not necessarily lead to violence, so it is necessary to distinguish between radicalization that directly links to violent extremism and radicalization that aims to initiate societal changes through non-violent means (Bećirević 2016, 35).

The main distinction between radicalization and extremism presented in this paper is the difference between *process and adherence*. Radicalization often refers to the process of undergoing a transformation in beliefs, opinions, and values, adopting more extreme viewpoints that often deviate from mainstream or commonly accepted norms. Extremism, on the other hand, is commonly defined as adhering to extreme beliefs or advocating for ideas far outside mainstream or conventional views, and may be associated with any group or ideology that is not aligned with state norms, rejects pluralist governance, opposes the existing social order, and condones some form of violence in pursuit of its cause (Futrell, Simi, and Tan 2018, 619). Radicalization can lead to extremism, and extremism may be a result of radicalization, but they are, and should be treated as, distinct concepts.

Studies on violent extremism have traditionally been concerned with the emergence and escalation from radicalization to violent extremism. However, not all radical individuals will turn violent, and not all violent extremists are radical. Alex Schmid (2014) draws a cognitive distinction between radicals and extremists, assuming that whereas radicals tend to be more open-minded, extremists are often considered to have a closed mind and distinct willingness to resort to violence. For the purpose of this paper, the extremist term is applied to explain the cases studies.

Whereas social movements on the left have traditionally been analyzed through mobilization theory, movements on the extreme right have been studied through so-called 'break-down' or political theories (Caiani et al. 2012, 7). Moreover, social movement studies have traditionally focused on left-wing movements (Tarrow 2011, 7), while the countering vio-

lent extremism-agenda (known as CVE) has focused largely on fundamental Islamists. If the objective is to elucidate extremism along the entire the political continuum, it is necessary to connect the existing literatures in order to address this theoretical gap. Studying violent extremism from a social movement theoretical perspective in which extremists are considered part of a movement of rational actors, is helpful in order to understand violent extremism – and its absence – across the political continuum.<sup>2</sup> Previously missing aspects in research on extreme far-right movements have recently become central in social movement studies, such as the stressing of political opportunities rather than social threats, frames rather than ideology, repertoire rather than violence, and networks rather than individual pathologies (Caiani et al. 2012). It is to this project the paper aims to contribute.

Violence is an outcome of the interactions between a social movement and its opponents, in which the political system and interactions between political and social opponents are factors expected to have an impact on the levels of violence (della Porta et al. 2018, 10). According to research, social movement organizations rarely resort to violence initially – they rather gradually adopt violent tactics through sustained interaction with their opponents (Caiani et al 2012). This is also true for extremist organizations specifically. Busher, Holbrook, and Macklin (2019) found that relatively few groups consistently undertake lethal violence, and few, if any, carry out as much violence as they appear capable of. It is therefore surprising, they argue, that while there has been considerable attention as to why political violence escalates and de-escalates (e.g., Alimi, Demetriou, and Bosi 2015; Borum 2011; McCauley and Moskalenko 2017), far less attention has been given to processes of non- or limited escalation. Leena Malkki (2020) addressed the conceptual and methodological issues in research on low levels of political extremism, pointing particularly to the low number of qualitative studies on why violent extremism does not occur.<sup>3</sup> Devoting attention to such cases, she argues, may help us understand the dynamics and mechanisms that are relevant for the emergence of political violence on one hand, while improving our understanding of the conditions that may protect certain areas from outbreaks of violence on the other.

Thus, resilience has become less about whether an individual possesses a certain trait, and more about the role of institutions in creating the environment in which individuals and communities can utilize their resources and strengths (Stephens et al. 2019, 11). Should these institutions fail to create a safe environment, there is an increased risk of violent extremism taking root.

What is a negative case of violent extremism, then? While an absence of extremist violence can be defined in absolute terms, it is often understood in relative terms, such as

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2 Donatella della Porta (1995) was the first to do so through her study on Italian and German militants.

3 A call for more attention to cases with negative outcomes has been made elsewhere, see, e.g., della Porta 2013; Chenoweth et al. 2019.

countries or regions that have witnessed relatively little violent extremism (Malkki 2020, 31). The absence of violence also has a temporal aspect, being understood as a relative absence of violence within a specific period of time.

The post-war history of BiH has been characterized by instances of political turmoil, economic unpredictability, societal grievances, and a tenuous sense of security for its citizens. The combination of an unstable democracy, extended periods of economic and political distress, and a dysfunctional state together creates a conducive environment for the spread of various extremist ideologies. Despite this prolonged decline in conditions, the country has experienced a limited number of attacks linked to violent extremism. Moreover, these attacks, though carried out, were of minor scale and yielded no wider plots (Bassuener et al. 2021, 74).

Previous research on violent extremism in BiH has primarily been concentrated on the danger posed by radicalized foreign fighters. Conversely, the influence of far-right extremist ideology, despite its significant role during the 1990s, has often been overlooked in scholarly literature. Conversely, while traditional social movements have gained more scholarly attention in recent years,<sup>4</sup> far-right extremists are still largely regarded as purely violent actors in the public discourse. A thorough understanding of extremism requires more nuanced analyses to explain how different movements respond to different constraints and opportunities (Futrell, Simi, and Tan 2018, 618). Given that the Ministry of Security in BiH (2016) regards “terrorism in all its manifestations, including any forms of extremism that aim to jeopardize the territorial integrity” as primary tests of domestic security, it is all the more important to acquire an increased understanding of the rationales underpinning various forms of extremist movements.

Hate crime and politically motivated violence pose a recurrent concern in BiH, yet it tends to manifest predominantly as isolated incidents.<sup>5</sup> This paper delves into structural conditions and networks within the Bosnian state and political system to explain low levels of violent extremism by analyzing two distinct extremist movements – usually studied separately – through the same analytical framework. Both the Salafi movement and the Chetnik movement have ethnic, religious, political, and nationalist elements, creating a strong foundation for a comparative analysis.

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4 Chiara Milan (2019) recently published the first comprehensive book on social movements in BiH, covering social movements in the traditional sense.

5 Based on incident data reported in the OSCE Mission to Bosnia-Herzegovina’s Hate Monitor (2021), a monthly visualization of the Mission’s hate crimes monitoring data. It presents the latest data on all known bias-motivated incidents and responses to these incidents by the justice sector, local authorities, and civil society throughout BiH.

## **Extremist Movements' Political Opportunities: When Contentious and Institutional Politics Intersect**

While grievances are presumed by many as a prerequisite for extremist mobilization (see, e.g., Bélanger et al. 2019; Ravndal 2018; Bara 2014), the political opportunities framework help us understand why movements mobilize differently across time and space (Koopmans 1996). Sidney G. Tarrow defines political opportunities as 'consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of politics that encourage people to engage in contentious politics' (1998, 20–21). The political opportunity structure holds both formal, institutional elements and informal, cultural aspects (Kriesi 1989, 295). In situations where the formal political system is vulnerable to challenges, opportunities are opened for extra-institutional groups, who will either try to confront the state or work within it (Kitschelt 1986, 58).

Political opportunities are primarily structured around the organization of the state; cohesion and alignment among political elites; and the structure, ideology, and composition of political parties (Jenkins and Klandermans 1995, 4). In this paper, three factors are applied when analyzing political opportunities in BiH: political access, political allies, and popular discursive support (see Table 1).

### *Political Access*

Political access – operationalized as the relative openness of the formal political system to challengers – depends on the relative strength of the regime and the state's control over extra-institutional challengers. Moreover, political access is bound up with whether political alignments are stable or shifting, which in democratic systems is usually measured in terms of electoral instability (Tarrow 2011, 165). Shifting alignments, especially in cases of new coalitions, encourage challengers to exercise marginal power and may even induce elites to compete for support from outside the polity (Tarrow 2011, 165). In line with Eisinger (1973) this paper argues that violence is more likely to occur in systems characterized by a mix of open and closed political access (Eisinger 1973). In closed systems, contention is restrained by fear of repression, while in fully open systems protesters turn to more institutionalized channels. In sum, political access is measured through Bosnia's electoral laws and how politically established the country's extremist movements are.

### *Political Allies*

Extra-institutional challengers feel encouraged to act when they have allies who can support them as guarantors against repression or as acceptable negotiators on their behalf (Tarrow 2011, 165). In terms of extreme-right groups, such allies may include strong far-right parties which appear to have a moderating effect on the groups' repertoire of action. This is often referred to as the pressure cooker theory: when radical right parties obtain political influence, they may act as a 'safety valve' for dissatisfied radical right activists who



would otherwise turn violent (Ravndal 2018, 783). In terms of radical Islamist groups, closer links between radical leftists and Islamists have emerged globally over the past decade. Despite a long history of conflict, the two sides have joined together in the wider struggle against globalized capitalism and Western imperialism, a situation made possible by master frames legitimizing protest activity and encouraging solidarity (Karagiannis and McCauley 2013). More generally, however, protesters alone seldom have the power to affect the policy priorities of elites, both because their acts of protests are often limited to an informal, expressive form and because elites are unlikely to initiate policy change that is not in their interests (Tarrow 2011, 168). Thus, political allies are defined as direct linkages to, or ideological support from, political figures or parties.

### *Discursive Support*

Dominant public discourses will likely affect extremist movements' chances of success, and discursive opportunities represent the capacity of a movement's themes to resonate with cultural values (Koopmans and Statham 1999; Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012). Ruud Koopmans identifies three mechanisms that conform to discursive opportunities. These depend on: 1) visibility, without which the chances of a message being diffused and influencing public discourse are low; 2) resonance, which is 'the degree to which a message provokes reactions from other actors in the public sphere', whether positive (consonance) or negative (dissonance); and 3) legitimacy, which is 'the degree to which ... reactions by third actors in the public sphere support or reject an actor or her claims' (Koopmans 2004, 373–375). A social movement is more likely to succeed if it articulates its cause in terms that appear legitimate and meaningful to those outside the movement – that is, when the frame resonates with the key beliefs, values and ideas held by a wider group or society (Benford and Snow 2000, 621). The capacity of a movement will determine the extent to which its members are perceived as legitimate political actors within society's dominant values (della Porta and Diani 2006; Koopmans and Olzak 2004). Public support or alliances are essential in justifying a movement's activities within a broader societal system, regardless of how deviant they are from accepted norms (Caiani and della Porta 2018, 338).

A full overview of the theoretical framework is listed in Table 1.

Theoretical factor	Mechanism
Political access	relative strength of regime; electoral law; political alignments
Political allies	movement–party linkages; ideological support from political figures or parties
Discursive support	visibility; cultural resonance; legitimacy

**Table 1:** *Political opportunities for extra-institutional movements*



## Research Design

The aim of this study is to compare two extremist movements in BiH utilizing the political opportunities framework. The comparative case study design was chosen due to its strong internal validity and to provide a comprehensive understanding of the country's extremist landscape.

The analysis covers 2014–2021, a period during which a number of factors believed to have an impact the levels of violent extremist mobilization came into play, including a large number of foreign fighter travelers to Syria and Iraq, legislative changes as a result of this, the 2014 general elections which was characterized by divisive campaigns and a polarized political environment (Keil and Perry 2017), as well as the 2014 anti-government protests.<sup>6</sup> To fully understand the current levels of violent extremism in BiH, however, a longitudinal understanding of the phenomenon is necessary, implying both a diachronic and synchronic dimension to the study (Ritter 2014). Based on the previously outlined definition of social movements, two extremist movements were chosen as units of analysis: the Salafi movement and the Chetnik movement. Both are, in essence, loosely structured networks bound by overlapping collective challenges which rely on unconventional means to achieve their objectives.

The first Salafi proselytes arrived in BiH during the 1992–1995 war, when foreign mujahideen came to fight alongside Bosnian Muslims. While most Salafis in the country are not considered violent, a new generation of Islamist radicals have emerged in BiH who – in contrast to earlier movements that evolved out of ‘war solidarity’ among Islamists who fought in the 1992–1995 war – are more reluctant to accept the Bosnian state and its laws, while holding conservative views on issues related to family, gender equality and the right to education (Babić 2014; Bećirević 2016). Between 2012 and 2015, 188 men, 61 women and 81 children are believed to have travelled to Syria and Iraq and are thought to have been recruited from these fringes (Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić, and Turčalo 2020, 4). As of 2021, 41 identified associations and organizations were believed to actively promote the movement (Kuloglija and Mujkić 2019).

The Chetnik movement was established during World War II to resist the Axis invaders, but primarily fought a civil war against Yugoslav communist guerrillas – the Partisans – and was therefore condemned in public discourse at the time (Veljan and Čehajić 2021, 22). When, during the 1992–1995 war, the movement's ideology was no longer suppressed by communism and ethnonationalists came to power, the movement underwent a transformation in public perception. It evolved from a Yugoslav royalist movement to a nationalist guerrilla movement, with the primary objective of uniting Yugoslav Serbs

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<sup>6</sup> The 2014 unrest in BiH was a series of demonstrations and riots that began in the northern town of Tuzla but quickly spread to multiple cities across the country. The protests marked the largest outbreak of public anger over high unemployment rates and political inertia in the country since the end of the 1992–1995 war.

across Serbia and BiH (Turčalo and Karčić 2021, 14). The movement's Bosnian wing is led by an organization registered as 'the Ravna Gora Movement of the Serbian Homeland', consisting of mainly Bosnian Serb organizations and groups in Republika Srpska (RS), whose goal is to form a larger movement with similar groups in neighboring Serbia (Bećirević 2016, 12). As of 2021, there were 16 associations in BiH whose names include the terms 'Ravna Gora' or 'Chetnik' (Sorguc and Rovcanin 2021).

First-hand data was collected through six semi-structured interviews with experts and researchers during a four-week fieldwork trip to BiH. Expert interviews were conducted to ensure the analysis reflects in-depth contextual information and insights from a variety of experts in the field. In order to strengthen source reliability and mitigate potential bias, the interpretation of each source has been validated using other sources of data, including desk-review of official documents, research and media articles.

The survey data applied to the study is derived from the annual National Survey of Citizens' Perceptions in BiH in the period 2016 to 2021 (MEASURE-BiH n.d.). This nationally representative survey targets adults aged 18 and above, with a consistent sample size of 3000 interviews conducted each year. The collected data pertain to inquiries about the perceived threat of violent extremism in BiH, and the consistent methodology employed in the survey provides a robust foundation for comparing public sentiments concerning the violent extremist threat over time.

## Findings

### *Political Access*

BiH is categorized a hybrid regime, scoring relatively high in the areas of electoral process and political participation and low in its functioning of government (EIU 2021). The country's system of government was established through the Dayton Agreement<sup>7</sup> and is a democracy based on consociationalism, which gives multiple political elites a stake in the decision-making process while preventing any one ethnic group from gaining full political power (Norris 2008, 23). The electoral system is designed in such a way that political parties only require a small fraction of the total vote to win seats. This reduces the incentive to court votes outside a party's own community, further institutionalizing ethnic cleavages (Horowitz 1985).

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7 The Dayton Agreement, signed on 14 December 1995 in Paris, made a tripartite power-sharing state in BiH, split between a decentralized Bosniak-Croat federation in the country's center (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), a centralized Bosnian Serb Republic (Republika Srpska) in the north and east, and a small, neutral region in the northwest (Brčko District). Through this agreement, 51 percent of the territory was given to Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims, and 49 percent to Bosnian Serbs.

While the procedures for establishing new parties are similar across the two entities, they differ in terms of the number of party members required to establish a new party. In the Federation this number is 50, in the Brčko District it is 300 and in Republika Srpska it is 500. Not only has the low threshold resulted in BiH having more political parties per capita than any other country, but it has also led to a system in which the strongest nationalist parties use their access to patronage to oppose or co-opt challengers (Hulsey 2015, 524). Given that the territorial units in BiH each have a clearly dominant ethnic population, this creates the conditions for nationalist parties to dominate, particularly in a system characterized by weak civic options and an environment of ethnically driven fear and patronage (Keil and Perry 2017, 84).

The Salafi movement has traditionally stayed outside of politics, but this has recently changed with *Vjera. Narod. Država* ('Faith. People. State', VND), an Islamic party established in 2020 by a Salafi *Da'i*.<sup>8</sup> Prior to establishing the party, the party leadership co-organized Bosnia's first anti-LGBTQ protests in 2019 and are strong opponents of the country's recently established Pride movement (Kuloglija 2020). Despite this deeply held opposition, VND's leader called for a non-violent counterprotest. Furthermore, VND is monitored by the international community and would not undertake any actions that would put it in the spotlight as a security threat (Hulsey 2015, 524). The party ran for its first general elections in 2022, and while other Salafi parties have made similar attempts in the past, they failed to moderate their rhetoric and consequently had little electoral success (interview with expert 1, August 2021).

The Chetnik movement's political access is, according to some, non-existent, arguing that 'Dodik may provide the [discursive] space for these groups to thrive, but their capacity at the moment remains quite low' (interview with expert 1, August 2021). On the other hand, others claim that 'extremist groups are the right hand to do something if far-right politicians want it' (interview with expert 2, August 2021). Either way, extreme-right groups encounter the same obstacles facing fundamentalist Salafis, in that they must moderate their extreme ideological doctrine in order to be accepted as formal political groups. Individuals in BiH affiliated with a political party tend to be more moderate than those who are not, while those operating outside the political environment are more likely to be unemployed, hooligans, or extreme-right sympathizers (interview with expert 3, August 2021). In sum, these findings indicate that formal political institutions have a moderating effect on actors who wish to be politically involved. Nonetheless, a few far-right parties have had marginal parliamentary representation in previous years, and their views continue to be propagated by other political actors viewed as mainstream (Turčalo and Karčić 2021, 13).

The two movements' political access is restricted. Although the low threshold for forming a party, in theory, could prove advantageous for the movements, the Election law

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<sup>8</sup> A missionary or preacher, one who engages in da'wah. Not an exclusively Salafi term but used here only in reference to a Salafi preacher.

prohibits parties with extreme ideologies from running.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, those who try to exercise marginal power are often absorbed by stronger nationalist parties, who, in following their political power interests, have no incentive to change the existing institutional and electoral system given that this would mean relinquishing their dominant power position (Aulić and Kalinić 2016, 426). Although far-right groups have influenced local politics from time to time, such influence has mostly been issue-based and related to group interests and values (interview with expert 3, August 2021). This, however, cannot be applied to electoral contests, as direct connections between mainstream political parties and radical groups are not supported by the majority of voters (interview with expert 4, August 2021).

In summary, the findings suggest a relatively strong state regime and an electoral law that plays a limiting role against extremism in the political environment, implying that formal political institutions exert a moderating effect on actors seeking political engagement. Yet, given the shifting political alignments and the deliberate exclusion of extremist parties from electoral participation, social movement theory could lead us to anticipate a greater propensity for these groups to employ violent strategies to garner attention for their grievances. In light of this, political access may not be the most precise explanatory variable for understanding limited occurrence of violent extremism in BiH.

### *Political Allies*

Two political parties in BiH are relevant in this regard: the Alliance of Social Democrats (hereafter SNSD) and the Party of Democratic Action (hereafter SDA).

The Chetnik movement's ideas are propagated by influential political actors. Moreover, there have been incidents where political figures in RS, while not expressing direct support, have not condemned Chetnik gatherings and allowed the official registration of Chetnik groups as NGOs (Turčalo and Karčić 2021; Pečković and Jašarević 2021). Some far-right figures are also members of SNSD, led by Bosnian Serb politician and current Serb member of the Presidency, Milorad Dodik. Having previously enjoyed broad support from Western countries as an alternative to earlier nationalist Bosnian Serb politicians, Dodik's rhetorical style has changed over time from moderate to far-right. As a result, the backing Dodik received from his western European counterparts has vanished while he has strengthened ties with Russia (Petersen 2011, 305).

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9 Office of The High Representative (OHR), Department for Legal Affairs (2001). Election Law of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Article 7.3: "*Candidates and supporters of political parties, lists of independent candidates, list of members of national minorities and coalitions, as well as independent candidates and their supporters, and election administration officials or those otherwise hired in the election administration are not allowed to [...] 7. use hate speech, and/or, publish or use pictures/images, symbols, audio and video recordings, SMS messages, Internet communications, social networks and mobile applications or any other materials that can have such effect.*"

Dodik is critical of the international supervision of BiH in place since 1995, which grants the international civilian representative the authority to impose legislation and remove domestic officials in order to protect the country's peace (Kovačević 2021). Sanctions have repeatedly been placed on Dodik and his close political allies for various reasons, including obstructing the terms of the Dayton agreement, corruption and political destabilization (Šuklje 2022; Latal 2022). Despite lacking Western support, Dodik has broad backing among the international far-right, most notably from president Putin. Though this has gained Putin popularity among Bosnian Serbs, some claim that Russia lacks the necessary financial resources to be considered an influential political ally in BiH (interview with expert 1, August 2021). Even so, Russia's soft-power approach of influencing Bosnian media channels and supporting secessionist objectives in RS, feeds into the long-term aim of engaging a broader audience potentially sympathetic towards Russian efforts to undermine BiH state sovereignty (Kuloglija 2021).

The link between the Salafi movement and the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) is less clear. Led by the Bosnian Muslim member of the current Presidency, Bakir Izetbegovic, the SDA is a conservative Bosniak nationalist party that won 17 percent of the vote in the 2022 general election. Besides being conservative nationalist, the party has been described as Islamist with its leadership believed to have strong ties to prominent international religious organizations. Despite this, the party's ideological position is perceived as too liberal for fundamentalists. The SDA has recognized the importance of a multi-ethnic state to preserve peace and supports the country's EU accession (SDA 2021) – two developments Islamist extremists are strongly opposed to. Politically active individuals with close links to the SDA have been careful to project themselves as inclusive toward Salafis, while taking pains to make a clear distinction between violent and non-violent Salafism (Bećirević 2016, 90). The Islamic Community (IC) – the religious authority for Muslims in BiH and the broader Western Balkans region – has adopted a similar position towards fundamentalist Salafis in BiH. The IC previously had an inclusive approach, but internal conflict emerged as some Imams believed that an inclusive approach to Salafis would have a moderating effect on more extreme individuals, while others feared it would simply provide space for a more aggressive Salafi discourse (Bećirević 2016, 39–40). The SDA and IC have distanced themselves from fundamentalist interpretations of Salafism and been careful not to reduce Bosnian Muslims to a homogenous religious group based on their Islamic identity (Croatian News Agency 2018). However, despite receiving little to no support among Bosnian Muslim political figures, fundamentalist Salafis have found support in transnational networks and extremist Salafi groups led by diaspora communities (Babić 2017).

Neither movement's political allies are immediately obvious, given that no established political party wish to be associated with them. Though the Chetnik movement appears to have greater support than the Salafi movement, it is more discursive than direct support, with far-right politicians unwilling to allow direct representatives of the Chetnik movement into the formal political environment. Given that it goes against the interests

of political elites to allow extremism of either kind to thrive, such discursive support only extends to the point where elites retain superior political power.

In summary, the impact of political allies emerges as a more precise factor in explaining the extent of violent extremism than access to political institutions. This is particularly evident in the case of the Chetnik movement. The passive attitude of certain political figures towards the actions of far-right extremists and the continued popularity of Milorad Dodik highlights the pervasive influence of the Chetnik movement's ideology within the country's political sphere. According to the pressure cooker theory, far-right parties that secure political power may serve as a 'safety valve' for dissatisfied far-right extremists who might otherwise turn violent. However, in understanding the relatively low levels of violence within the fringes of the Salafi movement, political allies seem to offer limited explanatory power.

### *Discursive Support*

Bosnia's fragmented ethnic and religious landscape can be explained by past legacies, with the country's location between Europe and the Orient leading to ambiguities in its identity, which has been resolved through different discourses at different times (Hansen 2013, 98). Bosnia's historical and geographic position has long made it vulnerable to nationalist territorial aspirations that have sought to suppress the Balkan people in defining their own identity (Hansen 2013, 100). This has, in turn, led to some groups expressing a determination to define their identity on their own terms.

A source of discursive opportunities for extremist movements in BiH is the ethnocultural conception of nationality (Giugni, Koopmans, Passy, and Statham 2005, 2). Historically, the concept of nationalism has been divided between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nationalism – whereas the former provides fewer discursive opportunities for extremists, the latter contributes to legitimizing extremists' ideological claims (Koopmans and Statham 1999; della Porta and Diani 2006, 219).

### Visibility

Extreme-right ideologies have been visible within Bosnia's political spectrum ever since the country's first democratic elections in 1990 (Turčalo and Karčić 2021, 13). For the neo-Chetnik movement, there has been a general shift in its expressed ideology since World War II, with increasing animosity directed towards those perceived as opponents of the Greater Serbia expansionism. The movement's activities have increased since 2015, with two annual gatherings drawing particular attention. The first takes place in Višegrad, a Bosnian Muslim-majority city, while the second takes place in Srebrenica on 11 July, the date marking the 1995 genocide of Bosnian Muslims in the area. Both events are located in the Serb-dominated entity of RS, celebrate war criminals and display ethnonationalist iconography (Sorguc and Rovcanin 2021; Veljan and Čehajić 2021).



Amendments to the law imposed by the then-High Representative in July 2021 have, however, altered the environment in which the movement displays its ideology. Since 2007, RS representatives have blocked attempts to pass a state-wide genocide denial ban. In an attempt to address this, High Representative Valentin Inzko criminalized the denial or glorification of genocide and war crimes. The effects of the law thus far have been fewer Chetnik public appearances and incidents of genocide denial, with legal measures taken to prevent such crimes. In 2022, the movement cancelled its annual gathering in Višegrad and instead met in a town outside the city under the supervision of police and EUFOR peacekeepers. Attendees did not wear their traditional Chetnik uniforms (BIRN and N1 Sarajevo 2022). The political effect of the law has, however, intensified Bosnia's political crisis. The RS parliament voted to initiate the Serb entity's withdrawal from the country's joint army and its security, tax, and judiciary systems – moves considered precursors to secession (Mujanović 2022; Muslimovic 2021). Thus, while recent developments appear to show a less visible Chetnik movement, it has led to more extreme political claims that could spell the end of the current post-Dayton framework.

As for the Salafi movement, its prominent *Da'is* advocate that Bosnian Muslims undergo an identity transformation in their religious and cultural practices, in particular avoiding the Western-liberal cultural practices they claim have been imposed on society (Bećirević 2016, 25). In doing so, they have taken to social media to broadcast lectures and attract new followers. Recent years have seen a shift in their rhetoric, however, as they have moderated their resistance to the Bosnian state and IC – although they still present a challenge to the IC's position as the leading Muslim authority in BiH (Kuloglija and Mujkić 2019). Moreover, the Salafi movement continues to contest fundamental building blocks in modern society by 'promoting intolerance, exclusion of women and religious superiority' (Kuloglija and Mujkić 2019). An example is the movement's Pride counterprotest, the 'Day of Traditional Family', with Salafi preachers utilizing Facebook to express their discontent with the Pride movement, eliciting homophobic, threatening and offensive comments from their followers (BIRN 2022). The counterprotest was, however, non-violent, as had been requested by the Salafi organizer.

Non-violence is the prevailing principle of the movement, even though a few sub-groups endorse and justify the use of violence. It is believed that individuals from these radical segments were recruited as foreign fighters to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq (Babić 2017). After their return from Syria and Iraq in 2014 onwards, foreign fighters became less publicly visible, primarily because state authorities increased maximum prison sentences for convicted terrorists to 20 years. However, Bosnia's law enforcement agencies have struggled due to internal conflicts (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism 2019) and prison sentences have remained relatively short. Furthermore, resources for effectively reintegrating these individuals into society have been insufficient. Simultaneously, prominent *Da'is* have continued to deliver lectures on social media, reaching an expanding audience, thereby spreading their – admittedly moderated – messages. Nevertheless, the authorities' measures to address the most extreme elements



within the movement has played a crucial role in the movement's reduced visibility and toned-down rhetoric.

### Cultural Resonance and Legitimacy

BiH has been subject to occupying forces and conflict for centuries, and despite having gone from communist to democratic rule, still labors under a number of legacies that help explain today's ethnically and religiously fragmented political environment.

After years of relative isolation within a communist system, Bosnian Muslims were unprepared in axiological terms to deal with the variety of Islamic ideas and ideologies introduced to them in the 1990s. Moreover, the poor socio-economic conditions after the war ended in 1995, made them vulnerable to radicalization (Babić 2017). In the years following the end of the war, a new generation of radical Salafis evolved in some communities, with increasing numbers of Bosnian adherents shifting to a more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam (Bećirević 2016, 10). Despite these strong external influences, few Bosnian Muslims were interested in converting to an extreme Salafi ideology. When Arab foreign fighters arrived during the 1990s, locals were reluctant to fully accept the jihadi doctrine, with this religious practice subsequently limited to a minority of Bosnian Muslim believers. This resilience against externally imposed religious practices has been explained as being due to their secular Muslim Europeanness, resulting from a half-century of communist modernization (Bećirević 2016, 10). The positions taken by the country's leading political and religious authorities, as well as communities, supports this narrative – neither the SDA nor the IC fully accepts the Salafi ideology. There is, however, a growing acceptance for moderated Salafi claims within the country, as evidenced by prominent preachers' increasing number of social media followers in recent years. This may be due to their toned-down rhetoric, which, in combination with a relatively conservative population, is creating overlap between certain movement claims and public opinion. Furthermore, Salafism provides a sense of identity and belongingness, which may be attractive to youth who regard themselves as lacking future prospects within the Bosnian state (Babić 2017). Even so, in the absence of broad public legitimacy such recruitment has been limited to the fringes.

The public discourse on violent extremism has changed since the first foreign fighter departures over a decade ago. In 2014, the official discourse on extremism was centered around the foreign fighter travelers, how the country officially had gotten a role in the conflict in Syria and Iraq, and its preparedness in dealing with the issue. Since then, however, the extremist landscape has shown far more complex, both in the public opinion and media. From 2017 to 2020, there was a general incline in people stating that they believed that various extremist groups – both local and imported – presented a moderate to strong threat to the country. However, significant differences exist across the entities regarding which groups are perceived a threat. Generally, respondents from Republika Srpska have,

over time, expressed more concern with different extremist groups than have respondents from the Federation.

Security agencies and experts alike in BiH agree that the threat posed by radical Salafis has been unjustifiably exaggerated, particularly by the media (Bećirević 2018, 14). An assessment of Bosnia's media sector identified several challenges, including political instrumentalization and an opaque media market (Brunwasser, Turčilo, and Marko 2016) with the political climate and nationalist rhetoric contributing to slow media sector development (Reporters Without Borders 2021). The media influences whether and how the public conceives of a problem as a threat. Given that highly legitimate statements usually provoke few reactions, the media tend not to repeat messages that are publicly accepted (Koopmans 2004, 367–391). Conversely, more controversial messages are better positioned for replication, leading to both extremist movements and political figures employing this tactic to reach a wider audience. This environment is exploited by political entrepreneurs who, in their pursuit of power, mobilize ethnic constituencies using the rhetorical weapons of blame, fear and hate (Kartsonaki 2016, 493).

As for the Chetnik movement, this paper's findings point to more discursive support. Since the 2021 amendment criminalizing the denial or glorification of genocide and war crimes, BiH has again seen a rise in extreme-right hate speech and incidents, including neo-Nazi vandalism glorifying the Srebrenica genocide, gunshots fired near mosques, and the use of ethnic slurs (Donine 2022; United Nations 2022). Shortly after the amendments to the Criminal Code of BiH were introduced, the RS government released a report denying the evidence for the 1995 genocide. Although the amendment, as stated by High Representative Inzko, were introduced to apply to all war crimes, Dodik and other Bosnian Serb politicians regarded it as an affront to RS.

What is considered extreme elsewhere may not be regarded as such in the Bosnian context, as exemplified by the close ideological links between the Chetnik movement and certain prominent political figures in RS. Extreme far-right sentiment within the political environment has become a means of attracting voters (Mujanović 2018, 17). Such is the case in Srebrenica – a town that suffered severe war atrocities in 1995 and that today hosts a Serb majority population – where ultra-nationalist narratives and genocide denial are frequently invoked by local politicians during elections (Turčalo and Karčić 2021, 16–17). This further illustrates the institutionalized extremism that exists within the political environment.

The relationship between formal politics and the Chetnik movement is partly facilitated by the conservative, patriarchal discourse that runs through Bosnian society and politics (Turčalo and Karčić 2021, 16–17). BiH remains a socially conservative country, with traditionalist views prevailing on issues such as LGBTIQ+ rights and gender equality. It was the last European country to hold a Pride event, in part due to opposition from nationalist forces within the dominant ethno-religious groups (Swimelar 2017). The impact of the parade did not diffuse beyond the capital, Sarajevo (Ayoub, Page, and Whitt 2021).

In addition, public perceptions of Western institutions have worsened over the decades, following the inability of such institutions to protect civilians in 1992–1995, and the protracted EU and NATO accession processes. Grievances are not directed at a single actor, but toward several ‘others’: political leadership, state authorities and Western institutions. This corresponds to elements of the Salafi and Chetnik ideologies, granting a degree of cultural resonance and legitimacy for movement claims. Even so, the Bosnian population remains resilient to extreme ideologies, with a minority – irrespective of ethnicity – supporting the use of violence for political aims (Vizin et al. 2020, 53–54).

The findings point to mixed discursive support for extremist movements in BiH. The fringes of the movements have become less visible – and more moderate – due to action taken by authorities and due to a shift in the strategies employed by the movements themselves. In the case of extreme Salafis, their presence in the public domain has waned, with individuals from the fringes choosing to depart to other locations to advance their convictions. Following the departure of foreign fighters, the remaining Salafi adherents have adopted more structured methods to disseminate their moderated messages to an expanding audience, prompted by measures enacted by the authorities. In contrast, the Chetnik movement has not undergone significant moderation, yet its ideas have become more institutionalized within the political environment, providing greater political legitimacy. These findings indicate a reduced necessity to resort to violence as a means of gaining visibility for both movements.

A majority of citizens—across the two entities—oppose the use of violence for political and ideological purposes, demonstrating resilience to extremist influences. However, a relatively conservative segment of the population upholds certain values that intersect with, and validate certain claims propagated by, the two movements. The moderated messages being propagated, further amplified by notable figures within the political environment, resonate more deeply with the cultural values prevalent in a relatively conservative society.

### **Enabling Environment After All?**

In this paper, an analysis of two movements in Bosnia-Herzegovina has been carried out, with the primary objective of explaining low levels of violent extremism within a conducive environment. The study pursued a dual purpose: first, to examine two ideologically distinct movements using a shared analytical framework, thereby attempting to bridge research on far-right and Islamist extremist movements, and second, to employ social movement theory as a tool to delve into the impact of open and closed political opportunities on the prevalence of violent extremism. A central claim put forth was that extremists often refrain from resorting to violence, especially on the scale they are capable of. This assertion appears to hold true for the two movements in question.

How well does social movement theory and political opportunity structures explain low levels of violent extremism in BiH, then? The findings point to a relatively strong state

regime acting as a brake against extreme ideas in political institutions, suggesting that formal political institutions exert a moderating effect on actors seeking political engagement. However, considering the exclusion of extremist parties from electoral participation, according to social movement theory one might anticipate more violent tactics in order to amplify their messages. This raises doubts about whether political access is an accurate explanatory factor for the limited occurrence of violence.

Conversely, the role of political allies emerges as a more potent explanation for the levels of violent extremism in BiH, particularly in the case of the Chetnik movement as opposed to the Salafi movement. A strong far-right political alignment in the formal political environment highlights the pervasiveness of the Chetnik movement's ideas in the political sphere. The pressure cooker theory posits that far-right parties acquiring political influence can act as a 'safety valve' for dissatisfied far-right extremists who might otherwise resort to violence. More institutionalized extremism leads to moderated tactics, allowing movements to exert political influence through influential figures despite lacking direct access to political institutions. However, while this seems to elucidate the limited occurrence of violence among far-right extremists, it provides only limited insight into the low levels of violence among Islamist extremists.

Lastly, while the findings indicate varied levels of discursive support for the two movements, they hold substantial explanatory power in both cases. The fringes of both movements have become less visible – and more moderate – partly due to action taken by authorities and partly due to a change in movement tactics. In the case of Islamist extremists, expressions of their most extreme claims have decreased, while moderated messages are being spread through more institutionalized channels to a growing audience. In the case of the Chetnik movement, their claims have become more institutionalized within the political environment. These findings suggest a reduced need to resort to violence to amplify their claims. Resorting to violence is not worth the potential costs, considering the power the movements hold as extra-institutional groups.

Violence will happen in 'the right context' – that is, when political opportunities emerge, threats appear imminent, groups feel disenfranchised and frustrations set in. While political and socioeconomic challenges exist and cause severe grievances, they may not be sufficient to drive extremist movements towards large-scale violence. The transition from violent ideologies to violent action involves three key factors: restricted political access, non-existent political allies within the political environment that advocate for movement causes, as well as limited discursive support within society. Exclusion from formal political institutions and from public discussions may lead marginalized groups to feel threatened and disenfranchised, eventually leading them to conclude that the benefits of resorting to violence outweigh the associated costs.

The case of BiH illustrates that even in environments where the state seems to work as a facilitator of violent extremist mobilization, this enabling environment can act as a brake on violent tactics among extremist movements. Prominent ethnonationalist parties

provide a release valve by framing issues through the ideological narratives of extremist movements while simultaneously keeping these movements at arm's length from formal political institutions. In this way, balance is kept in a country where political and institutional reform could have triggered a spiral of opportunities for, and threats from, extra-institutional groups, ultimately leading to the elite's demise.

Despite the seemingly low danger of violent extremism, institutionalized extremism in the political environment poses a significant threat to a country on the brink of political collapse, with powerholders continuing to deepen ethnic cleavages. Slow progress towards socioeconomic and political justice further delegitimizes the Bosnian state while legitimizing the extreme ideologies, widening the space within which extreme movements can pursue ideological frames based on historical revisionism and violent ideology.

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