

Original scientific paper

UDK: 327.56::351.86(316.754:316.334)

DOI: 10.5937/jrs20-44227

Received: 4 May 2023 / Accepted: 21 May 2025

Institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Friends or Foes in the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism?

MUAMER HIRKIĆ*

DAMIR KAPIDŽIĆ**

SEAD TURČALO***

ANIDA DUDIĆ-SIJAMIJA****

VELDIN KADIĆ*****

SARINA BAKIĆ*****

SANELA BAŠIĆ*****

Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract: This paper examines how state institutions, civil society organizations, the media and international organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) perceive and deal with the threat of radicalization and violent extremism. Drawing on the theory of institutional norms, rules, and practices, the paper explores the interactions and priorities of actors in different types of institutions in defining the drivers of radicalization. The paper provides a detailed analysis of the institutional context of BiH and the patterns of institutional interaction in the prevention of radicalism and violent extremism. The findings reveal that the concept of radicalisation and its drivers are understood differently by different institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some institutions focus on political ideologies or radical religious interpretations, while others emphasise socio-economic factors or transnational influences. This shows that there is no consensus on which factors are most important. These results highlight the importance of considering specific drivers of radicalization and their interactions when developing strategies to counter

* *muamer.hirkic@fpn.unsa.ba*; ORCID: 0000-0002-6071-3657.

** *damir.kapidzic@fpn.unsa.ba*; ORCID: 0000-0002-8619-3530.

*** *sead.turcalo@fpn.unsa.ba*; ORCID: 0000-0002-3577-6509.

**** *anida.dudic@fpn.unsa.ba*; ORCID: 0000-0002-2814-5661.

***** *veldin.kadic@fpn.unsa.ba*; ORCID: 0000-0002-6251-3798.

***** *sarina.bakic@fpn.unsa.ba*; ORCID: 0000-0002-3031-4970.

***** *sanela.basic@fpn.unsa.ba*; ORCID: 0000-0002-1681-7934.

and prevent violent extremism. The research is based on semi-structured interviews with individuals working in relevant institutions, including state institutions, civil society, media, and international organizations, as well as analysis of secondary and primary sources.

Keywords: radicalisation, Bosnia and Herzegovina, institutions, countering and preventing violent extremism, new institutionalism

Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), a society emerging from conflict and characterized by ethno-political divisions and complex institutions, has continuously grappled with issues of radicalization and violent extremism (Perry 2016; Azinović and Jusić 2016; Atlantic Initiative 2018; Bećirević 2018). From 2012, several hundred citizens from BiH joined factions in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine, while far-right groups gained momentum domestically (Hirkić, Kapidžić, and Turčalo 2022). Despite these vulnerabilities, the institutional framework responsible for countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) remains under-researched. Most research on radicalization has focused primarily on micro-level factors, such as individual pathways to radicalization, or macro-level policy frameworks, leaving a significant theoretical gap in understanding the influence of institutional norms and interactions on C/PVE strategies. This paper aims to fill that gap by employing the lens of new institutionalism, which asserts that institutions are influenced by normative structures and power relations. By applying this framework to BiH's fragmented governance, the study transcends a simple case analysis and reveals how the multiplicity of institutions and conflicting priorities influence coherent C/PVE initiatives. Thus, the research problem revolves around examining the relationship between institutional behaviour and efforts to mitigate radicalization in a landscape marked by state fragility.

A fair amount of academic literature deals with radicalization in BiH, which looks at the factors and actors that contribute to radicalization and violent extremism in the country (Kapidžić et al. 2020, 3). What is missing is an analysis of the way in which state institutions and organizations in BiH perceive the threat and interact in their efforts to combat radicalization. The principal question guiding this paper is: How do the various state institutions and organizations in BiH perceive the phenomenon of radicalization and violent extremism and are some drivers of radicalization and violent extremism considered more relevant than others by the various Bosnian-Herzegovinian institutions and organizations? By examining the practices of different types of actors, the paper aims to distinguish the specific roles of institutions and organizations in the process of C/PVE and the ways in which they cooperate, communicate, and interact. This is particularly relevant to better understand institutional policy choices, identify institutions that dominantly shape overall strategic priorities, and address the choice of future strategic initiatives of BiH actors directly involved in C/PVE. Additionally, country-specific contextualization and analysis of drivers could improve institutional responses and enhance our understanding

of the processes of radicalization. However, it is important to emphasize that this is an academic paper, not a policy document.

This paper's theoretical approach views organizations as independent actors in their own right, with a prominent emphasis on institutional norms, rules, and practices that are the outcome of individual actions and discourse. This institutional perspective enables a new contribution to the study of radicalization and resilience and helps to understand the effectiveness of C/PVE strategies. The paper does not aim to map out institutional actors in detail, as has already been done in several publications (for an overview, see Kapidžić et al. 2020, 3–5), but rather to look at institutional interactions between individuals representing them and the priorities in defining the drivers of radicalization. This focus on institutions corresponds to a macro-level perspective in which the level of analysis encompasses institutions present within an entire country. In this sense, this paper serves to establish a cartography of the institutional contexts of radicalization and violent extremism.

This research was conducted within the CONNEKT Project which aims to explore the drivers of radicalization and violent extremism. The project identified seven potential drivers of radicalization, and these drivers could be relevant in the context of the Balkans and MENA regions (Kapidžić, Hirkić, and Turčalo 2025). These include territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political ideas, cultural factors, religion, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics. The analysis is focused on the three levels of analysis: the institutional (macro), community (meso), and individual (micro) levels (Torrekens and de le Vingne 2020, 15). Analysis of the institutional or macro level in BiH provides context and framing of radicalization and violent extremism and existing processes and interactions to counter it. This will be linked to the community and individual levels of analysis, thus providing a structural understanding for future research within the project. The focus is on the institutions and organizations in BiH that are most relevant for the design of C/PVE strategies and are actively working in this area. This includes a broad selection of different categories of actors that encompass various state institutions, civil society, media, and international institutions present in BiH. The research is based on a series of 16 semi-structured interviews with individuals working in these institutions.¹

The paper is structured as follows. The following section provides an overview of the theoretical framework and literature on radicalization in BiH. The third section maps the relevant institutions in BiH that deal with the issues of radicalization and violent extremism. Section four introduces the research methodology. Section five provides a detailed analysis of the institutional context in BiH, with a special focus on institutional perceptions and recent changes in the norms and behaviours of institutions towards C/PVE; this is portrayed with examples of institutional practice, forms of cooperation between institutions from BiH and abroad, and communication-related activities. Section six gives an overview of the seven drivers of violent extremism and explores their perceptions and

1 The interview transcripts are stored on encrypted external drives and protected by password, in accordance with the data management protocols of the CONNEKT project.

relevance within institutional practice in the BiH context. The final section concludes with findings concerning institutional perceptions, practices, norms, and behaviours, as well as the contextualization of radicalization drivers in BiH.

Exploring Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: From Theory to Institutions

Research on institutional approaches to C/PVE builds on an institutionalist perspective (Kapidžić et al. 2021). It is loosely connected to new institutionalism, which regards institutions as actors in their own rights, shaped by collective norms, identities, rational behavior, and historical path dependency. It looks beyond institutional structures and identifies sets of rules and norms as well as practices and relationships that shape the way institutions act (Cairney 2012, 69). This creates patterns of behaviour that are repeated within the same institutional framework, while the institutions themselves are viewed as organized social structures that impact the behaviour of their members. Emphasizing the relevance of this approach, March and Olsen (2008, 9) argue that it is more rational to rely on established institutional criteria to emphasize the individual level and give a common character to political behaviour. Institutions and their members are guided by rules, practices, definitions, and regulations (March and Olsen 2008, 10). This, in turn, influences the development of new routines that shape the nature of the organization. The basis of behaviour within institutions, or more precisely organizations within the scope of this research, is normative, meaning that members are affected by values just as much as by formally established rules.

Norm diffusion is equally relevant for a context where a diverse set of international actors can influence the appropriateness of values within a national system through institutional cooperation at all levels (Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010, 200). Depending on the individual country's context, international norms can be promoted or diffused by organizations that are local, international, or a hybrid combination of both. International interdependence is a substantial driver of domestic institutional change. An institutionalist perspective is helpful in analysing how the everyday engagement of individuals representing organizations creates and shapes macro-level perceptions of institutions, mutual interactions, the norm diffusion, patterns of cooperation, and international interdependence between institutions at the macro level. An operationalization of this theoretical framework specifically focuses on individuals as agents of their respective organizations who create, embrace, and convey institutional norms and practices. This gives us insights into the specific role of organizations in C/PVE processes and how their practices emphasize different drivers of violent extremism.

Within the existing body of literature on radicalization and violent extremism in BiH, there is a conspicuous lack of empirical studies examining the institutional interactions and conceptions of C/PVE. Only a few authors have touched on the issue of mapping

interactions of drivers of violent extremism, which represents a significant gap in radicalization research on the BiH. This literature is published broadly as research reports, policy papers, news articles, critical analyses, and other descriptive literature, and only a small segment is published in academic publications. The most relevant research deals with the issue of foreign fighters, radicalized Bosnians who fought for the Islamic State and in Syria, and their subsequent reintegration. Examples are “The New Lure of the Syrian War: The foreign fighters’ Bosnian contingent” by Azinović and Jusić (2016), who analyse the phenomenon of foreign fighters in more detail, looking into informal Islamist groups that encouraged radicalization. In their contribution to “Returning from Violence: How to Tackle the Foreign Fighters’ Problem in the Western Balkans?” Hamidičević and Plevljak (2018) give unofficial estimates that put the figure at around 330 citizens and provide an overview of their demographics and fate.

More general research that maps extremism research and institutions include two publications by Bećirević “Salafism vs. Moderate Islam: A Rhetorical Fight for the Hearts and Minds of Bosnian Muslims” (2016), and “Extremism Research Forum Bosnia and Herzegovina Report” (2018), as well as “Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum” by Bećirević, Halilović and Azinović (2017). These publications emphasize that research needs to be more cautious when making the link between radicalization and violent extremism, and that the process of reciprocal radicalization, in which mutual forms of extremism cross-fertilize each other, needs to be recognized. This is especially relevant in a country still shaped by the consequences of war, including social mistrust and insecurity. Research by Oruč and Obradović (2020), “Drivers of Radicalisation of Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” looks at youth radicalization and assesses the impact of demographic characteristics, migration experience, and social behaviour by relying on survey data and an index of radicalization. However, this research does not adopt a societally embedded understanding of drivers and focuses only on individual-level (micro) expression, where drivers can impact radicalization. Similarly, Hasić, Mehmedović and Sijamija (2020), in their study “Perception about radicalization by young people in the Western Balkans Region – Country report: Bosnia and Herzegovina” investigate causes and effects of radicalization in BiH, and highlight systemic weaknesses in institutional responses, therefore recommending improvement of education, media literacy, and coordinated prevention efforts to build resilience against radicalization among youth. Research by Richardson, Berlouis, and Cameron (2017), “Radicalisation of Young Adults in the Balkan States,” explores why young adults join extremist organizations, including some of the drivers that are part of this research, and discusses potential measures. “The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe,” published by OSCE in 2019, explores the supportive role civil society can have in helping to identify and address drivers that make individuals more susceptible to violent extremism.

In the chapter titled “Building Resilience or Increasing Vulnerability to Extremism in Communities: Different Perspectives on the Role of Religious Actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” Hirkić and Turčalo examine the dual role of religious actors in Bosnia and Her-

zegovina, both as potential builders of community resilience and as sources of vulnerability to extremism. Ahić (2022), in “Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Bosnia – ‘Circle of Lack of Knowledge and Islamophobia’”, explores how post-war societal fractures, political instability, and regional influences fuel radicalism and extremism and calls for de-radicalization efforts focused on education, youth engagement, and countering Islamophobic narratives. Metodieva (2021), in “The Radical Milieu and Radical Influencers of Bosnian Foreign Fighters,” investigates how charismatic local leaders institutionalized influence in radicalized communities and facilitated recruitment for conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Preljević (2017), in “Preventing Religious Radicalization in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Role of the BiH Islamic Community,” assesses the Islamic Community’s efforts to curb the spread of unauthorized mosques often linked to radical interpretations of Islam. Further investigative research and reporting on C/PVE in BiH and various aspects of radicalization have been published by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in recent years.² Overall, the existing body of literature on radicalization and violent extremism in BiH provides diverse insights into drivers, institutional interactions, and societal responses. While significant attention has been given to foreign fighters and their reintegration, as well as youth radicalization, there remains a notable gap in empirical studies exploring institutional interactions and conceptions of C/PVE, which is what this paper aims to address.

The Institutional Framework for Addressing Radicalization in Bosnia and Herzegovina

In this paper, we distinguish between state institutions, societal institutions, and international institutions that work on C/PVE in BiH. All three are broad categories that include a plethora of different types of institutions, organizations, and associations, some with more institutional independence and resources than others (Kapidžić et al. 2020). It is possible to observe and map interactions, synergies, and dependencies between different institutions and categories of institutions, which will be discussed in the following sections.

State institutions include ministries, agencies, and other institutions at multiple levels of governance. Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Ministry of Security is a pivotal state-level institution for C/PVE initiatives (Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina n.d.). The Ministry has been implementing the new Strategy for the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism 2021–2026, encompassing various forms of extremism, including right-wing, religious, and far-left extremism. Other state institutions, ranging from those concerned with the early detection of the phenomena to those concerned with causal effects, include the Intelligence and Security Agency, the State Investigation and Protection Agency, the Prosecutor’s Office of BiH, and subnational ministries of the interior. It is also relevant

2 Balkan Investigative Reporting Network’s websites: <https://birn.eu.com/> and <https://balkaninsight.com/>.

to mention that subnational and local level ministries of education and centres for social work play an important role, particularly in prevention and repatriation processes (Kapidžić et al. 2020).

Societal institutions include various actors. Civil society organizations (CSOs) dealing with radicalization and violent extremism can be divided into two groups: those dealing with prevention and those dealing with research. The first group includes the PRONI Youth Development Center, Transkulturalna psihosocijalna obrazovna fondacija – TPO Foundation, Global Analitika, Youth Resource Center Tuzla, Humanity in Action, and Hope and Homes for Children.³ As for the second group, which primarily focused on research, the work of the Atlantic Initiative, the Democratization Policy Council (DPC), the International Republican Institute (IRI), GEA – Centar za istraživanja i studije, and ProEduca stands out (Perry 2016).

Regarding religious institutions, there are four legally recognized religious communities in BiH. These are the Islamic Community in BiH, the Bishops' Conference of BiH, the Serbian Orthodox Church in BiH, and the Jewish Community of BiH. They cooperate and work together through the mechanisms of the Interreligious Council, which is a non-governmental organization that has been active since 1997. The Islamic Community is a historically confirmed authoritative body that regulates questions of religious life, religious training, and appointments, and is independent of the government in its management and decision-making. Since 2016, the Islamic Community has adopted a strategy concerning C/PVE and organized a significant number of activities aimed at combating all forms of violent interpretations of religion. The Bishops' Conference is an institution of the Catholic Church in BiH established in 1994. In addition to religious education, the Bishops' Conference organizes and oversees humanitarian and educational institutions, but its engagement lacks noteworthy programs on topics of violent extremism. Likewise, the Serbian Orthodox Church, as an institution that brings together Orthodox Christian believers in BiH, did not conduct any C/PVE-related activities (Hirkić and Turčalo 2023).

We include the media as a third segment of civic organizations that shape public perceptions of radicalization and are also engaged in investigative reporting. Some of the more renowned media outlets active on C/PVE topics include the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) with its websites Balkan Insight and Detektor.ba, Al Jazeera Balkans, and Preporod, which is managed by the Islamic Community. BIRN is the most active media outlet dealing with the phenomena of radicalization and violent extremism through investigative journalism, focusing on reports about the criminal trials of returnees accused of terrorism, violent fan groups, and how the Strategy is implemented.

3 For instance, PRONI emphasizes working with young people as a factor of prevention and resilience in larger and smaller communities in BiH, while the TPO Foundation's aim is to encourage critical thinking and understanding within wider topics of peacebuilding, intercultural, and interreligious dialogue.

The third category includes international institutions that have a large presence in BiH. International engagement in C/PVE activities is strong in terms of policy priorities and funding and therefore provides significant financial support for most research and prevention projects. In addition to traditional partners in a global C/PVE arena, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), significant support for C/PVE in BiH is provided by the Regional Cooperation Council and national embassies of Norway, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Italy. As an organization that has been engaged in BiH since the war, the OSCE's support includes a wide range of political, military, economic, and human security dimension efforts working with state and civic institutions (Perry 2016, 30). USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives oversees small grant pilots and research with the aim of understanding radicalization and supporting positive voices such as youth activists. IOM emphasizes the prevention of violent extremism through cooperation with state institutions, more recently focusing on returnees from Syria and their repatriation process.

Methodology

This research is based on interviews with representatives of institutions and organizations active in the field of C/PVE in BiH. A non-exclusive list of institutions was identified based on previous research (Kapidžić et al. 2020), and some were mentioned in the previous section. These include formal state institutions, civil society, a broad variety of civic institutions and organizations, media, and international institutions. The research team sent official requests, followed by inquiries via email and telephone. In total, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted online and in person from December 2020 to February 2021, where all in-person interviews were held in Sarajevo.⁴ It is crucial to highlight that the study concentrates on the state institutions in Sarajevo and other Sarajevo-based actors that have a significant outreach in the entire BiH. Additionally, the empirical phase was predominantly carried out in 2020, predating the adoption of the new Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Prevention and Combating Terrorism (2021–2026).

Given the sensitive topic and nature of the work of some institutions, the research was guided by the principle of confidentiality, and consent was collected from each participant prior to the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed after permission was granted. Alternatively, notes were taken separately by the interviewer and assistant and, consequently, joined. The collected interview data were pseudonymized to conform

4 The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions grouped into three sections. The first asked about institutional views, norms, and interpretations of concepts of radicalization and violent extremism, as well as the work which the institution does in this field (practices). The second section asked about support, communication, and cooperation with other institutions that work in the field. The third section asked about institutional perspectives and practices regarding each of the seven potential drivers of radicalization.

to the EU's General Regulation on Data Protection (GDPR), relevant BiH legislation, and CONNEKT Project's ethics regulations.⁵

Institutional Norms and Practices in Addressing Radicalization and C/PVE in BiH

Institutional Perception of C/PVE

The macro-level analysis discussed in this paper takes a broader view of institutions. Several institutions have dedicated departments, teams, or trained individuals dealing specifically with C/PVE issues, in addition to various action plans, informal networks and working groups. One example of institutional C/PVE practice is the establishment of the NGO Relations Department within the Islamic Community in 2015, which demonstrates the importance of the civil society sector in addressing notions of pluralism that may affect the institutional practices and normative values of the Islamic community. Research shows that intensified work on preventive C/PVE actions is a common aspect of all institutions.

At the time of conducting interviews with participants, the Strategy for the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism 2015–2020 was still active, exhibiting certain shortcomings, primarily in the lack of separation between its preventive and security components. For instance, one interviewee confirmed the previously mentioned focus, noting that lately, his institution has been putting a lot more effort into the prevention-related strategic tasks and actions, while another interviewee revealed that her organization has lobbied to have a non-security sector included in the new Strategy of the Ministry of Security (Interview 1, January 2021; Interview 7, January 2021). The new Strategy does include repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of individuals returning from foreign conflict zones, emphasizing collaboration between the security sector at all levels of government and representatives of civil society.

CSOs are mostly trying to fill the vacuum generated by government institutions. Previous research by Hamdičević and Plevljak (2018) showed that the activities of CSOs range from research and studies, assistance to state and lower governance level institutions, to working directly with youth, media, and religious communities in raising awareness (Hamdičević and Plevljak 2018, 59–60). The CSO of one interviewee tries to bridge the gap between the academic and activist worlds by connecting different institutions, but also by improving the competences of teachers in public schools (Interview 3, January 2021). Others, highlighted by another interviewee, are trying to implement the projects that allow them to connect regional actors engaged in C/PVE (Interview 4, December 2020).

⁵ See CONNEKT Project's website: www.h2020connekt.eu.

Although most media deal with visible and already manifest forms of violent extremism, some media have recently started to explore the causes of the phenomenon through investigative reporting and critical reflection. This can go beyond the usual causes identified by journalists. For instance, one interviewee stated that his media outlet provides a space for critical analysis of professors or theologians regarding the subject of violent extremism (Interview 5, January 2021).

The involvement of international organizations is manifested through multi-sectoral work with academics, individuals, informal community groups, centres for social work, and other actors linked to C/PVE, but also through the designation of specific departments and teams that deal exclusively with this phenomenon. The diversity of sector coverage within C/PVE is also confirmed by the statements of several interviewees, all employed in international organizations. One such organization is involved in the assistance in a process of repatriation of citizens from Syria, a second provides the support in the implementation and design of the Strategy, while a third is focused on a small grant pilot and research (Interview 6, December 2020; Interview 2, February 2021; Interview 7, January 2021).

Changes in Norms and Behaviors of Institutions Toward C/PVE

Recently, there have been several important changes in the attitudes and work of state institutions toward C/PVE. First, global occurrences, such as the foreign fighter phenomenon, new actions of far-right groups, or the international partners' perception of a threat, also dictate the design of practices within institutions. Secondly, the emergence of new, radicalized milieus leads to a change in behavior and subsequent adaptations, such as the implementation of analyses or the transition from the state to the local level. Thirdly, changes in the approach to violent extremism are a product and direct consequence of open discussions between the actors involved in the C/PVE. For instance, one of the interviewees reveals how his institution attempts to connect communities and stakeholders both horizontally and vertically while trying to clarify that violent extremism is not something foreign that happens exclusively to others (Interview 1, January 2021).

Furthermore, some actors, such as donors, have sought to adapt their practices over time. At the same time, their common stance on C/PVE was strengthened by the recurring and coherent views of the issue. One interviewee from an international organization reveals that the initial interest for the topic ensued because of the phenomenon of foreign fighters, but also that the focus and strategy of his organization was changing accordingly in the last three years (Interview 7, January 2021). Nonetheless, several other interviewees from international organizations stated that in the last three years, the approach of security institutions has changed since they take the issue more seriously and understand the importance of other sectors. Additionally, some organizations tried to move the debate

away from Islamic extremism and elucidate the sphere of hate crimes (Interview 6, December 2020; Interview 2, February 2021).

In the C/PVE actions of civil society organizations, there has been a change in the perception of what extremism is and who is responsible for it, meaning that it is now seldom presented as exclusively Islamic. An interviewee argues that, for instance, a recent extremism in the United States has also opened the floor for talking about extremism that is not exclusively Islamic, meaning that people will not be able to ignore it any further (Interview 3, January 2021). Additionally, another interviewee also stresses the importance of the shift from offline to online communication during the COVID pandemic, affirming her organization's attempts to engage in more online-related C/PVE initiatives (Interview 4, December 2020).

One of the participants from the media believes that access to information has changed – while previously most of the information was obtained through conversation with people, presently those pieces of information could be available online (Interview 8, December 2020). He also added that the media now wants to know some of the factors that lead to violent extremism, which was not the case before. In addition, a different participant argued that four factors led to a change in the way the issue of violent extremism is perceived. First, the defeat of ISIS and consequent disappointment within circles who supported this ideology. Second, there is increased interest in the topic of BiH institutions. Third, there was a change in the perception of the Islamic community – from the initial disregard to a public call to close *parajamaats* and reintegrate communities. Fourth, there was a change in the way the international public perceived this issue (Interview 5, January 2021).

C/PVE Examples from Institutional Practice

Instances from state institutions' practices are permeated by the collectivization of norms, where employees are influenced by formal rules that are contained in strategic documents or other formal arrangements between institutions. One interviewee from the state institution that deals with both preventive and causal actions reveals that the way in which experts are engaged in her institution highlights a significant degree of systematization (Interview 9, February 2021). For instance, after studying the case at hand, there is a process of selecting the relevant institution, where the police, health care services, psychological counseling, educational centers, and others may be involved. Another interviewee reveals that her institution has made significant progress, particularly in the prevention part, where they have planned a whole set of activities around C/PVE (Interview 10, January 2021). Moreover, an interviewee from a religious institution speaks similarly about her institution, citing numerous educations for their own employees, aimed at prevention (Interview 11, January 2021).

On the other hand, civil society organizations use different tactics during the implementation of the program, meaning that the final aim, as well as the target group, is different

for each organization. Some of these programs focus on peacebuilding, good governance, human rights, women's rights, interfaith dialogue and conflict transformation, youth engagement, and other topics (OSCE 2019b, 25). For instance, one respondent cites an attempt to use ethical and normative values in educational institutions in a wide range of subjects, thus influencing the C/PVE as well (Interview 3, January 2021). On the other hand, another respondent reveals the attempt of her organization to influence the established routines of local leaders through financial support and grants, but also through networking at the national and international levels (Interview 12, January 2021).

The OSCE's Guide on Reporting on Violent Extremism and Terrorism pays special attention to the media's reporting practices regarding VE, particularly the accuracy of information, impartiality, accountability, and transparency (OSCE 2019a). One of the interviewed media outlets confirmed active engagement with young journalists through the organization of training and instruction on how to correctly report on the topic of C/PVE. On the other hand, when doing their own research and trying to get verified information, an interviewee reveals that she must go first to the police, municipality, or centers for social work, and then move up toward the state level (Interview 13, December 2020). Nevertheless, most of the state institutions that she turns to still refer her to the Ministry of Security.

In international organizations' approaches, there has been a degree of standardization regarding the target groups. For instance, there was a noticeable shift in focus towards young community leaders and positive youth voices. According to one of the respondents, in addition to working with young people, the focus remains quite wide and includes training for trainers within the repatriation process, research, and initiatives with religious communities (Interview 2, February 2021). Nonetheless, another respondent added that her organization has sought to improve inter-institutional cooperation in BiH through a specifically designed program (Interview 6, December 2020).

Forms of Interaction and Institutional Support from the State and from Abroad

The state institutions have developed solid relations with all relevant international actors, such as the OSCE, the IOM, the Council of Europe, the UNDP and others. This synergy provides all kinds of mutual assistance in C/PVE efforts. The extent to which a significant portion of government regulations is heavily influenced by foreign expertise coming from abroad (Kapidžić et al. 2020, 7–8). For instance, one interviewee from an international organization claims that his organization was active in developing a communication strategy for the Ministry of Security, but its implementation still did not materialize (Interview 7, January 2021). In addition to foreign organizations, state institutions have developed a system of cooperation between their own sectors involved in C/PVE. An interviewee from a state institution reveals that several actions initiated by her institution included

various departments such as education, health, security, and the police (Interview 9, February 2021).

CSOs receive the most financial assistance from foreign governments and organizations, primarily the United States government, the OSCE, the IOM, the United Nations, and others. For instance, previous research indicates that a careful look at these programs and projects reveals that many civil society organizations have relied on international partners to carry out C/PVE work within the country (Soufan Center 2020, 41). In addition to ‘traditional’ partners, one of the interviewees asserts that there is also developed cooperation between her organization and foreign universities and foreign CSOs (Interview 12, January 2021).

The central partner in international organization’s work is the Ministry of Security, with whom, according to an interviewee from an international organization, they sometimes have a “difficult relationship, for a number of reasons” (Interview 7, January 2021). For instance, one reason for slow changes in the routines of state institutions and the lack of personal connections can be linked with frequent institutional changes of leaders or entire teams, which makes the adoption of an initiative more difficult. In addition to the Ministry, international organizations cooperate with centers for social work, municipalities, and CSOs.

The normative framework, represented by various religious institutions, is adhered to within the cooperation mechanisms between religious institutions and foreign donors without attempting to influence the so-called “appropriateness” of existing rules and practices. For instance, one of the participants regarded the Islamic community as a positive example of C/PVE-related practices, where her organization and the Islamic community have successfully formalized their cooperation since 2015. Religious institutions, on the other hand, refuse to cooperate with non-governmental organizations on issues related to interpretation of religion that are seen as the sole purview of officially recognized religious institutions, in addition to upkeeping the “appropriateness” of traditional rules and practices.

Communication and Exchange between Institutions on C/PVE

An interviewee from a state institution argued that communication between state institutions is efficient both online and in person. Another interviewee believes that communication between her colleagues and other institutions takes place continuously, but mostly after the problem arises (Interview 10, January 2021). According to one of the respondents, the Ministry of Security is the focal point for most of the stakeholders involved in C/PVE and is a pivotal partner, while another one asserts that communication with the Ministry is much more formal, compared to communication with CSOs (Interview 2, February 2021). Interviewees add that communication between international actors is easier, primarily because they try to synchronize their views and approaches in order to

make it easier to work with the Ministry. They note that communication between international partners is currently much better than that between 2015 and 2018. However, several interviewees from the media believed that they had very poor communication with the Ministry. They cite examples where it has failed to provide quick and easy access to its reports and non-classified information and urge it to request this information from other security institutions (Interview 8, December 2020). The media highlight that communication with religious institutions is also not fruitful and that some topics are, as they describe, “an exhausted topic.”

Informal relationships between individuals, such as personal contacts, professional networks, and family ties, are present in communication between different institutions and categories of institutions. While such informal relationships can certainly enhance communication, they are no substitute for formal exchanges. This is evident through a systematized way of sharing information, for instance, by signing a memorandum of understanding or other formal documents. One interviewee believed that communication and initiatives are two-way streets, where it is important to know the needs of the partners on a project. This can then become a mixture of formal communications and informal networking, coupled with personal connections (Interview 6, December 2020). Another interviewee stated that by looking into his own case of having close connections with representatives of religious institutions, he can confirm that personal acquaintances can play an important role in institutional cooperation (Interview 1, January 2021).

This shows a complex and evolving relationship between institutions in BiH that deal with C/PVE. Although all institutions are aware of other actors in the field, openness is not always the preferred option. There can be some positioning or stance towards certain actors, such as media, or towards certain issues. When it comes to formal communication, there seems to often be a need to complement this with less formal and unofficial approaches. On sensitive topics, such as foreign fighters or radical interpretations of religion, we notice that one institution often takes the lead, and others have a supportive role. Nevertheless, the general impression is of cooperation both in communication and policy alignments, while retaining a sense of institutional distinctiveness, both in terms of aims and working culture.

Institutional Interpretations of Drivers of Radicalization

Territorial Inequalities

Although radicalization in BiH after the Dayton Agreement was primarily associated with isolated and often rural communities, which could be seen as a potential factor of radicalization in the context of territorial inequalities, the research suggests that this trend has changed in recent years. While some radical milieus may still seek a more specific and secluded community, many *da'is* or preachers choose to be present in urban centers and

no longer seek isolation. One interviewee believes that there is an evident trend of shifting from rural to suburban areas within these groups (Interview 1, January 2021).

According to an interviewee from a CSO, if territorial inequalities were relevant to the BiH context, she would need to consider ethnically homogenous spaces as more susceptible to radicalization. On the other hand, a respondent from a state institution highlighted multi-ethnic environments as potential hotspots, primarily because of prevailing prejudices (Interview 4, December 2020). An interviewee from an international organization attempted to make a cause-and-effect relationship, marking the returnee space as a potentially fertile ground for radicalization, where war legacy and isolation became striking issues in the so-called “backwater areas” such as Prijedor, parts of Herzegovina, and the eastern parts of Republika Srpska. Post-war frustration, which particularly affects youth, was mentioned in previous research by Perry, who writes that, although without prior experience of the war, young people are often dissatisfied with the slow pace of post-war change (Perry 2016, 27). Within such communities, there is a mindset of exclusion coupled with perceptions of neglect, marginalization, and injustice – both of a person and space. One of the interviewees believed that in some cases, it does not have to be an actual deprivation, but rather an individually perceived deprivation (Interview 15, January 2021). Therefore, rather than territory-exclusive inequality, the context of BiH shows that a more suitable driver is an individual’s perception of marginalization, injustice, and disenfranchisement of a particular territorial area.

Economic Deprivation

As Oruč and Obradović (2020) argue, radicalization among youth in BiH is the result of a complex interplay of various factors and not any of them in particular (Oruč and Obradović 2020, 2561). In relation to poverty, our research findings confirm this statement. Most interviewees emphasized that poverty could only be observed as an indirect driver, working in combination with other drivers. One of the prominent factors that coincides with poverty is education, both of which represent a combination that can lead to easier indoctrination and manipulation. One of the interviewees believes that there is a direct link between poverty and education, while another one states that the lack of dignity and lower education are a double package, either acting cumulatively or exacerbating one another (Interview 9, February 2021; Interview 14, January 2021).

Several interviewees from the media, state institutions, a CSO and an international organization agree that marginalization and hopelessness are correlated with poverty (Interview 1, January 2021; Interview 8, December 2020; Interview 12, January 2021; Interview 2, February 2021). Dissatisfaction resulting from economic exclusion provides a strong incentive for people to adopt radical views more easily. Although poverty manifests itself more as an individual phenomenon than as a group phenomenon, it is necessary to consider the personal perception of poverty. Added to this is the individual perception of the lack of upward mobility, opportunities for career success, personal development

prospects and dignity, with radicalized groups acting as a protector of the disenfranchised or as the only alternative within a dysfunctional system. The OSCE's Guide for the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism through the Educational Process highlights detachment, low self-esteem, and self-doubt as personality traits that can favor radicalization (OSCE 2019c, 11–12). Moreover, a recent study conducted by the Dialogue about Radicalization and Equality (DARE) project shows that the connection between inequality and radicalization is case-by-case dependent (DARE 2020), where the driver of perceived injustice can become a subjective reality of individuals and groups (Poli and Arun 2019, 68).

On the other hand, the Atlantic Initiative's (2018) research findings show that, in many cases, those most sympathetic to violent extremism are economically settled (Atlantic Initiative 2018). One interviewee believes that elites within radicalized communities are well-situated, even if their peers are struggling (Interview 5, January 2021). Azinović and Jusić (2016) made this assertion by describing it as dual morality (Azinović and Jusić 2016, 56). While leaders preach to their followers about the absurdity of this secular, material life, they enjoy lives of luxury. These conflicting views indicate that while economic deprivation is perceived as a driver of radicalization, its effects manifest at the individual level rather than at a societal level. It is assumed that relative and perceived deprivation have an influence on radicalization, but at the same time wealth (lack of perceived deprivation) does not prevent people from expressing violent extremism.

Political Ideas/Grievances

In the context of BiH, political ideas and grievances are primarily expressed in terms of ethnic politics and narratives propagated by ethnic entrepreneurial elites. One of the interviewees believed that the perception of the conflict between the three ruling streams in BiH could facilitate the “us against them” mentality. Rhetoric that leads to polarization, political incentives and political goals manifested through political opportunity structures are, as one of the participants states, prevalent occurrences in the context of the Balkans (Interview 2, February 2021). Another participant adds that this, in turn, produces a space where everything is allowed (Interview 13, December 2020). Moreover, political ideas can propagate a narrative of vulnerability, leading to a state of fear or caution. Within the political arena, there could be an instrumentalist understanding of the issue of violent extremism, where narratives can be used for specific purposes. More precisely, they can become instruments for staying in power rather than an expression of conviction. One interviewee revealed that even some humanitarian organizations, using ethnic nationalist characteristics such as uniforms or symbols, are placed in the service of politics (Interview 2, February 2021).

At the same time, radical groups represent interests and act as interest groups themselves that do not seek to be in power but strive to incorporate their values and ideas into policies. One of the interviewees believes there might be support in the future for political

projects that show understanding for such beliefs and ideas, while another one adds that such groups are anti-political, meaning that their interest lies in destroying the system, not changing it (Interview 4, January 2021; Interview 1, January 2021).

Cultural Factors

Through depiction of the cultural driver as a “way of life,” an interviewee argues that this driver is more of a form of perception than a factor of radicalization in the context of BiH. It is primarily manifested through subcultures and means of identification, such as uniforms, insignia, iconography, vocations within structures, and other forms of expression. These are mostly closed, social groups in which the omnipresent ‘us against them’ narrative exists, but as one interviewee states, without a clear perception whether radicalization had occurred prior to joining a group or after (Interview 11, January 2021). An interviewee from a state institution believed that contemporary society is dominated by an “Al Capone matrix of success,” where young people that are “excluded from social happenings and often face a sense of hopelessness,” and this could lead them toward radicalized groups (Interview 10, January 2021).

One of the interviewees connected the issues of radicalization and violent extremism with the dominant patriarchal society of BiH and so-called “toxic masculinity,” believing that such behavior can harm both individuals and families (Interview 6, December 2020). Nikola Vučić, journalist of N1 television argues that “toxic masculinity, in its various nuances, is what conservative thought protects and the far right glorifies” (Buka 2021).

A respondent from the media believes that there is still a palpable fear of change and “others” in BiH society. For instance, a specific way of life in Salafist circles, such as separate cultural and sports facilities, agricultural holdings, patterns of behavior or eating habits, worries an interviewee from a CSO, who would not want to see a change in the social fabric of BiH (Interview 4, December 2020). Previous research on such circles notes that adherence to form can be one of the characteristics of the newly faithful dedicated to physical appearances, symbols, and customs (Azinović and Jusić 2016, 57).

Religion

Although Islam is thought to be the dominant factor in radicalization in BiH, our interviews did not confirm this assumption. One of the interviewees states that in many cases, radicalized individuals received their first in-depth knowledge of religion within radicalized groups; they were not practicing believers before that. They often they sought a sense of belonging, which is consistent with the studies conducted previously (see: Richardson et al. 2017, 90). Moreover, another interviewee believes that the majority of extremists quickly went “from nothing to extreme.”

Interpretations of religion as a driver from officially recognized religious institutions can significantly differ from individual interpretations or those from informal religious groups. While official religious institutions do not justify violence, misinterpretation and abuse by individuals may occur. In her study, Bećirević (2018) revealed that a lack of institutional religious education limits the ability of individuals to think critically about extremist rhetoric or place it within an ideological context (Bećirević 2018, 23–24). However, one of the interviewees mentioned that her organization's work with institutionally educated teachers of religious studies have shown them to have radical worldviews (Interview 3, January 2021). On the other hand, another interviewee believed it is problematic to impose a precise interpretation of religion, which is a tactic often employed by C/PVE educational programs (Interview 14, January 2021). A respondent from an international organization asserted that her organization did not attempt to link violent extremism to any religion, when working on prevention.

In most radicalized groups, prevailing narratives and existing knowledge are challenged to impose one's worldview. Some unofficial religious leaders themselves may have questionable knowledge, but also a strong desire for building a "religious charisma." Several interviewees highlighted the fact that religion is used to legitimize one's own opinion, for example, by declaring another person an infidel, using extremist language, or through processes of "othering." Such leaders usually have a sense of superiority and use religion as a powerful lever to give themselves legitimacy through reference to supreme authority, which is essentially a tool used to prey on people's emotions. One interviewee argued that places of worship that are turned into places of socialization could serve as the main points for absorption of the aforementioned radicalizing narratives (Interview 7, January 2021).

Digital Literacy

Paton (2020) believes that the internet and social media are both implicated in ideological radicalization and recruitment through what is termed "self-radicalization" (Paton 2020, 4). Online spaces are a dominant driver for spreading radical ideas because of their effectiveness. Multiple virtual gathering places and communities can be considered potential sites of radicalization. One interviewee from a religious institution noted that, unlike traditional media such as TV or radio – which require permits and registration – online platforms allow individuals to disseminate messages freely without the need for prior authorisation. This type of informing, organizing, and mobilization is cheaper and more efficient (Interview 11, January 2021). Bećirević et al. (2017) confirm the importance of peer-to-peer contact but also consider the importance of online interaction, suggesting that it remains unclear whether cases of radicalization have been driven purely by online interactions (Bećirević 2017, 25). One of our interviewees confirmed this idea by arguing that access itself is not an issue, but rather how the content is consumed (Interview 2, February 2021).

Online spaces provide an opportunity to build a sense of community and offer an illusion of personal contact with charismatic leaders. The content produced by extremist groups is very sophisticated and professional in style, while the content ranges from mildly radical to extremist. One interviewee pointed out the expertise in producing online content tailored to young people and using the most modern marketing methods (Interview 4, December 2020). Furthermore, the existence of closed communication tools protected by encryption facilitates anonymity and communication. This makes it possible to share online content that has been removed from platforms and their algorithms and also allows access to communication channels even when individuals accused of violent extremism are imprisoned. For instance, even when ISIS was defeated, it was not possible to end the dissemination of online content produced by them through social media (Balkan Insight 2019a). Anonymity can play an important role in some cases due to secrecy and personal distance but is generally found in right-wing groups that tend to use forums and gaming platforms. On the other hand, we can witness *da'is* (preachers) from Salafi circles that act as “superstars” or “digital influencers” and have a much greater reach than either traditional media or academia, as noted by an interviewee from the media. Their online profiles allow them much higher visibility in comparison to the official religious institution, which is an interesting and relevant sociological phenomenon, especially due to the youth's susceptibility to online content. Informal groups of the same character, although mostly operating independently, are often seen as part of one network, within which religious or national exclusivity can be promoted.

While some state institutions in BiH are working on early detection in the online space, one participant stated that it is still a largely unregulated field. The main institution in charge is the Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA) (Interview 8, December 2020). However, in previous years, the CRA made it clear that it was up to the police and judiciary to tackle violent and terrorism-related content (Balkan Insight 2019b). Previous research has shown that many online contributions fall under the radar of law enforcement or social media standards for removing hateful content from their platforms. Although hate speech and violent statements are a daily occurrence the online space in BiH's, there is still no institutional solution for “blacklisting” websites with inappropriate content, which calls into question the functionality of established communication channels with the largest social networks.

Nevertheless, most interviewees stressed the importance of initiatives and educational programs that encourage critical thinking and media literacy. An interviewee from a CSO stated that her organization decided to work on media pedagogy, precisely in order to educate teachers, who in many cases are less advanced in media literacy than their students (Interview 12, January 2021). An interviewee from a religious institution pointed out that her institution recognized media literacy as an important step forward, providing educational programs for their own employees (Interview 11, January 2021).

Transnational Dynamics

One interviewee argued that externally influenced extremism is primarily fostered through social and ethnic identification, as well as the narrative of “us against them” (Interview 15, January 2021). Calls from countries in the region, primarily Croatia and Serbia, can mobilize BiH citizens to go to foreign battlefields such as Ukraine and Syria. In many cases, this happens through soft persuasion instruments such as lectures, images, and texts. Several interviewees suggested that there are groups actively working together and maintaining communication between countries in the Balkans, such as in the case of groups from Republika Srpska and Serbia, but the system hardly recognizes them as potentially dangerous (Interview 4, December 2020; Interview 13, December 2020; Interview 15, January 2021). One media participant believes that there is a direct link between football fan groups and Chetnik associations in BiH, Serbia, and Russia, with Russia clearly (financially) supporting these ideas (Interview 8, December 2020). This observation aligns with findings from recent research, which highlights how extremist ideologies and ethno-nationalist narratives are often propagated within football fan groups in BiH, serving as a platform for fostering division and violence (Testa 2022, 6). In that sense, formal institutions create an environment that enables informal groups to act. This is visible in both religious and far-right extremism. One interviewee added that official transnational influence does not intend to strategically advance radicalization but rather uses a divide-and-conquer strategy (Interview 7, January 2021). In some cases, assistance can be conditioned on different issues, particularly in an investment-dependent society where the process of influencing people’s ideas is straightforward. A respondent from an international organization considered that the influence of the diaspora should also not be ruled out in this context (Interview 2, February 2021).

One interviewee believed that there must be a personal identification with global threats or occurrences in order to see its repercussions in BiH, such as with the Russian and ISIS channels that are currently relevant (Interview 1, January 2021). In his work, Jusić (2017) states that a silent battle for the “spirit of Islam” in BiH began during the war in the 1990s between different interpretations of religion (Jusić 2017, 44). Even nowadays, students from the Balkans leave for the Gulf States, where they are being educated in more conservative interpretations, and upon return, call for the “purification” of Islam (Bećirević 2017, 22). A respondent from the media argued that influences of states such as Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Jordan are visible through scholarships schemes and training of a large number of contemporary lecturers, but at the same time that the established Salafi system in BiH is self-sustainable and does not have to rely on external financial support any longer (Interview 5, January 2021). According to a 2019 BIRN investigation, some Salafi preachers did not receive political and financial support from abroad but rather from local authorities (Balkan Insight 2019c).

Conclusion

This study enhances both theoretical and empirical insights into institutional behavior in C/PVE through three significant contributions. Firstly, it illustrates the value of new institutionalism in situations of state fragility, where competing institutional norms and practices complicate coordination efforts. The paper demonstrates the applicability of the theory by illustrating how institutions in BiH prioritize different factors of radicalization, including political grievances and global religious influences, thereby shedding light on policy fragmentation within divided societies. Secondly, it broadens the norm diffusion framework by emphasizing the conflict between internationally advocated C/PVE strategies and domestically established institutional practices. Lastly, the findings make a case for a multi-level institutional analysis that connects macro-level policy frameworks with micro-level community engagement, going beyond current studies that focus solely on individual radicalization. These contributions offer a framework for examining C/PVE in other post-conflict environments, where institutional legacies and external interventions likewise influence counter-extremism efforts.

The aims of this paper were to analyze perspectives, norms, practices, and relations of institutions and organizations in BiH that deal with C/PVE and to assess the relevance of seven predefined drivers of radicalization and their interconnectedness. The principal question guiding this paper was: How do different state institutions and organizations in BiH perceive the phenomenon of radicalization and violent extremism, and are some drivers of radicalization and violent extremism emphasized as more relevant than others by different Bosnian Herzegovinian institutions and organizations? These BiH institutions are seen as individual actors in their own rights, with distinct views and forms of action. The research covered a wide selection of state institutions, civic institutions that include civil society organizations, religious institutions and media, and international institutions. The analysis included a comprehensive overview of the complexity of C/PVE cooperation between different types of institutions, patterns of support from domestic and foreign actors, and the dynamics of establishing formal and informal communication channels. When analyzing the prevalence of drivers, the goal was to map institutional (macro) perceptions of the drivers of violent extremism and their interactions. These include drivers of territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political ideas, cultural factors, religion, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics.

Regarding relations between institutions, the paper explored norms and practices and especially focused on examples from work on C/PVE. Most institutions show clear and specific forms of institutional practices. They place a special focus on the necessity of preventive C/PVE actions, and some have separate departments that specifically deal with this topic. CSOs try to fill the gaps in the work of state institutions, the media provide space for critical analysis of the consequences and causes of radicalization, and international institutions usually adopt a multi-sectoral approach with a special focus on young leaders. The perception of threats by international organizations strongly affects behav-

iors and institutional practices. Several changes in the last couple of years, such as the focus on the returning foreign fighter phenomenon, new activities of right-wing groups, emerging radical milieus, engaging local levels in C/PVE, and perceptions of extremism beyond religious Islam, have found their way in the programs and activities of most institutions. The Ministry of Security stands out as the central partner of most institutions, and the institutional cooperation nexus in BiH has its dynamics, with most financial and knowledge support coming from foreign partners. Lastly, the communication aspect of the collaboration proved to be complex, with pronounced limitations towards certain issues or actors, such as the media.

Regarding the drivers of violent extremism, this research has shown that not all are considered equally relevant by institutions and organizations in BiH, even though there is no complete agreement. Territorial inequalities are largely seen as going hand in hand with individual perceptions of marginalization and injustice and are no longer linked to a rural-urban divide. This is not seen as an independent driving force. Likewise, economic deprivation was described as an indirect driver manifested at the individual level, functioning in combination with other drivers such as education. As with territorial inequalities, individual perceptions, lack of perspective, professional success, and low self-esteem play important roles. The driver's political ideas, which include expressions of nationalism, are primarily reflected through political polarization based on ethnic narratives and vulnerability. Research has shown that radical nationalist groups and organizations mostly do not engage in party politics. They do not aim to incorporate their values into the political system to produce change but rather seek to undermine or replace it. Cultural factors as a driver are primarily related to a "way of life," which in the context of BiH can be seen through the prism of sub-cultures and forms of identification but also through the issue of toxic masculinity. Regarding the driver of religion, there is still a significant misuse to legitimize individual opinions and worldviews, foremost seen in the assumption of Islam as the dominant factor of radicalization. The research has repeatedly found this to be a false narrative in BiH, where moderate and official Islam can serve as a protective factor against radicalization. The digital literacy driver has proven to be instrumental in spreading radical ideas simply and effectively. This represents a significant challenge for analysis because of the different ways individuals consume online content as well as the lack of institutional action to remove unwanted content from social networks. Finally, the last driver's transnational dynamics are seen as significant and manifest, both through actions originating in the immediate neighborhood of the Balkans and from further abroad.

Institutions matter for they shape views towards societal issues, and the policies that they create are pivotal for any planned action at the community and individual levels. If institutional actors working on C/PVE share similar norms, values, and practices towards the complex societal issues they engage with, the impact of their work can be much more significant. Moreover, if their interactions can create synergies that build on each other rather than compete, this enables better and more strategic use of institutional resources.

Our research on BiH has shown that institutions are largely able to fulfill this role, even though there are still many deficiencies. This paper also points to the following steps, both in policy and research, starting from the Ministry of Security. It also points to international and civil society organizations that should strengthen their programs and capacities to carry out activities in vulnerable communities or centers for social work that deal with individuals.

Acknowledgements

This research, conducted within the framework of the project Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies (CONNEKT), has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 870772. More information available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu>.

References

- Ahić, Jasmin. 2022. "Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Bosnia – 'Circle of Lack of Knowledge and Islamophobia.'" *Kriminalističke Teme* 22 (3–4): 13–32.
- Atlantic Initiative. 2018. "Countering Violent Extremism Baseline Program: Research Findings – Bosnia & Herzegovina". *Atlantic Initiative*. Accessed January 25, 2025. <https://atlantskainicijativa.org/wp-content/uploads/CVE-Baseline-Research-Findings-December-2018.pdf>.
- Avant, Deborah D., Martha Finnemore, and Susan K. Sell. 2010. *Who Governs the Globe?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Azinović, Vlado, and Muhamed Jusić. 2016. *The new Lure of the Syrian War – The foreign fighters' Bosnian contingent*. Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative.
- Balkan Insight. 2019a. "Balkan 'Social Media Jihadis' More Dangerous than Ex-Fighters". December 17. Accessed January 25, 2024. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/17/social-media-jihadis-greater-balkan-threat-than-ex-fighters/>.
- Balkan Insight. 2019b. *Bosnia Failing in Fight against Extremism Online*. August 13. Accessed January 25, 2024. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/13/bosnia-failing-in-fight-against-extremism-online/>.
- Balkan Insight. 2019c. "Bosnian Taxpayers Funding Spread of Hardline Salafi Message". December 16. Accessed January 25, 2024. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/16/bosnian-taxpayers-funding-spread-of-hardline-salafi-message/>.
- Bećirević, Edina, Majda Halilović, and Vlado Azinović. 2017. "Western Balkans extremism research forum – Literature review Radicalisation and violent extremism in the Western Balkans". Sarajevo: British Council.
- Bećirević, Edina. 2018. "Extremism research forum Bosnia and Herzegovina report". Sarajevo: British Council.
- Buka. 2021. "Nikola Vučić: Šta je muškost desničarima?" February 1. Accessed February 1, 2024. <https://6yka.com/novosti/nikola-vucic-sta-je-muskost-desnicarima>.
- Cairney, Paul. 2012. *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- CONNKT Project. 2020. Accessed April 5, 2025. <https://h2020connekt.eu/>.
- DARE. 2020. "Policy brief Drivers of Self-Radicalisation and Digital Sociability". Accessed January 25, 2024. <https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=58640>.
- Hamidičević, Sanjin, and Benjamin Plevljak. 2018. "Bosnia and Herzegovina". In *Returning from violence: How to tackle the foreign fighters' problem in the Western Balkans?* Budapest: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade.
- Hasić, Jasmin, Melisa H. Mehmedović, and Mahir Sijamija. 2020. "Bosnia and Herzegovina." In *Perception about Radicalization by Young People in the Western Balkan Region: Strengthening Resilience of the Youth against Radicalization in the Western Balkans Project*, edited by Ján Cingel, 29–50. GLOBSEC.
- Hirkić, Muamer, and Sead Turčalo. 2023. "Building Resilience or Increasing Vulnerability to Extremism in Communities: Different Perspectives on the Role of Religious Actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina." In *Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism:*

- An Actor-Centric Approach*, edited by Juline Beaujouan, Veronique Dudouet, Maja Halilovic-Pastuovic, Johanna-Maria Hülzer, Marie Kortam, and Amjed Rasheed, 124–138. Routledge.
- Hirkić, Muamer, Damir Kapidžić, and Sead Turčalo. 2022. “Strategic Policy Suggestions for a New Approach in Countering Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” In *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans: Islam, Identity and Measures Countering Radicalisation*, edited by Michele Brunelli, 148–192. Paris: L’Harmattan.
- International Organization for Migration. n.d. “About IOM”. Accessed January 25, 2024. <https://www.iom.int/>.
- Interview 1. In person interview with a male representative from BiH state institution, Sarajevo, January 2021.
- Interview 2. Online interview with a female representative from international organization. Sarajevo, February 2021.
- Interview 3. Online interview with a female representative from civil society organization, Sarajevo, January 2021.
- Interview 4. Online interview with a female representative from civil society organization, Sarajevo, December 2020.
- Interview 5. Online interview with a male representative from the media, Sarajevo, January 2021.
- Interview 6. Online interview with a female representative from international organization, Sarajevo, December 2020.
- Interview 7. Online interview with a male representative from international organization, Sarajevo, January 2021.
- Interview 8. Online interview with a male representative from the media, Sarajevo, December 2020.
- Interview 9. Online interview with a female representative from BiH state institution, Sarajevo, February 2021.
- Interview 10. Online interview with a female representative from BiH state institution, Sarajevo, January 2021.
- Interview 11. In person interview with a female representative from religious institution, Sarajevo, January 2021.
- Interview 12. Online interview with a female representative from civil society organization, Sarajevo, January 2021.
- Interview 13. In person interview with a female representative from the media, Sarajevo, December 2020.
- Interview 14. Online interview with a female representative from civil society organization, Sarajevo, January 2021.
- Interview 15. In person interview with a male representative from BiH state institution 2, Sarajevo, January 2021.
- Islamska zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini. n.d. Accessed January 25, 2024. <https://www.islamskazajednica.ba/>.
- Jusić, Muhamed. 2017. “The Complex Ecology of Islamic Narratives and Movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. In *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and*

- the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, edited by Vlado Azinović, 43–58. Sarajevo: School of Political Science and Atlantic Initiative.
- Kapidžić, Damir, Anida Dudić, Veldin Kadić, and Sead Turčalo. 2020. *Country Reports on National Approaches to Extremism: Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA Region and the Balkans – Bosnia and Herzegovina (D3.2)*. CONNEKT Country Reports. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.
- Kapidžić, Damir, Muamer Hirkić, Anida Dudić, Sead Turčalo, Sanela Bašić, and Sarina Bakić. 2021. *Country Papers on Macro-Level Drivers: Drivers of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the Light of State Dynamics in MENA and the Balkans – Bosnia and Herzegovina (D4.1)*. CONNEKT Country Papers on Macro-Level Drivers. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.
- Kapidžić, Damir, Muamer Hirkić, and Sead Turčalo. 2025. "Contextualizing Institutional Approaches to Radicalization in the Balkans, Middle East and North Africa." *Journal of Regional Security* 20 (1): 5–22. DOI: 10.5937/jrs20-43737.
- March, James. G., and Johan P. Olsen. 2008. *Elaborating the 'New Institutionalism'*. Oxford Handbooks Online.
- Metodieva, Asya. 2021. "The Radical Milieu and Radical Influencers of Bosnian Foreign Fighters." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46 (9): 1725–1744.
- Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina. n.d. "About Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina". Accessed January 25, 2024. <http://www.msb.gov.ba/onama/default.aspx?id=3053&langTag=en-US>.
- Oruč, Nermin, and Nikolina Obradović. 2020. "Drivers of radicalisation of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina". *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja* 33 (1): 2559–2573.
- OSCE. 2019a. *Reporting on Violent Extremism and Terrorism – Guidelines for Journalists*. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Accessed January 25, 2024. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/2/442381.pdf>.
- OSCE. 2019b. *The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe*. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Accessed January 25, 2024. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/2/400241_1.pdf.
- OSCE. 2019c. *Vodič za prevenciju radikalizacije i nasilnog ekstremizma kroz odgojno-obrazovni process*. OSCE POLIS. Accessed January 25, 2024. <https://polis.osce.org/file/25802/download?token=ltJjU1xl>.
- Paton, Nathalie, ed. 2020. *Country-Level Reports on Drivers of Self-Radicalisation & Digital Sociability*. DARE: Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality.
- Perry, Valery. 2016. *Initiatives to Prevent/Counter Violent Extremism in South East Europe A Survey of Regional Issues, Initiatives and Opportunities*. Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council.
- Poli, Alexandra, and Onur Arun. 2019. "Meta-Ethnographic Synthesis: Qualitative Studies on Inequality and Radicalisation". DARE: Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality.

- Preljević, Hamza. 2017. "Preventing Religious Radicalization in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Role of the BiH Islamic Community." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37 (4): 371–392.
- Richardson, Cara, Katherine M. Berlouis, and Paul A. Cameron. 2017. "Radicalisation of Young Adults in the Balkan States: Counter-Measures, Healthcare Provision, and Community Involvement." *Journal for Deradicalization* 11: 87–111.
- Soufan Center. 2020. *The Nexus Between Human Security and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism: Case Studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Niger, and Tunisia*. The Soufan Center. Accessed January 25, 2024. <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Soufan-Center-Report-The-Nexus-between-Human-Security-and-Preventing-Countering-Violent-Extremism-March-2020.pdf>.
- Testa, Alberto. 2022. "Waves of Extremism: An Applied Ethnographic Analysis of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Football Terraces." *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* 4: Article 770441.
- Torrekens, Corinne, and Daphné de le Vingne. 2020. *Concepts and Analytical Framework: Debating Notions and Approaches to Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.