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Beyond Securitizing Radicalization and Violent Extremism: Key Findings from the Balkans and the MENA Region

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Abstract: This conclusion to the special issue analyzes the findings of six country studies in the Balkans and MENA region, which investigate the drivers behind radicalization and violent extremism among youth in this region. The country studies in this special issue focus on a macro-level approach, highlighting the institutional approaches to the prevention of these phenomena. The macro-level findings reveal several trends that also correspond to research in the field, including the securitized approach that states adopt in preventing radicalization and violent extremism, as well as the focus on Islam as the ideological background of such tendencies. The conclusion also engages with the innovative aspects of the country studies, including the emphasis on the contexts of radicalization and violent extremism, which are analyzed through the use of the seven drivers, as well as the cases of right-wing radicalization. Lastly, the conclusion reflects on the synergies between the country studies and the literature on violent extremism, highlighting new areas of research and interconnections with other theoretical traditions, such as investigations of masculinity and new methods of radicalization.

Keywords: radicalization, violent extremism, Balkans, MENA, right-wing radicalization

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Introduction

Radicalization and violent extremism were dominant terms in policy debates across the world in the context of the US-led "war on terror" after 9/11 and the rise of Daesh and several high-profile terrorist attacks in Europe during the 2010s. While subsequent crises, including the COVID pandemic and geopolitics following the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, have eclipsed these terms, they remain deeply engrained in government policies across the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region and Europe. Furthermore, if one considers these phenomena detached from any single religion or other reductive explanatory factors, it remains relevant in various contexts. In fact, as the articles in this special issue highlight, while there are multiple drivers of radicalization and violent extremism, there are also multiple directions in which such processes can be expressed, from religious extremism to football hooliganism to radical nationalism. This article brings together these diverse considerations, both the drivers of violent extremism and radicalization and their expression in the Balkans and MENA, thus offering a novel view by comparing two regions rarely part of comparative research when investigating the two phenomena. We identify how the findings of separate case studies in this special issue connect to broader research on radicalization and violent extremism, highlighting commonalities and differences, particularly noting the gaps in the research and the focus areas for future research.

Researching radicalization and violent extremism in the MENA and the Balkans presents several challenges and opportunities. First, there are the challenges which are posed by defining radicalization and violent extremism, which, despite the wealth of literature as well as institutional approaches to the phenomena, remain numerous and diverse. Second, some challenges are determined by the context, namely the two regions' differences in population and size and their geographical location, which already set two separate backgrounds for research and partly explain why they are rarely comparatively analyzed. The demographic picture between these regions varies substantially. Notably, the MENA region has many young people (Bieber and Pollozhani 2021), while only Kosovo shares that characteristic in the Balkans. There is also a more evident regional inequality within the countries of the MENA region than in the Balkans, centering research on some areas which have been left out of economic or social benefits and services. Third, the terminology of radicalization and violent extremism, especially in both regions, often has strong normative assumptions and focuses on particular groups and identities. Thus, research has to be careful not to reiterate these assumptions and reproduce mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization. A fourth challenge is that MENA countries under analysis have been bordering on countries with active violent conflicts and high levels of state repression. In contrast, the violent conflicts in the Balkans ended over two decades ago.

Yet, the two regions also share considerable commonalities, as the individual country articles have shown, constituting a benefit in comparing the two regions. Years of political instability in both regions have led to a lack of trust in institutions, while the securitized approach that governments have adopted to counter violent extremism in both regions

has led to the alienation of diverse societal actors in tackling the phenomenon. Significantly, the globalized narratives and debates on violent extremism and radicalization have influenced youth in both regions in developing their narratives of injustice and unfairness which necessitates that research also covers narratives across the two regions to improve our understanding of these issues. The lessons we highlight within this article draw comparatively from the two regions to advance both the knowledge we have of radicalization and violent extremism and broaden the scope of research across the two regions.

In analyzing the macro-level approach to the study of radicalization and violent extremism in the Balkans and MENA, two core features set the stage. Firstly, the centrality of institutions, particularly those mandating and monitoring security and religion, necessitates the new institutionalism approach employed by the authors of the articles of the special issue (Kapidžić, Hirkić, and Turčalo 2025). The second feature consists of the drivers of radicalization and violent extremism, which form the framework of the research, namely religion, territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political grievances, cultural factors and leisure opportunities, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics. These two features already set a context for the research, which places emphasis on a top-down view as seen by institutions, civil society organizations, and international organizations.

This top-down view clarifies how institutions think of radicalization and violent extremism and how they have tackled it. The first aspects that become apparent in the different country analyses, and which combine the pillars, are the securitized approach of institutions and religion as a driver of this approach. Namely, the articles focus primarily on Islam as a backdrop of religious ideology. However, this is not necessarily based on the empirical analysis of the causes of radicalization and violent extremism, at least not the only driver of importance. This focus is somewhat dictated by the importance given to religion by state actors in response to radicalization and violent extremism. Thus, religion is the primary driver of institutional responses but not necessarily the leading source for radicalization.

This article compares the findings from the different papers contained within this special issue; however, it also expands to other case studies in the two regions using the same methodology to support its findings.[1] It juxtaposes the findings of the case studies with research on violent extremism and radicalization. It aims to position the new research in a broader scope of academic debate and research. Particularly, the article focuses on three aspects divided into three sections: the institutional approaches to radicalization, where the issue of securitization and the focus on religious radicalization (particularly Islamist radicalization) are discussed; secondly, the article focuses on the seven drivers of VE and

1 As noted in the introductory chapter of this special issue (Kapidžić, Hirkić, and Turčalo 2025), this article draws on findings from both the individual country articles included herein and the country case studies conducted within the CONNEKT project, which was implemented across eight countries in the MENA and Balkan regions: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia.

radicalization which form the framework of the case studies within this issue; and lastly, the more novel aspect which emanates from the research, namely the radicalization from the right.

While right-wing radicalization and violent extremism are not novel in terms of research, the case studies from the Balkans highlight new developments that have been so far lacking or have been marginal in the study of VE in the region. The focus on far-right extremism also makes evident the gaps in the research of VE, both in terms of the institutional approaches, the lack of preparedness or willingness to tackle other forms of radicalization, and the conceptual challenges which have developed as a result of the focus of research into the securitization aspects of VE emanating in the post-9/11 context. There has been some new research trying to test this framework; for instance, Tepšić and Džuverović (2023) have attempted to study the far right in the Serbian context using the conceptual framework of clientelism and informality to highlight how the far right became the political mainstream. The conclusion of the article reflects on the challenges and opportunities ahead for researching VE and radicalization in these two regions and more broadly.

Institutional Approaches to Radicalization and Violent Extremism

While religion does serve as a crucial driver of radicalization, the various articles in the special and the research within CONNEKT show that other factors affect it as well and, at times, play a more significant role. In terms of institutional approaches, religion, and more particularly Islam, and responses to Islamist radicalization form the central pillar of policy making. The example of Bulgaria highlights how the focus on Islam as the driver of institutional responses to radicalization and violent extremism is misguided. Namely, as the authors note, even though the far-right poses the greatest challenge in terms of radicalization and violent extremism in the country, state approaches. Strategies have focused exclusively on Islamist threats despite the local Islamic community's resistance to the phenomenon (Dzhekova, Ralchev, and Stoynova 2021). Other countries, both in the MENA and the Balkans display this pattern as well, whether they are Muslim majority countries or not.

In the MENA region, there is a plethora of religious institutions dedicated to countering extremism and radicalization, including ministries such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Tunisia or the Ministry of Awqaf[2] and Islamic Affairs in Jordan, as well as offices such as the now defunct Strategic Communications Unit in Jordan or the High Council of Ulemas in Morocco. There is also a strong focus of state policy on developing a moderate or middle-way narrative of Islam for wide social consumption. The control of the practice of religion, in the form of licensing preachers as in Tunisia or monitoring them closely,

2 Awqaf (singular waqf) means assets which are donated, bequeathed or purchased for specific charitable uses which serve the community.

shows a heavy involvement of the state in the religious lives of citizens in the region. In the Balkans, too, state institutions, as well as CSOs, focus primarily on Islam as a driver of their responses to radicalization and violent extremism, particularly on the issue of foreign fighters coming from Syria as well as Ukraine. However, Glušac (2020) has shown that the prosecution of these two groups was not equal. Indeed, the state control of religion and its broader anti-terrorism strategies are centered around Islam, despite religious Christian groups also practicing violent and radical means of engagement, as in the case of North Macedonia and Bulgaria, which will be explored below.

Religion and security have defined institutional responses, and this has become increasingly problematic and ill-suited for tackling violent extremism and radicalization in both regions. Part of the reason is due to the incongruence of the driver of religion and radicalization; namely, while religion is a crucial factor, it gains power in congruence with other factors. As Kundnani (2012, 21) notes, "[w]hile a Salafi semantic register might be part of the way that groups articulate their narrative, this alone is not evidence that religious ideology is causing violence, but merely that, within this milieu, legitimacy is secured using theological references." It appears that countries are aware of the gaps in programs that mainly focus on religion as a driver due to recent shifts towards softer and development-oriented approaches, as highlighted by the case of Egypt (Kassem 2022). However, heavily securitized systems have maintained their centrality in dealing with these issues. This has led to the establishment of dangerous trends, as shown particularly by the case of Tunisia, where the authors highlight how the education system and prisons have become "incubators of violence" (Chirchi et al. 2021; Chirchi and Ghribi 2025) instead of creating solutions. These are both state systems where youth fall through the cracks and feel disenchanted, as shown by the high student drop-out rates (Chirchi et al. 2021; Chirchi and Ghribi 2025). Indeed, there is a common trend of institutions failing youth in the MENA region, because the states in question have not sought to understand them but control them. Namely, the highly securitized system of preventing violent extremism and radicalization in these politically volatile environments has also served to stifle opposition and control disruption, with prison as a key punitive measure. The lack of transparency due to the high level of securitization has also contributed to a lack of understanding of how effective such government measures have been.

The Balkans offers wider access to the institutional framework countering violent extremism and radicalization. However, the focus on a particular religion has also strengthened narratives of victimization and injustice, which fuel radicalization and violent extremism (Torrekens and de le Vingne 2020). In North Macedonia (Georgieva et al. 2025) and Bulgaria (Dzhekova, Ralchev, and Stoynova 2021), the religious category overlaps with non-majority national and ethnic communities, further adding to the marginalization of these communities, particularly in the case of the Roma community in Bulgaria. However, as with the MENA region, the institutional approaches in the Balkans show that they fail to consider the political, economic, and societal context which leads towards radicalization, particularly of youth. This lack of contextualizing radicalization was also prevalent in the post-2001 literature, which in many ways shaped policies, as highlighted

by Kundnani (2012). However, while research has sought to expand beyond the scope of the post-2001 world, institutional approaches have failed. All the articles discussed in this special issue have either hinted at or outlined the difficulty of being a young individual in these countries. Youth is vulnerable to weak education systems, lack of opportunities and perspective, and low employment levels, which particularly affects countries such as Egypt in MENA and Kosovo in the Balkans, where the proportion of youth is higher. These countries also lack spaces where youth can spend their free and leisurely time, as well as lack systems that help in dealing with the challenges of complicated emotions and frustrations of youth.

Furthermore, the focus in radicalization studies, including the articles herein, is primarily based on the male youth experiences (as shown by the mention of coffee places or football fan groups as spaces of socialization), noting an even more severe lack of understanding and accommodation of young women within these countries. Formal policies of radicalization and violent extremism largely ignore these issues, although practitioners seem to be aware of these gaps. This issue is not only relevant in the two regions under study, as Jiménez Sánchez (2022) has shown how the EU strategies to counter-terrorism, mainly as related to women from European countries who joined Daesh, do not adequately account for gender and usually employ stereotypical notions due to the highly securitized approach.

Lastly, the securitized approach has also meant an exclusion of other actors, such as civil society and academia. This exclusion has also hindered a comprehensive approach to countering violent extremism and radicalization. While there has been a shift towards softer measures in all countries, with the recognition that there needs to be a wider, whole of society approach, the centralized and securitized approach remains predominant as the government response to these phenomena. This approach has also meant more centralized information, which also makes it hard for academia and civil society institutions to assess and monitor these measures as well as potential abuses that occur as a result. The exclusion of the CSOs by state institutions has been somewhat assuaged by international organizations who have supported CSOs financially to enable them to work in the field of prevention and resilience.

However, this has led to a dependency on donors and created donor-driven approaches that do not necessarily fit the needs and challenges on the ground. Namely, donors have also been influenced by the global post-2001 trends, in particular the ascent of ISIS in the mid-2010s, therefore maintaining the focus on Islamist radicalization and dealing with target communities, which have further served to stigmatize them. The vision for a potential way forward remains blurry, even though various countries are trying new approaches to countering violent extremism. For instance, while the authors on Jordan note the shift towards a broader language utilized in prevention, with the support of donors, they also highlight the risk that by broadening the scope too widely and by changing the language used to address these issues, the focus on prevention of radicalization is lost (Mhadeen, Bint Feisal, and Štikovac Clark 2021; Bondokji et al. 2025). This lack of clarity is also re-

flected in literature and in analyses here, which leads to further exploration of the drivers of radicalization.

Furthermore, there is a tension between different actors and the way that they define violent extremism and radicalization. As the authors argue in the Jordanian case, there exist "historical shifts in the positioning of key institutional actors towards radicalization and VE, but equally, [within] the state's institutions, the view on how to prevent and counter VE differs in line with priorities of different state entities" (Mhadeen, Bint Feisal, and Štikovac Clark 2021, 6). This difference in agendas and definitions highlights the importance of the exclusion or inclusion of diverse actors. For instance, in the case of Jordan, initially, the development of strategies for preventing and countering VE were strictly confidential and undisclosed to the public except shown in closed-door meetings to international donors and embassies and not to the local civil society actors. Eventually, the government actors acknowledged the limitations of their approach. They diversified these approaches towards different programs, such as the "Dialogue with Takfirs" program, which was implemented in cooperation with academics and civil society actors. CSOs in Jordan, in the meantime, adopted resilience-based approaches and moved away from targeting 'hotspots,' which, in their view, contributed to the stigmatization of certain groups (Bondokji et al. 2025).

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while central institutions have engaged with the CSOs, their efforts have remained limited to policy-making and not engaging with communities (Hirkić et al. 2025). Hence community engagement is largely left to the CSOs which aim to fill the gap left by institutions. In the case of Kosovo, CSOs have been more integrally involved in the development of strategies and have become among the institutions that target PVE (Peci 2025). However, if we were to look at this picture more broadly, it would be hard to understand the role that CSOs play in engagement and what their benefits are. One clear result is that CSOs contribute to a diverse and multi-pronged approach to PVE. However, it still remains unclear whether an expansion of methods necessarily leads to a better understanding of PVE. For these dynamics to be better understood, it is imperative that there is more transparency on the side of institutions, to assess their approaches, and that there is more integration of methods on the side of CSOs, meaning a more streamlined and intentional approach to violent extremism and radicalization.

The Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism

When considering the drivers of violent extremism and radicalization in the two regions, a contrast emerges between religion as the primary driver of institutional responses versus its actual role in radicalizing youth becomes apparent when focusing on the other six drivers highlighted in the introduction (territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political grievances, cultural factors and leisure opportunities, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics). Namely, research underlines that the drivers studied within each country are closely intertwined and that even when religion constitutes an important or

key driver, it is not so on its own. Only in combination with other drivers does religion gain salience in pushing toward radicalization or violent extremism. The interdependency of drivers creates a more complex context, particularly when analyzing the radicalization of youth, a context where the loss of hope, the creation and sustenance of injustice frames fueled by both national and international narratives, and the perception or the existence of marginalization and discrimination create a fertile background for radicalization. The larger picture painted within the different country analyses is one of apathetic youth who have limited opportunities and have lost trust in state institutions to resolve their concerns. Jordan has a low turn-out in elections (Mhadeen, Bint Feisal, and Štikovac Clark 2021; Bondokji et al. 2025, 158), which is also a common thread in the other countries of both regions, while Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia speak more broadly of the failure of these states towards their youth. These aspects reveal much of the influence that politics has on radicalization. The driver of political grievances and their importance pushes the research towards investigating the context, which, as Crettiez (2016) critiques, is often lost in radicalization and violent extremism literature.

Political grievances form a significant driver when combined with other drivers, such as culture, education, or territorial inequalities, to form a context marked by marginalization and inequality. In the case of the Western Balkans, the inequality frame forms a powerful background for radicalization. The article on Bosnia and Herzegovina finds that the more suitable driver of radicalization is an individual perception of marginalization, injustice, and disenfranchisement of a particular territorial area (Kapidžić, Hirkić, and Turčalo 2025). While for Kosovo, religion is the key driver, the international and the national responses to violent extremism have increased the perception of injustice and created a frame of victimization for radicalized youth (Peci 2025). They also note that religion became particularly salient after the war at the end of the 1990s, amid political turmoil and instability. This sense of injustice is further exacerbated by the ethnic division, particularly in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. As Azinović has noted, "[t]he sense of being trapped in a hostile ethnic, religious, and political environment may soon lead some young Bosniaks and Albanians to develop a 'Gaza Strip mentality,' as they increasingly feel as though they live under a sort of societal occupation and forced isolation" (2017, 20). In the countries of the MENA political instability also defines the context, as well as responses to radicalization. In Egypt, radicalization and violent extremism are largely seen as the monopoly of the Muslim Brotherhood, and state responses to stifle it have meant not just seeking to control religion but also political opponents.

Another significant driver is economic deprivation, which, like political grievances, gains significance when combined with the other drivers. Unemployment, particularly unemployment of youth, is a recurring issue in both regions, particularly so in the case of Egypt and Kosovo, where the proportion of youth is higher, while their opportunities are lower. The driver of economic deprivation is not a key driver in the sense that it is sometimes assumed in the literature, meaning it does not relate to the assumption that those who come from poorer families are more prone to radicalization. Instead, the picture is one where the overall uncertainty created by economic deprivation and a lack of a clear vision of the

future leads to feelings of hopelessness about the future and the environment of young people. As Baffa et al. have also noted, "even if there is no direct connection between unemployment and radicalization, failed expectations can lead to a sense of discontentment, depression, and restlessness that feeds radicalization" (Baffa et al. 2019, as quoted in Torrekens and de le Vingne 2020, 24). Indeed, the feelings of hopelessness and injustice result from the political and economic instability of these regions, where young people find themselves most vulnerable and prone to searching alternative pathways, spaces and narratives towards finding a community or purpose. While the authors of the different articles have different perspectives on economic deprivation, where in some cases it is more of a context-related driver, while in others a driver ascribed to individuals, it is still a driver that can be found throughout, more so in the MENA region.

Literature on radicalization and violent extremism places the frame of injustice or unfairness as an important indicator. Borum's (2003) four-step model takes the categorization of events as unfair as the second step in radicalization, while Moghaddam's (2005) staircase model also sees the inception of radicalization in the perceptions of equity that a person has and the opportunities they see in their personal mobility. The different articles in this special issue show that the countries analyzed lack opportunities for their citizens due to political instability and economic grievances. For instance, in the case of Jordan, the authors note that the common denominator to radicalization dynamics in the country marked "increased hostility towards the state and its institutions" (Mhadeen, Bint Feisal, and Štikovac Clark 2021), this hostility towards the state can be connected to dissatisfaction with it and its policies. As the findings of the paper point out, the drivers of radicalization mentioned by interlocutors include family dynamics, domestic violence, youth's idle time, marginalization, lack of social justice and low levels of political participation, and poor access to jobs and educational opportunities (Mhadeen, Bint Feisal, and Štikovac Clark 2021; Bondokji et al. 2025, 158). All of these areas, though some seemingly belonging to the 'private' sphere, are issues that can and should be addressed by public policies, and which in the case of Jordan are not. Furthermore, like other countries of the MENA region, Jordan sees economic deprivation as the most prominent driver. Another alarming fact that displays the dissatisfaction of youth is the high drop-out rate in Tunisia; namely, the authors note that there are more than a million school dropouts and that 2/3 of inmates in prisons are children and adolescents (Chirchi et al. 2021; Chirchi and Ghribi 2025) showing very concretely the precarity of youth. The authors further highlight how ISIS ideologies are seen as promoting a sense of belonging for young people (Chirchi et al. 2021; Chirchi and Ghribi 2025).

Lastly, in the Balkans, the Bosnia and Herzegovina case highlights how the individual perception of marginalization, injustice, and disenfranchisement form a significant driver in particular territorial areas. The articles oftentimes mention the word hopelessness when referring to motivators or drivers of radicalization in the country (Kapidžić et al. 2021). This hopelessness is felt within contexts of inequality and vulnerability for populations, particularly youth and marginalized communities. However, there is also a danger of placing too much focus on context. Namely, while context matters, it does not have enough

explanatory power in the sense that while there might be a lot of disillusioned young people, they do not all turn towards extremist ideologies; in fact, very few do. The question thus arises why, in such contexts, those few radicalize, whereas most others who experience a similar environment do not. This is the limit imposed by the macro-level research. However, it still is telling that the macro-level analysis has led to an identification of the emotional dimension behind radicalization (Zembylas 2021).

One display of the manifestation of these feelings of hopelessness, or the emotional dimension, is the aspect of masculinity or toxic masculinity, which is advanced in the case of Jordan and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and indirectly also in Bulgaria. Jensen and Larsen (Jensen and Larsen 2021) argue that literature on masculinity can help bridge the gap between macro- and micro-level research. They consider that gender and masculinity are a "blind spot" (Jensen and Larsen 2021, 430) in radicalization research, which can draw away from the individual or psychological analysis of radicalization criticized by Kundnani (2012). In the study on Jordan, masculinity comes to the fore in the analysis of the Al Zarqawi, the godfather of ISIS, whose former criminal record contains counts of sexual assault. The authors conclude that ideology is an umbrella used to mainstream other grievances, while the case of Al Zarqawi is used to show a case of a "newer generation" (Mhadeen, Bint Feisal, and Štikovac Clark 2021; Bondokji et al. 2025, 149) of radicalized persons where it can be argued that the individual perceptions of masculinity can have an effect on paths which assert violence.

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina highlights the issue of masculinity more explicitly as one interviewee identifies the culture of a patriarchal society and "toxic masculinity" (Hirkić et al. 2025), which affects families and individuals. The reference to masculinity or to the overarching societal mores its interpretation entails is not explored in depth in these articles. However, it does point towards a somewhat novel direction that would engage with different literature not usually found in radicalization research, as Jensen and Larsen argue. Opening the research towards gender both in terms of the inclusion of women and in terms of the analysis of the influence of gender norms and the expectations that these norms create can shed more light on future research. Research on masculinity, too, can shed light into gender relations, particularly as masculinity and the frustration that is built from it among youth, as literature on incels [involuntary celibates] shows, is always constructed in relation to women and what femininity means within a specific context (Daly and Reed 2022). Furthermore, the aspect of gender and masculinity is a common thread not only when it comes to Islamist radicalization but also far-right radicalization. As such, utilizing masculinity as a framework of research can help in understanding what it is exactly that makes young men radicalize, removing the focus from religion to understand the individual dynamics of radicalization and how other societal norms may be more influential in shaping the path towards violent extremism.

Radicalization from the Right

The research of the different articles in the special issue and the CONNEKT project researching Islamist radicalization, to find far right radicalization when researching in the field. Thus, there is a balancing act to understand the drivers of violent extremism among those who are influenced by religion and ideology. However, as highlighted above, there can be a common thread that provides a framework for analyzing the paths of radicalization of different individuals and groups. Tahir Abbas (2020) offers the concept of "crisis of masculinity" as one aspect that is shared between the radical Islamist and radical far-right groups. As Abbas notes, "[a] crisis of masculinity is at the center of many of the predicaments facing marginalized communities, underpinned by a lack of social mobility, persistent unemployment, and political disenfranchisement" (Abbas 2020, 7). This statement rolls masculinity into the other drivers used in the framework of the research presented by the various articles. The sense of disenfranchisement and the fact or perception of marginalization combine to create a feeling of danger, or rather that values, such as those upheld in patriarchal structures, are falling apart.

Additionally, the protests against Bulgaria's ratification of the Istanbul Convention display how masculinity, religion, and radicalism combine to mobilize in "defense" of values grounded in exclusionary practices and against the LGBTQI+ community. Interestingly, these groups, though religious, as many were shown to have ties to the Christian Orthodox and Christian Catholic churches, and radical in their narrative and methods, have received less attention in both research (Kursani 2018) and policy-making in the Balkan region. One of the reasons is that these far-right groups are often part of mainstream politics. As Kelly shows, "[f]ar right groups are shown to be enabled by mainstream politics and institutions which agree with some of their extreme ideas and fail to clamp down on groups" (Kelly 2019, 2). The Bulgarian case shows how the Patriotic Front, a far-right coalition, entered the governing coalition after the 2017 elections. Thus, while far-right politics and policies are extreme, and their methods radical, they become more often part of the mainstream.

This tendency is dangerous, particularly considering that in the Balkans, most radical or violent events were caused by far-right groups and individuals. Such violent instances include the storming of the Parliament in North Macedonia, the so-called Bloody Thursday (Kambovski, Georgieva, and Trajanovski 2021; Georgieva et al. 2025), which saw various far right groups directly challenge and violate key democratic institution in the country. Bulgaria, too, has seen far-right mobilization, particularly against marginalized groups – the Roma community being a common target. As Buljubašić notes, in the Balkan countries, the right-wing extremist "radicalization is mainly top-down and reciprocal; a sense of threat, fear and mistrust between ethnic groups have the potential to feed [right-wing] radicalization" (2022, 8). Piro Rexhepi recounts the events occurring in 2017 in the neighborhood of Loznitsa in Asenovgrad, Bulgaria, where the results of a fight between a group of Roma residents trying to save a drowning woman and a Bulgarian kayaking team resulted in the arrest of eight Roma residents and none of the members of the kayaking

team (Rexhepi 2023, 1). Subsequently to this event, far-right politicians from the Bulgarian National Movement Party (IMRO), who were in the government at the time of the incident, called for the "euthanization" of the arrested Roma (Rexhepi 2023, 3), and there was a rally "denouncing 'Roma aggression'" (Rexhepi 2023, 2). This example shows both how the far-right is mainstreamed into the political establishment and also, it's targeting of marginalized communities or the ethnic, racial, or religious "other."

Furthermore, the presence of both far-right and Islamist radicalization in the region requires attention on both manifestations of violent extremism, particularly as regards 'reciprocal radicalization' or "the interplay of extremism, such as Islamic extremism and far-right extremism [as] opposing groups make their views and actions more radical based on perceived threats from the other, as well as actions" (Perry 2019, as quoted in Kelly 2019, 4). Abbas (2020) stipulates that such reciprocal radicalization should be researched in ways that include the effect that societal and global inequalities have on youth radicalization. If we apply this to the articles in this issue, inequalities have a strong influence, whether it is the socio-economic inequalities remarked in the MENA region or the inequalities springing from the marginalization because of the local context, as in North Macedonia, with the minority status of the Albanian community which is also predominantly Muslim, or the Roma community in Bulgaria. In Kosovo, despite Islam being the majority religion, a strong secular nationalism, combined with the global "war on terror" and the ensuing narratives against Islamization, which have been translated in the local context, have also pushed more devout communities towards more closed and radical spaces. Most importantly, the focus on inequalities calls for methodologies that look at the wider context and the dynamics that this context entails. Therefore, the use of the seven drivers in the analysis is beneficial, as they do not only look at the influence of religion, but also the political, social, and cultural aspect as well.

The last relevant drivers are those that connect the countries under research to the world outside them. The effect of transnational networks and digital media have significantly contributed towards shaping radicalization and violent extremism (Bieber and Pollozhani 2020). They serve both to create internal narratives, such as the internalization of the narrative of the war on terror after 2001, as well as to export narratives and connect players, such as the case of foreign fighters going to fight for ISIS from the Balkans and Europe. The use of digital media, particularly during the COVID pandemic, largely changed the landscape of radicalization and transferred it online. The pandemic also made apparent other vulnerabilities in social systems, such as the healthcare system, and sharpened already existing socio-economic inequalities. Thus, where the research of this article ends, the most important questions for future research on radicalization and violent extremism begin, namely how new technologies and lack of digital literacy may interact in exploiting the social vulnerabilities of youth, particularly after crises such as COVID, or such as the wars in Ukraine or Gaza.

Namely, the seven drivers have given an overview of how tackling radicalization and violent extremism looks from the top. Through the use of the drivers, the articles create a

clearer picture of the context in which radicalization occurs, avoiding the risk of broadening their scope while still analyzing different forms of radicalization. The research ends where inequalities deepen, and that is the limit presented by the focus on institutions, which by default places the focus on the institutional approaches and understandings of the phenomena and fails to address how these institutions may create, facilitate, and deepen both the conditions of radicalization and the conditions of its prevention. The use of various drivers assuages this gap, as it moves the research towards critically assessing the societal and political context young people find themselves in, but not how they view these institutions.

The focus on institutional approaches is methodologically and conceptually limited because it focuses on the gaze of the state, namely, how a state sees an issue and constructs it, which may not correspond to the situation on the ground. The case of Jordan particularly highlights this issue. Namely, while the authors note that the state has acknowledged the limitations of the securitized approach, the development of new approaches does not always reflect the situation in the field. The authors note a change of language driven by the state and donors towards the use of terms such as 'social cohesion' and 'good/active citizenship', which they consider as an alarming development because it fails to reflect the needs and situation on the ground, mark a step in the wrong direction (Mhadeen, Bint Feisal, and Štikovac Clark 2021; Bondokji et al. 2025). This example highlights the limitation of the focus on institutions because the gaze of the state or a macro view focuses on generalized concepts and narratives, in addition to being driven by particular agendas. At the same time, the situation on the ground is not generalizable and, in addition, requires a knowledge and understanding of particularities. In the case of Jordan, the institutional approaches shift, or attempt to shift, from one categorization – mostly focused on security and ideology – to another categorization – based on cohesion. Both of these focuses, whether on ideology or cohesion, work with very broad concepts, which sweep under their conceptual carpet numerous issues. From a researcher's point of view, the focus on institutional approaches also presents challenges because of the necessity to engage with the concepts that the interlocutors use, as well as the language used by official state documents, which limits the engagement with these terms. On the other hand, this approach also offers its benefits, particularly considering that institutions have power in both setting agendas, defining terms, and addressing issues. Thus, it is important to engage with them. The authors in the various country papers in this special issue critically engage with the institutional approaches by highlighting the contexts within which they operate.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of MENA and the Western Balkans, which we sought to explore, showed a large incongruence between the dominance of a securitized institutional approach heavily centered around Islamist radicalization in both regions and the appearance of other forms of extremism, such as far-right extremism. Even if the two regions have very different institutional and societal dynamics, the same approach remains, which

is indicative of a pursuit of international expectations and approaches rather than of the needs created by the context of these countries. This securitized approach is largely centered around security organizations and a religious approach centered around the regulation of religious teaching and practice, aligned with a so-called "middle way" or "true Islam". Therefore, the institutional approach is both highly centralized and highly focused, making it appear as if the issue of radicalization and violent extremism is quite straightforward. However, when focusing on the drivers of radicalization, the picture becomes more diverse and complex. Namely, the utilization of the seven drivers reveals the importance of the context, or as the authors from Tunisia have pointed out, "rather than being related to an interpretation of religion, [violent extremism] reflects the lived reality (or social and economic conditions) of members of extremist groups" (Chirchi et al. 2021, 20; Chirchi and Ghirbi 2025). The research in each country finds that the drivers are intertwined and that most of them gain significance only in relation to each other and not on their own. This means that the drivers themselves seek to explain a context within which a radical or extreme frame may be built. For instance, the drivers of economic deprivation and territorial inequality are significant throughout, and they both can serve as a strong contextual background to building frames of injustice that are powerful in radicalizing youth.

This incongruence between the institutional approach and the causes or drivers of radicalization and violent extremism on the ground has also served to show the political tensions that are present in tackling these phenomena. On the one hand, as pointed out by Giscard d'Estaing (2017, 105), the aim of preventing violent extremism is "used to justify strict rule-of-law and policy measures to control, repress, and track terrorist activities, sometimes at the cost of human rights and civil and political freedoms for the sake of security." Sometimes it also means tracking political opponents, as the case of Egypt has shown, or to monopolize power over narratives, as seen in the case of Morocco. Namely, the authors note, "the position of religion as the religion of state and as a political asset of the monarchy allows it to exercise a monopoly on the subject" (Mouna, Er-Rifaiy, and Fadil 2021; Er-Rifaiy and Mouna 2025). There is another monopoly of politics that does not get the same degree of investigation, and that is far-right extremism and radicalization. The cases of the Balkans show that far-right extremism offers an under-research field and an institutionally under-regulated field as the discourses of the far right are mainstreamed into the political discourses of the day. However, not researching the far right within the frame of radicalization and violent extremism is a missed opportunity as it develops within contexts that also shape religious extremism. As Buljubašić points out, right-wing extremism in the Western Balkans has recently increased due to the use of digital media and the effect that the various regional crises- political and economic- have caused in the different countries (Buljubašić 2022, 14). The country analysis covering the Balkan region has offered a glimpse into the far-right in these countries; however, much more research is needed to investigate the context in which it occurs, as well as its connection to mainstream political parties.

The research presented by the country analyses shows significant gaps in both the institutional approaches and the literature on violent extremism and radicalization more

broadly. While there were examples of countries trying to expand their policies to include soft approaches, such as in Jordan and Egypt, the main focus remains on security approaches. Sometimes the softer approaches lead towards securitized solutions, such as the monitoring of social media and the penalty of arrest for youth seen to like or respond to radical messaging. In general, the focus is on control and punishment rather than support and improvement of the conditions in which youth live in these countries. As seen in all cases, youth in both these regions live in volatile societies, both economically and politically, where uncertainty is high and precarity widespread.

The societal context imposed by the unstable environments where this youth grows up shows that policies targeting violent extremism and radicalization must incorporate the social and economic effects as well. Another gap is that of gender, as women are largely missing in the articles within this special issue and in literature more broadly. Some of the articles highlighting the influence of masculinity have left the door open for further research, which investigates how gender norms, expectations, and patriarchal structures affect the lived realities of youth, men, and women. The institutional approaches, too, focus primarily on men, and sideline the role of women both as potential subjects of violent extremism and radicalization and as its victims. Lastly, the research focus on macro-level approaches has the limitation of methodology, which only shows the top-down view on radicalization and violent extremism, missing the finer nuances presented on the field. Still, all the articles in this special issue incorporate the views of various actors and critically assess the approaches of institutions and other actors, such as civil society organizations or international actors. By using the seven drivers as a lens through which to analyze the institutional approaches to these phenomena, the articles can juxtapose the institutional approaches to the context in which they operate, which makes the research reflect the complexity on the ground and makes the analyses valuable contributions to research on radicalization and violent extremism in the Balkans and the MENA region.

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