

# Tackling anti- democracy drivers: Civil society resilience in the Western Balkans

# DEMOCRACY VERSUS AUTOCRACY. WHY THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IS SUPERIOR AND HOW IT CAN DEFEAT AUTOCRACY

## TACKLING ANTI-DEMOCRACY DRIVERS: CIVIL SOCIETY RESILIENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

**Author: Dimitar NIKOLOVSKI**

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Rue Montoyer 25 1000 Brussels Belgium  
[www.iedonline.eu](http://www.iedonline.eu)



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The policy brief looks at the issue of radicalization (Islamic and far right) as one of the key dangers to the consolidation of the Western Balkans countries. It outlines the key drivers at the macro, meso and micro level, and then presents several different examples of civil society actions aimed at building resilience at the local level, concentrating on various aspects of radicalization. The paper claims that one needs a holistic, rather than an approach concentrating on security issues, when dealing with radicalization. In fact, the analysis of actions so far as well as the recommendations purport that even actions not aimed at suppressing radicalization, such as anti-corruption, environmental issues etc. still hold the potential for preventing and countering radicalization.

## Social Media summary

Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts in the Western Balkans have concentrated on various aspects of radicalization. The paper proposes the strengthening of civil society through various approaches.

## Keywords

#WesternBalkans #radicalization #P/CVE #consolidationofdemocracy

## Short bio

Dimitar Nikolovski is the Executive Director of the Center for European Strategies-Eurothink. He is enrolled in a PhD program at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, Poland with a research focus on populism and civil society in South-Eastern Europe.

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# INTRODUCTION

The European integration for the Western Balkans (WB) region held a promise for the final democratization of the struggling region. With the exception of Albania, the other five countries of the WB6 (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and suffered the bloody consequences of the subsequent wars to varying degrees. Although not a post-Yugoslav country, Albania also felt the conflict in its midst and was affected by the influx of refugees of mostly ethnic Albanians from Kosovo. It did, however, have an internal conflict during the collapse of pyramidal schemes in 1997, with considerable violence. Due to the wars and various economic sanctions, the economies of all these countries were seriously negatively affected which further impeded the democratic transitions.

Currently, however, the WB6 are at varying stages of European integration. Serbia and Montenegro have been involved with membership negotiations since 2012, Albania and North Macedonia finally opened the negotiations in the summer of 2022, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is yet to be given the candidate status and Kosovo, with all its statehood problems, is having similar difficulties. Furthermore, the expansion of NATO to Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia has shown additional commitment by the political West to ensure liberal democracy in the region.

Nevertheless, in regular EU reports and other international organizations, it is noted that the countries suffer from endemic corruption and organized crime, struggling economies, erosion of democratic institutions and procedures, ethnic and political polarization, as well as various disputes with the neighbours (Anghel, 2022). Coupled with the current Russian propaganda and the overall effect of the war in Ukraine in all of these countries, it is not difficult to conclude that much is left to be desired in terms of democratic consolidation. As a first claim in this paper, we can say that democracy in the Western Balkans is endangered by two societal forces, which affect it in varying degrees:

1. Proclaimed democrats.
2. Anti-democrats (self-proclaimed or substantial).

The proclaimed democrats have already been mentioned in this introduction. These are the champions of democratic transitions who have found the chaos and vacuum of the transformation as lucrative opportunities for personal and partisan enrichment. These actors have engaged in corrupt practices and state capture, and diminish the institutional trust among citizens, which is crucial for the consolidation of democracy. These actors fall within the category of 'stabilocrats' as proclaimed by some academics: friendly to the West and promoting European and democratic values, but nevertheless detrimental for their own societies through cronyism and participation (Pavlovic, 2016; Bieber 2018). Thus, they endanger democracy not by directly attacking its principles, discourse, and institutions, but rather indirectly through making it dysfunctional and unattainable.

Although democracy is still the ‘only game in town’ for the greatest majority of citizens of these countries, there are such entities and actors that invest time and energy into promoting non- democratic narratives and extremist world views. This is the second societal force which I am discussing here. In the early transitional years, those were the hardliners from the defunct or non-reformed communist parties, who were fearful of what the changes might bring, and who did not wish to give up power held for nearly 50 years. Nowadays, however, these groups come in two distinct forms: Islamic fundamentalists and the far right, both with a conceptual basis in the wars of the nineties.

For Islamic fundamentalists, the goal is to go and currently support the Islamic state or other similar organizations in Syria and Iraq, and recruit members and funds among the Muslim populations of the Western Balkans. They have some relations to the Mujahideen who came to fight in the Bosnian war on the side of Bosniaks, as well as find support among Muslim Albanians across all countries of the WB6, and among the poor Roma communities as well (Prislan, Cernigoj, & Lobnikar, 2018).

The other group is becoming more prominent and raising renewed interest - the far right (a uniting term for radical right, Alt right, neo-Nazi groups, etc.). Depending on the national context, these groups see a theoretical basis in World War II as well as the wars on the nineties in the Balkans. They are, however, equally influenced by contemporary polarizing struggles which can be seen in the West and East. So, they have as their heroes either Trump, Salvini/Meloni and other Western populist leaders, Russian leaders such as Putin or Dugin. These entities reside on anti-modernist, nationalist and racist grounds, and organize around issues such as anti-migration movements, nationalism against neighbours, genocide denial, and anti-LGBTIQ narratives.

The two forces outlined, however, do not exist independently from each other, but are rather mutually reinforcing. The disappointment with the way democracy functions under ‘stabilocrats’ provides wonderful grounds for the development of antidemocratic narratives for these groups. In this sense, they (stabilocrats and other pro-democratic actors) are the enemies, just like the migrants or sexual minorities. However, they can be utilized as well. In 2017, the radical right was used by the pro-European VMRO-DPMNE in power to storm the parliament and attack the MPs who were labelled ‘national traitors’. The Vucic regime often uses the nationalist football supporters either to discipline defying civil society, or as a scarecrow to prevent developments not to their liking out of security concerns (like for the recent EuroPride in Belgrade). Thus, even without direct collusion, these forces can act together in order to further erode democracy in the WB6.

Through this policy brief, I want to look into the ways how these societies deal with the issues presented. More specifically, I am to answer the question: How does civil society in the Western Balkans build resilience against extremist and regressive ideologies and actions?

I look into the various initiatives and actions at the level of (in)formal civil society aimed at building resilience against extremism and authoritarian narratives in Western Balkans societies. Social resilience, in short, is the ability of society to resist forces that aim to disintegrate it. I outline several examples which, to varying degrees, de-escalate social tensions and manage to isolate polarizing forces: environmental activists in North Macedonia bringing people of various ideological



backgrounds together, or high school students of different ethnic origins in Bosnia and Herzegovina protesting against ethnically divided schools. A common thread is that these initiatives do not tackle extremism per se, but rather the drivers enabling it, thus strengthening democratic forces. Resilience understood like this has a more encompassing and promising effect at bringing WB societies back on the European path: the outcome falls within the category of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), despite not having the well-known securitization discourse.

## DRIVERS OF RADICALIZATION

In order to outline the drivers of radicalization, one needs first define the terms themselves. Generally, radicalization is the process by which an individual or a group turns from mainstream political views to extreme ones, or at least those straining from the established political norms of society. Closely related terms are terrorism, extremism, and the far right, while one of its anti-thesis is the school of thought and corpus of activities called “Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism” (P/CVE).

When defining terrorism, it is unavoidable to ignore the dichotomy and conceptual conflict of ‘freedom fighters versus terrorists’, which has marred academic and political (*United Nations*) circles for decades. Nevertheless, some consensus can be brought, as for example in the definition of Gill *et. al.* (2014), who define terrorism as, “the use or threat of action where the use or threat is designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and/or the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, or ideological cause.” Thus, intimidation and ideology are crucial parts of the definition, although there can be found examples where intimidation has been used and it still has not been labelled terrorism. However, the journey to becoming a terrorist (or a radical, for that matter) is one that has been equally of interest to academics and policy-makers. According to Perry (2019:p. 14), it involves “a move from an initial “default” state which likely conforms to the broader social norms of one’s society, towards something quite substantially different and outside the norm of one’s environment,” and it includes real-world and cognitive, psychological characteristic.

Therefore, while some drivers, or factors of radicalization can be ephemeral, others are absolutely context-specific. Nevertheless, the OSCE (*Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe*), which has dealt with the issue across nations, does not treat any radicalization a threat to society always: “Radicalization is not a threat to society if it is not connected to violence or other unlawful acts, such as incitement to hatred, as legally defined in compliance with international human rights law.” (OSCE, 2014: p. 35). They include the fight for abolition of slavery as a radicalization which in fact brought about positive change. Therefore, the violence, verbal or not, is one that distinguishes the radicalization which is a threat to democracy. USAID (*United States Agency for International Development*), which has been very active in the region of WB6 by aiding the development of civil society, defines violent extremism as “advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives” (2011:p. 2–3).

Regarding drivers to radicalization, some authors, for example (e.g., Guilain & Lynn, 2009; Harriet *et al.*, 2015), divide the drivers into macro- (country-level), meso- (community, network, and identity related) and micro level (individual). Whereas the individual, i.e. psychosocial factors deserve special attention and a study of its own, we can concentrate more on the macro and meso levels for the purposes of this paper, as they can directly influence the resilience to, or ability to resist against, extremism, such as discrimination, socio-economic marginalization, lack of opportunities, poverty, and unemployment. And they all relate to specific grievances that citizens have.

The macro level was partially touched upon in the introduction: troubled countries with limited capacities to fight against corruption and organized crime, limited access to public services, inefficiency of public administration, non-responsive politicians, lack of agency and ability to affect change within mainstream political procedures. Ranstrop (2016), who concentrates exactly on the meso and macro drivers, lists the following main ones: (1) individual socio-psychological factors; (2) social factors; (3) political factors; (4) ideological and religious dimensions; (5) the role of culture and identity issues; (6) trauma and other trigger mechanisms; and three other factors that are a motor for radicalisation: (7) group dynamics; (8) radicalisers/ groomers; and (9) the role of social media. The meso and macro level feed each other, especially in the Western Balkans. One of the deciding factors for joining ISIS (Islamic State) and other radical Islamic groups is the belonging to religious and other marginalized minorities, who both faced the issues of the whole society, and were double discriminated by the virtue of their identity. It also helped that there were already individuals within these communities who were connected to such structures, and therefore had the necessary networks to spread the ideology. On the other hand, for the far right it can be a globalizing effect, with a frustration from the members of the ethnic majority who have been economically disadvantaged and became frustrated with policies aimed at advancing the quality of life of minorities and migrants. Nevertheless, above each of these societies loom the criminal nineties (economic disadvantage and corroded institutions), memory of the wars of Yugoslav dissolution (family histories, negative attitudes towards other ethno-religious neighbouring nations or domestic minorities), and even the symbolism of WWII (following the tradition and animosities fought against during Yugoslav rule).

Another notable and extremely important factor of interest is polarization as a driver for radicalization. Depending on the societies in question, it can have a root in either partisan politics or ethno-religious identities (Mishkova *et. al.*, 2021). Partisan polarization can be noticed in all WB6 countries and does not have to coincide with ethnic/religious polarization. For example, polarization between the two mainstream parties (of the same ethnicity) have led to several violent episodes in Albania and North Macedonia, while the most significant opposition parties in Serbia have decided to boycott the latest parliamentary elections, thus removing political dialogue out of the institutions. On the other hand, in ethnically mixed societies, identity can be a driver of polarization, as is the example in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. Such polarizations remove politics out of the institutions, giving space to radical elements on the streets to influence even those who adhere to mainstream options. On the other hand, polarization based in identity can lead to reciprocal radicalization, such as examples in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina between the Serbian far right and radicalized Bosniak Muslims.



Finally, I would point out the educational systems (or their failures thereof) as specific drivers of radicalization. In some of the educational systems in the region, ethno-religious segregation is nurtured which brings about two “parallel worlds” among students. Such examples are Kosovo Serbs and Albanians and North Macedonia’s Albanians and Macedonians, who attend separate classes in their own languages. The “two schools under one roof” in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, is a “delay-action bomb with unforeseen consequences in the near future for social peace and social cohesion” (Mishkova *et. al.*, 2021: p. 61). Insufficient control on the curriculum and the educational process in religious subjects may result in the infiltration of radical elements, turning religious classes into a hotbed of extremist ideologies. (*ibid.*) Finally, when there is a lack of school involvement in providing youth engagement through extra-curriculum activities, inappropriate or unused capacities and low activism of the local CSOs (civil society organizations) can create a vacuum which can be filled by radical groups (Kursani, 2019).

## CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES

For the purposes of this policy brief, I use the concept of social resilience against radicalization as the “multilevel, multisystemic process demonstrating the capacity to adapt successfully to challenges that threaten systems function, viability, or development of systems” (Grossman, 2021). International donor communities have increasingly encouraged and financially supported civil society organizations (CSO’s) in the WB6 to work on prevention and countering of violent extremism, first focusing on countering radicalization which leads to violence. However, they have also put focus on broader issues, i.e. meso and macro drivers, related to promoting tolerance, preventing hate speech, reconciliation, and civic education. According to a report by regional project on P/CVE in the Western Balkans supported by the European Union and the German Marshall Fund, “[a] key barrier to effective programming on P/CVE within the Western Balkans remains the lack of understanding of existing local community actors that have the capacity and credibility to deliver P/CVE programming at a grass-roots level” (Rosand, 2018:p.5).

In general, prevention-focused projects revolve around: building critical thinking skills, community engagement, inter-faith dialogue, counter-narratives, youth and gender empowerment, awareness raising among mothers, youth, women, and teachers on the signs of radicalization and how to address it, mediation and transitional justice, human rights, educational programs, and peace activism (*ibid.*)

Too many government actors continue to view P/CVE as security as opposed to a community issue and the periodic exploitation of P/CVE in the political arena can complicate the efforts to CSOs to implement P/CVE projects in particular communities, hence the need for strengthened joint efforts by civil society, international liberal political community, and the international donor community. Several examples can be brought, to illustrate the level of success of such initiatives, which look at it as a security issue to a certain extent. Cultural Center DamaD from Novi Pazar, Serbia, institutionalized a P/CVE referral system in Southwest Serbia. It

links local authorities, service provision institutions involved in health, welfare, education, culture, justice and security, CSOs, and media. It was created to enable timely and holistic provision of care and support to youth at risk of radicalization to violence. This mechanism relies on aligned policies, approaches and capacities of service providers to: a) recognize and identify youth at-risk of extremism and radicalism (or caught up in radicalization processes); b) provide comprehensive support to youth to counter radicalizing influences; and c) serve as a policy feedback mechanism that advocates for changes in legislation, public policies and institutional practices relating to P/CVE (Kostic et. al, 2018).

Another example is the *Mothers Circle* in North Macedonia, implemented by ZIP Institute and Analytica Think Tank under the guidance of Women Without Borders (Stojkovski & Selimi, 2018) The Mother Circles is significant and unique as it explores the parent-child and student-teacher relationship, and supports mothers and teachers to continue to engage regularly and in a structured way, so they can effectively strengthen the resilience of youth to extremism and radicalization. The purpose is to sensitize mothers in preventing radicalization of various forms in their youth. Mother Circles are a series of weekly workshops connecting mothers to share their experiences, discuss concerns, learn from each other, and discover their power as parents to bring peaceful solutions to common problems affecting the youth in vulnerable homes and neighbourhoods.

Both the referral system and the Mother's Circles put an emphasis on the security aspect, as they are both located in areas mostly affected by Islamic radicalism (Sandjak in Serbia an urban and rural areas inhabited by Muslims in North Macedonia). However, they do add to the holistic approach to P/CVE as they involved the institutions and look at the drivers of radicalism, either in schools or the families.

A similar, yet much more encompassing project has been conducted in Albania, regarding cooperation between civil society, relevant authorities and the educational system. It has played an important role through the organization of campaigns undertaken to raise community awareness countering violent extremism, namely with the "School as a community center" initiative in 2019. In seven schools throughout the country, the project aimed at strengthening and training teachers to distinguish and respond to signs of radicalization, increasing school support and extracurricular efforts in target schools in order to prevent radicalization, including civil and religious education, artistic and sporting initiatives, debate clubs, and similar activities that can increase resistance, as well as addressing the socio-economic causes that promote radicalization through providing vocational education and training, as well as employment services (Aliaj, 2018). Thus, it was a definite step further.

Perhaps the most recent and most holistic approach to P/CVE have been the actions of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, within the *Strong Cities Network* (SCN), in cooperation with the Municipality of Kumanovo in North Macedonia. Under this project, a local multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder entity the *Community Action Team* (CAT) was formed in 2019, composed of 12 members, "including two representatives from the municipality, a representative from the LPC working within the SIA, a representative from the office of the Ombudsman, a representative from the Inter-Municipal Centre for Social Affairs, a representative from the Municipal Union of Sports; two teachers – one from a Macedonian-language school and another from an Albanian-language school; two representatives from CSOs and two

representatives from the religious communities – one from the Macedonian Orthodox Church and another from the Islamic Religious Community“ (Merkel and Hulse 2022, p.10). As a major achievement from this project, we can draw that a body that was formed in accordance with the *National Action Plan of the CVE Strategy*, but was in need of external conceptual support, which was given by the ISD, and in turn produced local ownership over an imported concept. Specifically, the project has aided the CAT in the following areas:

“Identifying local risk factors in Kumanovo municipality through community-wide surveying; Mobilizing, motivating and inspiring CAT members to lead prevention efforts and to share their experiences and learn from city level professionals in other SCN municipalities; Capacity development of CAT members in areas such as identifying early warning signs of radicalization, push and pull factors and project management; Technical advice on the development of a local action plan (LAP) to strengthen community resilience against VE; Technical advice and oversight to CAT-led activities, including implementation of the LAP.” (*ibid*, p. 9).

Nevertheless, the above examples are tackling radicalization/violent extremism *per se*. Other possibilities of building resilience are activities surrounding the public interests (at least those who have still not been kidnapped by political parties), primarily since they can influence overcoming of differences in society and, especially, serve as drivers for depolarization. In a study on polarization in North Macedonia, the Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities lists the 2017 protests against the opening of gold mines in the South of the country as ones which brought about greater cohesion at the local level. In a period of heightened political tensions in the country,<sup>1</sup> both the oppositional SDSM (as expected) and the incumbent VMRO-DPMNE (the local chapter going against the decisions of the headquarters) and their supporters prevented the building of the goldmines in Gevgelija and Bogdanci (Blazheva *et. al.* 2019). Similarly, the recent nation-wide Serbian protests against the building of lithium mine showed similar results, as citizens of all kinds of political affiliations could be seen on the streets, thus bridging the gap between political opponents.

Furthermore (and this time not sanctioned by formalized civil society), an extremely positive example are the high school students of Jajce, Bosnia and Herzegovina, who organized protests against the plans of the government of the Central Bosnian Canton to open a new school, so that ethnic Bosniak and Croat children could be separated and then learn according to ethnically-oriented curricula. In 2016-2017, these young people staged protests and other actions, capturing the imagination of the whole nation, and did manage to prevent the ethnic segregation. According to students interviewed, it was exactly the freedom to still not belong and be a part of the clientelistic relations typical for Bosnia and Herzegovina, which gave them the ability to be persistent and earn the sympathies (Stipic, 2019). Thus, the intention of political elites to segregate young people along ethnic lines, and subsequently immerse them in the ethno-national engineering and polarization, failed due to the willingness to live together.

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<sup>1</sup> The end of the illiberal Gruevski regime, marred with daily protests and counterprotests.

# CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenge of tackling radicalization in the WB6 is a complex one, encompassing multiple stakeholders, dangers, and approaches. In a region with such feeble democracy, radicalization is definitely the primary phenomenon which mostly endangers the stabilization or consolidation of democracy in the region. As has been shown, civil society approaches the issue both head-on, as shown by the various CSO projects, or its anti-radicalization qualities can be an unintended consequence of other, non-related activities, such as activism against the mines in Serbia and North Macedonia or the students in Jajce. Therefore, the following set of recommendations need to be brought:

## **Civil society**

- Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in large cities need to (re)connect with active groups and organizations in smaller cities. Usually, CSOs from larger cities have the greater experience and theoretical knowledge, while those from the peripheries live the reality of radicalized youth and face the consequences more directly. A combination of both assets can aid the process significantly.
- Communicate with donors and explain the holistic approach to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), rather than concentration on security concerns. Appeal to them to communicate with local authorities, in order to strengthen this approach.
- Integrate in your communication strategies the various aspects of radicalization drivers. Many of the priority areas in which CSOs operate (anti-corruption, European integration, environmental issues, human rights, human development, etc.), although not directly related to radicalization, can in fact have a very positive effect in de-radicalizing society and youth. Therefore, the public needs to be reminded of this aspect.
- Identify individuals rich in social capital and authority at the local level, and develop counter-narratives along with them. Work with them in order to amplify and multiply these narratives in both informal and formal settings.
- Involve the private sector in resilience-building activities. This can give more financial sustainability to CSOs, as well as draw upon the marketing platforms, resources, and knowledge of the private sector.

## **National authorities**

- Need to set up more open discussions for citizens, with the purpose of preventing and reacting to violent events with a background in political or identity issues. These discussions need to have a semi-permanent form.
- Following the example of Kumanovo, other *Community Action Teams* (CAT) across the Western Balkans Six (WB6) need to be formed at the local level.
- Form Local Prevention Councils that deal with security issues at the local level broadly, rather than tackle only radicalization.

- In polarized societies, create policies aimed at intercultural communication and developing inclusive environments, in order to prevent ethnic and other isolation. Education, employment, provision of social services, and environmental protection are a few areas where such inclusion can place.
- In ethnically and linguistically divided societies, especially where “two schools under one roof” exist, create pockets of integration, such as integrated parts of curricula, at least at pilot phases.

**Citizens**

- Citizens should have a regular forum engaging with international actors to create top-down pressure in support of their bottom-up action. It will increase the likelihood of success. Pay particular attention to radicalization and polarizing discourse and practices in “own communities” primarily, rather than in the “other.”

**European Union and Member States**

- Re-evaluate the approach to cooperation with local ‘stabilocrats.’ While at the discursive level, this might seem to be in accordance with the democratizing mission of the EU, in the long run strengthening these politicians merely brings about the backsliding of democracy and radicalization of the population. Setting more clear boundaries, rather than rewarding declarative compliance, would give boost to independent civil society in the WB6.
- When deciding on priorities for financial support for civil society, put emphasis on the development of counter-narratives to the drivers and radicalizing discourses outlined above.

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