Balkan Expert Network on Good Governance (BENGG)

Understanding Radicalisation and Extremism in the Western Balkans and Beyond

Summary of Findings, 1 November 2018

This meeting followed our previous sessions about security and organised crime in the Western Balkans (WB), which highlighted the link between governance, development and security. During this meetiing, we focused on the role of society and community-building as a means of increasing societal resilience towards extremism. Participants stressed that countering violent extremism (CVE) in the region has been largely donor driven and skewed towards religious extremism. The meeting concluded with a joint agreement that CVE needs to be tied to the wider initiatives focused on development, peacebuilding and democratisation, rather than siloed.

Background and objectives

Building on the last meetings of the *Balkan Expert Network on Good Governance (BENGG)*, this third gathering drew together experts in the field of CVE. It focused on the current state of knowledge concerning extremism and radicalisation, as well as attempts how to tackle extremism in the Western Balkans. Topics covered included:

- **The nature and scope of extremism** in the WB, its drivers, indicators, and its historical trajectories;

- **Strategies** to tackle the appeal of extremism and analysing vulnerabilities in societies torn apart by violence;

- **Existing programmes and research** that have been implemented, their challenges and observable results;

- **The coexistence of violence and religion**.

CVE in focus across the Western Balkans

CVE in the Western Balkans has been a field driven by international concerns and donors' priorities. The donor focus has predominantly been on Islamic radicalisation; with a notable emphasis on the militant doctrines of Salafism and its sub-attachment Wahhabism. The approach and focus of national authorities in the WB has mirrored these priorities. As a result, Muslims in the Balkans have felt marginalised and targeted by security services.

Although up to 950 individuals left the WB between 2013-2016 to fight in the Middle East, the scale of terrorism in the region has been exaggerated, especially when compared to numbers in west European countries. The number of foreign fighters from the whole region (i.e. six countries) is also comparable to estimates from France (over 900) and the UK (over 800). Moreover, the last terrorist attack in the WB which was inspired by militant interpretations of Islam occurred in 2015.

Right-wing extremism has historically been much more significant in the region. However, it remains less reported by both local and international media. For example, Serbian fighters that have left for Ukraine are not given equivalent media coverage as those who left for the Middle East. Moreover, as instances of right-wing extremism are not too uncommon among key political actors in the WB, there is less appetite for focussing on right-wing instances of extremism.

> ### Socio-economic and political marginalisation
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> The Western Balkan experience points to the need for economic development and integrative peacebuilding approaches. Where integration of religious and ethno-national minorities has failed, for example in the Serbian Sandžak, radicalisation has been more prominent than in ethnically similar environments, such as the Montenegrin Sandžak, where fewer individuals have been radicalised. Bosniaks in Serbia have been socio-economically and politically marginalised.

De-Radicalisation – from What?

Given that extremists are no longer leaving to fight in the Middle East, the key focus in the WB is now on disengagement (renouncing violence) and de-radicalisation (renouncing extremist ideology). While disengagement is generally feasible, de-radicalisation is much more difficult as it necessitates a fine-tuned and individualised approach to each person that has radicalised. The additional challenge is that many radicalised individuals have joined foreign fighting forces without understanding the religion or ideology for which they fought. For many in the WB, it has been a simple way out of poverty and lack of opportunities. Any de-radicalisation thus faces the fundamental question: from what are they being de-radicalised?

This has become a key issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), as well as the wider region. Prior to 2017, over 230 BiH citizens had left for Syria and Iraq, and 47 have returned. Already in 2014, BiH legislation was updated to criminalise such actions. By 2017, 16 persons were imprisoned for going to Syria/Iraq and trying to recruit others. Some individuals have also been radicalised in prisons. Currently, there are no dedicated programmes within prisons across the WB for radicalised individuals, with the notable excpetion of Kosovo. A welcomed initiative was also the UK-funded production of the 'De-radicalisation of Prisoners'

Handbook, which has been highly valued by prison staff in the Zenica prison in BiH.

> ### Drugs and radicalisation
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> The relationship between drug use and religious radicalisation appears to be important but is currently underexplored. Key towns in Sandžak, such as Novi Pazar and Rožaje, lie on a well-established heroin trafficking route. Historically, drug use in these areas has been high. As local capacity to provide rehabilitation to drug users is poor, the small local Wahhabi community has stepped in to offer support to young drug users. There is some evidence to suggest that this has played a part in recruiting people to extremist organisations and ideologies.

Referral Mechanisms are poorly designed

Another major challenge in the WB relates to the way in which extremism is referred to the authorities. While experience elsewhere has shown that community-centred referral mechanisms can increase societal buy-in and local trust in areas where large-scale radicalisation has been a problem, such as in certain municipalities of Jendouba Governorate in Tunisia, they have only rarely been designed and implemented appropriately in the WB. One such example is Gjilan, in Kosovo. Such mechanisms must be designed as gradual multi-level and multi-stakeholder safeguarding interventions, rather than being framed or perceived as a means of intelligence gathering or as a tool to establish informant networks – as has often been the case in the past.

Instead, referral mechanisms must be built step-by-step with local organisations, religious actors, local police and security services (that would handle the case management) as a joint venture. However, this is very challenging in WB societies where cross-community cooperation has experienced difficulties and levels of distrust have been high. Experience shows that the most successful mechanisms are tailored to the context through iterative design and agile management process throughout the pilot phases, before scaling up.

> ### Ill-designed 'Referral Mechanisms'
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> The mistake made in the past has been to either vest referral mechanisms with the police only (which has eroded local trust) or youth mentors and CSOs that do not have the capacities to assess who is at risk of potentially committing terrorist crimes.

Violence shapes religion

The relationship between religion and violence was discussed at length. However, rather than focusing on the way religion shapes violence, the discussion looked at the way religion evolves in areas of conflict and strife. Although it may seem a relatively new phenomenon in the CVE sphere, religious beliefs have always been a reaction and coping mechanism in response to violence. Religion is a means of establishing a moral order and answering profoundly humane questions, including the meaning of life.

Rituals that involve violence have, in many societies, been a cathartic coping mechanism and a strategy for moving on from the past. Religious rituals have also been an integral part of armies and fighting. Community rituals were described as a way to identify with wider groups and identities that provide a more profound meaning to our lives. Many regiments of western armies attend church daily and chaplains are part of the military staff. Fundamentalist beliefs about Islam or Christianity are therefore, from this perspective, a logical behaviour to making sense of any complex system.

Participants also stressed that although Muslims are forbidden to kill other Muslims according to the fundamental religious teachings of Islam, extremists justify their actions on the grounds of 'extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures'.

> ### Religion and violence have always co-existed
> Historically, violence has shaped religion. After conflict, religious practice and rituals have often changed and people's beliefs have been transformed as they had to make sense of the past violence.

Technology as Part of the Solution?

Technological solutions, such as automated large-N data analysis, have recently been propagated as a panacea to online sources of radicalisation, including social media platforms. Software is indeed useful for detecting some predictable language and content and monitoring instances of keywords and their proximity. It allows us to make sense of words that are trending, periods in which there is increased online activity, and it allows basic mapping of online user networks.

However, as extremists online are aware of the current tech capabilities, they regularly readjust their strategies, move to new platforms on which they operate deeper on the web in encrypted environments, and modify the language they use. Tech-based research thus faces the challenges of being outdated quickly and provides only a snapshot of where extremism resides online.

Without a wider societal cooperation and understanding of the challenges, it is very difficult to detect and/or monitor those individuals that are at risk of committing violent crimes. Using the experience with studying online radicalisation in Bosnia, the participants concluded that it is important to educate policy makers and other interested parties about the current capabilities of tech companies so that the conclusions produced by such research are not taken out of context.

Recommendations

- It is advisable to broaden the focus from **religious extremism** to other types of extremist beliefs and behaviours, especially right-wing and ethno-nationalist denominations in the WB;

- **De-radicalisation** in the WB is a contentious topic; it must be handled sensitively on a case-by-case basis with a nuanced understanding of the individual drivers of radicalisation which may not be deeply religious;

- **Referral mechanisms** are difficult to implement well. As they necessitate a baseline degree of societal trust, they cannot we designed at the national level in the WB at once. Instead, they must be tailored to the specific operating context and scaled up gradually;

- Research into the relationship between **religion and extremism** should be expanded to understand how rituals and religiosity can be used to reconcile people after conflicts;

- **Technology** is not a silver bullet. It is advisable to use it with a thorough understanding of its capabilities and in addition to other tools that allow findings to be contextualised.

> **The Balkan Expert Network on Good Governance (BENGG)** is a hand-picked group of experts, practitioners and policymakers that regularly meet to discuss key challenges facing the Western Balkans and how to respond to them. The next meeting will be held in February 2019.