

REFLECTIONS ON EFFORTS TO PREVENT AND COUNTER RADICALIZATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE BALKANS (I)

The New Threat



A marked increase in the attention given to the issue of preventing and countering violent extremism in the Balkans reflects global worries about ISIS-inspired violence in Syria and Iraq, but also attacks committed in ISIS's name in other countries, especially European countries which struggle to maintain free and open societies while protecting citizens from such random violence, argues Valery Perry in the latest Democratization Policy Council report

While the actual number of individuals from the Balkans going to Syria and Iraq are low compared to other countries such as Belgium or France, they are proportionally significant, especially in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo. In the first half of June, reports that a key Kosovo Albanian ISIS leader was killed in a drone strike in Syria, and that ISIS sent a targeted message threatening violence in the cities of the region, served as reminders that despite the absence of significant terrorist attacks, the region is not immune. In a region with unresolved ethno-national challenges such as the Balkans, domestic risks of other variants of extremism – e.g., far-right, neo-Nazi – remain on the radar screen of policymakers and security professionals as well, with the understanding that such social trends can dangerously feed off one another.

Two Fears

In 2015, I started reading and hearing more about regional efforts to “counter violent extremism,” in the Balkans. References were primarily linked to fears of potential spillover from the increasingly deadly wars in Syria and Iraq, as vivid, lurid and intended-to-provoke videos of ISIS/Daesh atrocities swept YouTube and the evening news. While violence in that region unfortu-

nately is now seen as commonplace, the growing concern among western powers in particular was that foreign fighters going to Syria and Iraq would no longer limit their violence to that terrain, that battlefield, but would increasingly use that platform (the “Caliphate,” whether manifest through physical land or as an idea) in two ways, particularly once they began to lose territory. First was the fear that hardened foreign fighters schooled and practiced in war would be able to go to – or in some cases return to – Germany, France, the United Kingdom, etc., and become sufficiently skilled and inspired to organize and/or carry out atrocities on “the Western enemy,” on their home front. Second was the fear that certain individuals in “the West” who physically had never been in Syria and Iraq, yet could be described as “at risk”, could be radicalized and groomed through personal influence and persuasion as well as through social media outreach techniques, with recruiters manipulating and building on existing drivers and grievances to inspire them to perpetrate violence in the name of the Islamic State or its affiliates.

A White House conference on the topic was held in February 2015 and demonstrated the level to which it had risen as a policy concern; it also helped shift (or at least complement) the predominantly militarized policy of the global war on

terror to a more comprehensive regimen that recognized the structural causes of violent extremism, thereby allowing as well for nonmilitary prevention activities.

Prevention and the Securitization of the Liberal Peace

These fears were also increasingly linked to the intensifying refugee crisis in Europe in 2015 and 2016, and the concomitant fear of foreign fighters “sneaking in” through the refugee route. While societies have always grappled with threats of and from violent extremists, both at home and abroad, the new threat seemed somehow different, for two main reasons. First, the Internet made it easier for small and often obscure groups to network with one another, share information, groom and recruit new followers and stoke fear through effective use of new media, on its own and as a stepping stone to traditional outlets. Second, one cannot discount the difference between localized threats that “only” disrupt the lives of people in that community, and those with a broader, even global agenda and reach. As fears of radicalization and the potential for related violent extremist acts increased in general, it also seeped into the consciousness of

policy-makers in the Balkans, particularly (but not solely) in those countries of the former Yugoslavia affected by the wars of the 1990s. These concerns were not new; the dynamics of the possible emergence of a majority Muslim state had been on the radar screens of US policy analysts going back to the war and efforts to end it. Framing regional geopolitics in religious terms has had particular staying power among those already prone to us/them “clash of civilizations” thinking; the term “blue eyed jihadists” is bandied about online more than one might think. Confirmations of radicalized individuals from the region going to Syria and Iraq to fight seemed to confirm such fears, though the numbers remained quite small compared to other countries in Europe. In June, not long after the latest attacks in the UK, ISIS vowed that it had not forgotten about the Balkans, issuing new threats to the region.

There has been a mushrooming of initiatives aimed at countering violent extremism. The term “prevent violent extremism” has also increasingly become part of the lexicon. PVE is viewed as the ground floor in prevention, whereas “countering” activities assume that at least some radicalization processes are already underway. I live in Sarajevo, and have observed and analyzed the issue through the general prism of post-war political developments and years of few meaningful improvements in socio-political cohesion, particularly in the realm of high politics and the instrumentalization of ideology and identity. In 2016, I looked at this issue from a regional perspective, focusing on what various actors and donors were doing to P/CVE and how stakeholders in seven countries in the region define the threat of violent extremism, and then mapping the various initiatives undertaken with the aim to P/CVE. In 2017, I began to look at the issue in Serbia, speaking with governmental and non-governmental representatives about violent extremism and radicalization, defining these trends broadly to include far right-wing nationalist factions, neo-Nazis, Islamist-inspired groups and football hooliganism.

The Support Activities

I increasingly wondered about the sudden interest in and urgency of P/CVE initiatives, as many of the approaches discussed sounded like the basic elements of comprehensive security or liberal peace building and democratization that have been the basis for many of the transition and post-war activities in the region over the past two and a half



Various types of extremist worldviews could fill the “transition era values vacuum”

decades. People with whom I spoke – including non-regional experts specializing in the broader field of terrorism and extremism – frequently noted that the drivers of extremism and radicalization include many factors: a feeling of marginalization and alienation; a lack of tolerance; a sense that the system doesn't work; a frustration with corruption; and a perceived and pervasive lack of social justice leading to deeply held grievance. This was in line with much of the literature on the topic. Regional respondents were cautious in attributing too heavy a role to ISIS/Daesh or Islamist-inspired ideologies. But many acknowledged that various types of extremist worldviews could fill the “transition era values vacuum” (my phrase) with resurrected or new and alien values, often seemingly contrary to the values of liberal democracy that were assumed (by the US and EU – though not by many citizens) to have prevailed on the European continent. Proposed efforts to remedy such weaknesses in the so-called transitional Balkan countries sounded a lot like the trusty democratization toolbox – strengthening civil society; promoting good, accountable, responsive governance; supporting the rule of law through effective policing, independent judiciaries and prison reform based on contemporary European standards; developing educational programs to promote human rights, tolerance and critical thinking; giving young people something constructive to do; economic development and job creation, etc. The region should have been perfect for the continued implementation of this kind of support and intervention, as the former Yugoslav states have all had – to varying extents – fairly significant “treatment” by promoters of the liberal peace in the name of conflict prevention, early warning, post-war reconstruction and comprehensive security. Places like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have had particularly heavy military and civilian

peacekeeping/peacebuilding footprints, while Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia have also been subject to intensive external engagement for years. Endeavors by international organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the United Nations family of actors, the International Organization for Migration, the Council of Europe and the European Union; embassies acting through bilateral programming support; and countless non-governmental actors supported by a range of foreign donors have all engaged in supporting some or all aspects of comprehensive security, with the belief that doing so would provide the best path towards a peaceful, productive future, and that on-the-ground programmatic support would complement higher level diplomatic dialogue. As European enlargement processes became the primary policy and goal (not coincidentally around the same time as the US ceded the de facto “lead” in the region to the EU) these efforts were framed less as “post-war support”, and more as “pre-Europe support.” Regardless of the labels, the activities – promotion of good governance, effective and independent public administration, rule of law, civil society, free and independent media, human rights, gender equality, tolerance, etc. – have remained basically the same. This includes support for the basic elements of a liberal society (in the classic political science definition) long seen as part of the foundation of a liberal peace, though admittedly increasingly condemned by illiberal autocrats everywhere. This approach has continued despite new challenges, including from within the EU, most spectacularly in Hungary and Poland, as well as in the right-wing and populist, nationalist dynamics seen in Brexit and the election and administration of Donald Trump. There have been some P/CVE innova-

tions, primarily related to targeting support to “at risk” communities through work with Islamic community leaders and youth leaders, that aim to inoculate adherents against the lure of Islamist interpretations of the faith that could lead to radicalization, and efforts to counter the risks of prison radicalization. Preliminary efforts to establish community referral mechanisms to identify and respond to individuals considered to be at risk have at their core the understanding that strong and resilient communities are a key – if not the key factor in prevention. (However, the absence of associated social and public services to respond to such individuals – with psychological support, educational opportunities and jobs training, etc. – could



The drivers of extremism and radicalization include many factors

limit the effectiveness of even a well-structured mechanism.) There has also been more attention to counter-terrorism activities, through targeted support in security and intelligence sector reform. But overall, and regardless of the label and project title used, the support activities cover familiar territory – supporting the continued development of accountable and effective governments able to provide public services that work for all of its citizens.

Previously, such initiatives would have been framed by liberal or democratic peace theory, whereas in the CVE world they have been more directly securitized. And as these activities have been implemented in many countries as a part of a P/CVE portfolio, in the Balkans we’ve seen two additional factors complicate these efforts. First is the recent history of violent conflict, with the bloodiest wars in post-World War II Europe having played out in the neighborhood in the 1990s. This has made the region different in post-Cold War Europe in terms of development, transition and the development of “state-ness.” Though many people make this mistake (particularly in Brussels), one simply cannot (or at least should not) oversimplify comparisons between the EU accession paths of Estonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the Czech Republic and Serbia.

Second, even further shaping the issue is the historical position of the Balkan peninsula on the real and imagined cultural/historical border between “East and West,” and the influence of the Ottoman period in terms of establishing a centuries-long tradition of moderate Islam co-existing with Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity on this part of the European continent, well before Europe-wide 20th century political developments. This is important to note, as various interventions in the region have often included experts and community practitioners from places like the UK or France, where Islam is often one element of a larger post-colonial or economic migration experience. What are the similarities in the experience of

an expert/activist familiar with marginalized Muslim youth in an outer London housing estate, who comes to engage with a troubled young person in a family with a 400 year-long presence in their community in Kosovo? It is a necessary question to consider when making programming decisions.

Not a Bug

This is related to another trend one can see in P/CVE approaches. Nearly all analysts and implementers of initiatives take great pains – rightly – to explain and demonstrate that this issue is not simply relevant to Islamist-inspired ideological movements. There is acknowledgement of the dynamics of certain Islamist-inspired manipulation of texts, or of Salafi-Jihadist, takfiri or Kharadjite influences. However, this is supplemented by attention to other forms of extremism in the region as well: far right-wing nationalism (purely domestic or potentially with external links, for example in Vojvodina with Hungarian nationalists over the border in Hungary, or among white Orthodox/Slav groups with ties to similar movements in Russia, etc.), or neo-Nazi movements. In the Balkan region, this broad approach makes sense: in the charged socio-political

context, threats by or on any one of these groups or their purported constituencies makes it that much easier for others to point to the incident as “proof” of why they alone can offer genuine representation, protection and support. So, in light of regional particularism, while the broad, global P/CVE approach can certainly provide an opportunity to learn lessons from global de-radicalization efforts of all kinds, it can also run the risk of trying to force a square peg into a round hole, or, of more concern (to me at least), to unintentionally reifying some of the various divisive and sectarian trends most damaging in the region over the long-term. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina there have been efforts specifically aimed at engaging “Muslim youth” in civil society promotion and capacity building activities, to get them more involved and engaged in their communities as active constructive citizens. I have wondered why such activities would not be of interest to all young people, not just groups of any one kind of believers. There was recently a CVE workshop in Bulgaria bringing together “Muslim youth” from the region, as well as from Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, the UK and elsewhere; the assumption presumably being that these youth are somehow different than their non-Muslim peers in their home countries, and whether rich or poor, French or Bosnian, that they share something in common by virtue of their (presumed) belief system. Is this approach really helpful in the context of the region? In addition, I am unaware of similar activities in the region explicitly targeting, for example, “Christian Orthodox” youth, though that may indeed be happening, in which case one might wonder what happened to the “civil” qualifier in “civil society.”

As a committed proponent of the liberal peace, I continue to believe that efforts in support of it benefit not only the targeted beneficiaries, but also regional and global security. As P/CVE efforts proliferate, however, I question their real and lasting impact, particularly if the root problems such initiatives are trying to solve are not also being addressed. I am concerned that many of the activities are focused more on the symptoms than on the underlying disease. To employ another metaphor, while many efforts aim to provide a kind of anti-virus software, I suspect it is actually the overall operating system that is the problem, and that this configuration is not a bug, but a feature.

Tomorrow: Reflections on Efforts to Prevent and Counter Radicalization and Violent Extremism in the Balkans (II) - Frozen Conflicts and Radicalization

REFLECTIONS ON EFFORTS TO PREVENT AND COUNTER RADICALIZATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE BALKANS (II)

Frozen Conflicts and Radicalization

A marked increase in the attention given to the issue of preventing and countering violent extremism in the Balkans reflects global worries about ISIS-inspired violence in Syria and Iraq, but also attacks committed in ISIS's name in other countries, especially European countries which struggle to maintain free and open societies while protecting citizens from such random violence, argues Valery Perry in the latest Democratization Policy Council report

In the context of the former Yugoslavia, all of the countries considered to be most "at risk" are, to varying extents, frozen conflicts. This environment has enabled many kinds of radicalizing behavior to germinate and persist and hampers efforts to prevent radicalization, while feeding drivers of exclusion and radicalization. Three interrelated themes – each reflecting characteristics of frozen conflicts – are critical to this challenge, with each touching on lasting core political challenges in the region which few are willing to openly discuss.

Identity Politics and Identity Building

The post-Yugoslav countries that saw fighters go to Syria and Iraq (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia), and to Ukraine (Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia), all to varying extents exhibit various characteristics of unresolved conflicts. Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war development has been paralyzed by differing and contentious interpretations of the Dayton Peace Agreement and constitution contained therein for a generation; after an initial decade of hopeful change there has been more than a decade of stagnation and regression, and political rhetoric has escalated to the same "who controls what where" debates reminiscent of 1991. Croatia's relationship with Serbia has been strained due to issues concerning the ethnic Serb minority in Croatia, and with Bosnia and Herzegovina in light of its direct engagement in that country's domestic affairs regarding BiH Croats. Kosovo remains mired in its status dispute with Serbia, not quite moving forward, yet not resolving issues of Serbs on its own territory, primarily (but not solely) in the north. Neither Belgrade nor Pristina have demonstrated any commitment for the genuine resolution of core issues beyond the technical. Post-Ohrid Macedonia has been hamstrung by Greek intransigence on the name issue, which has



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allowed the country to become "stuck" in the morass of a broken political system which has kept the country on edge for years; the latest crises suggest the possibility of further manipulation of the population along ethnic lines. Montenegro dodged a bullet following the failed coup attempt (supported by Russia) in 2016, and does seem to be stabilizing; it is now NATO's newest member. Serbia's own gravitation towards illiberal practices, as the government seeks to balance a vision aligned with both Brussels and Moscow, is a long-observed development; its inability to meaningfully address socio-economic problems and related grievances in Sandzak and the Albanian-speaking south portend poorly for future cohesion. Further, all these countries continue to suffer the long-term transitional consequences of minimally transparent and often corrupt privatization processes which entrenched a political and economic elite in which government by patronage and fear win out over accountable government and the rule of law.

Identity Politics

Each of these countries – but especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia – is also fundamentally hamstrung by stubborn and unresolved identity politics, and from divisions that, unfortunately, have consolidated since the wars of Yugoslav dissolution. None of these countries has

managed to develop a shared civic identity that all citizens, regardless of confession, language or minority status, can embrace. (And, despite heavy international intervention in some of these places, encouragement of such a civic identity has been a low priority, if pursued at all.) The characteristics in each case can vary significantly, but at their core they all deal with the issue whether or not the state represents an ethnic democracy or a civic democracy. If an ethnic democracy (which seems to be the trend) then there will inevitably be policies of inclusion and exclusion, resulting in in-groups and out-groups, in turn cultivating the very sense of difference, intolerance, and alienation that have been identified as drivers of radicalization. Do Bosniaks in Serbia's Sandzak region consider themselves to be fully Serbian citizens on par with the Orthodox majority, or do they simply carry a Serbian passport? Do Albanians in Macedonia consider themselves full citizens of Macedonia, or like Albanians "in the wrong place"? Is it even possible to be a citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina? The list goes on.

The issue of identity politics is closely related to the development of common civic values. A political system in which identity is structured and constructed along exclusive ethno-national rather than inclusive civic principles will struggle to simultaneously embrace and meaningfully enact policies aimed at strengthening a civic, non-ethnic social and

governing environment. The still consolidating democracies in the Balkan region enjoy neither the pretext of broad civic belonging (as in the UK, the US or Canada), nor the founding myth of an unquestionable sense of inclusion (as in France, where the state insists there are no races or national minorities, just the French, a stance viewed as increasingly untenable by many). Instead we see a generation in which there is constant tension between de jure inclusion but de facto preferential status, a contradiction between verbal platitudes made by politicians on visits to Brussels, and the day-to-day reality.

Civic Values and Civil Politics

While individuals are remarkably tolerant and very often able to see political manipulation for what it is and has been, there has been little to no effort at meaningful political reconciliation, and often few internal or external incentives to support it. People are bombarded by politically-based absurdities and a thinly-veiled form of hate speech daily, in tabloids but also in more "mainstream" news. In such an environment, and without a robust and functioning system of social and political checks and balances, politicians and nearly every aspect of politics and policies are at their core already radical in nature. Consider just the following examples, all of which have played out in the course of "normal" politics.

A train emblazoned with the slogan "Kosovo is Serbia" was sent from Belgrade to Kosovo in January, with no intention other than provocation; it stopped at the border following threats of violence, but fortunately no escalation.

Even as governments in the region purport to take a strong line against foreign terrorist fighters (either coming or going), in the eastern Bosnian town of Visegrad (brutally ethnically cleansed in 1992) a monument to the Russian foreign fighters who died fighting there was erected this year. Meanwhile, in agreement with the Center Municipality assembly, plans are underway to place a monument to a wartime special police unit in front of the Second Gymnasium in Sarajevo; as of this writing the chosen design of the monument is a tank. In other education news, Milorad Dodik has announced that neither the genocide in Srebrenica nor the siege of Sarajevo will ever be allowed to be taught in schools in the Republika Srpska.

Political discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia was sidelined for a week or so this year as the issue of an appeal to the International Court of Justice over the 2007 judgment in the case between the two countries was re-ignited by the main Bosniak party in BiH

(SDA), as both sides have very different definitions of what is needed to support "reconciliation." The recently elected mayor of Srebrenica, the first Serb in that position since the war, has stated that he doesn't agree with the use of the term genocide, openly questioning the number of people killed in July 1995. In the recent political crisis in Macedonia, VMRO-DPMNE has categorized Albanian language demands as



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an effort to destroy the country. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has been accused of interference in the affairs of Macedonia after he summoned Albanian leaders in Macedonia to Tirana for talks related to language rights. More broadly, the entire "Skopje 2014" spectacle is viewed by many as a provocation aimed at both snubbing Greece and excluding the country's Albanians and other non-Slavs.⁴

If such extreme everyday political discourse and actions are in themselves "normal," then it is little wonder that the most extreme social actors, of any persuasion, can find an audience. This tenor of politics and the electoral dynamics that come with it marginalize voices of moderation, incentivize increasingly more divisive actions and preclude formal or informal efforts to cultivate civic identities or the sense of a shared vision, purpose or future.

Broken Governance and Corruption

And finally, all the core political challenges in the region mentioned above are related to the big picture governance issue of weak, minimally accountable, corrupt and increasingly illiberal democracies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina there are no incentives in the electoral or constitutional structures to build parties or coalitions that cross ethnic lines, which might promote a civic sense of governing responsibility or which could enable the promotion of moderate rather than extreme positions and policies. The situation in Macedonia is still highly unsettled, and

ongoing political tensions could break a nascent yet strong civic desire for change by the active instrumentalization of ethnicity and language issues for political gain. In Kosovo, the EU's focus on the technical elements of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue have overshadowed core status-related issues, and allowed pervasive crime, corruption and unaccountable governance to be ignored. In Serbia, there are increasing concerns about the growing centralization of power, and of threats to nascent liberalism including the squeezing of an independent press and meaningful participation of opposition voices in public life. And while states with weak democratic foundations may be able to make more aggressive moves in terms of repressive counter-terrorism strategies, they are uniquely ill-suited to counter or prevent radicalization, trading short-term expediency for long-term effectiveness.

Critics will accuse me of overstating these trends and say that this is all "normal" for Balkan politics; that the situation is nowhere near as urgent as in the early 1990s; that as long as things are quiet, then they must be stable. They will point to purported "progress" in European/Euro-Atlantic integration processes. However, while there is now much interest in a technical approach to P/CVE, there is obvious reluctance among international and domestic actors alike to confront these issues head on. On the domestic side, politics are still grounded in a mix of identity politics and a related decision-making calculus in which patron-client relationships remain paramount, and very often rely on ethnic power structures more responsive to party patrons than to citizens. On the international side, there is little tolerance to accept either that post-war structural contradictions intended to end violent conflict have now calcified, or that the enlargement process is failing to promote meaningful change (let alone political reconciliation) in the neighborhood. The EU will not admit that the membership accession process was not developed and never meant to be a conflict resolution tool; that they have no Plan B for the region; and that their own internal existential challenges have made Brussels less inclined than ever to attend thoughtfully to its neighbors in the southeastern corner of Europe. And the erratic foreign policy of the Trump administration has made consistent action by the US increasingly unpredictable.

Tomorrow: Reflections on Efforts to Prevent and Counter Radicalization and Violent Extremism in the Balkans (III) - Violent Extremism, Peaceful Extremism

REFLECTIONS ON EFFORTS TO PREVENT AND COUNTER RADICALIZATION
AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE BALKANS (III)

Violent Extremism, Peaceful Extremism

A marked increase in the attention given to the issue of preventing and countering violent extremism in the Balkans reflects global worries about ISIS-inspired violence in Syria and Iraq, but also attacks committed in ISIS's name in other countries, especially European countries which struggle to maintain free and open societies while protecting citizens from such random violence, argues Valery Perry in the latest Democratization Policy Council report

In an environment in which politics are extreme by nature, another issue which many are keen to avoid concerns the very nature of extremism and radicalization processes. When studying or addressing these phenomena, should we only talk about violent extremism (or VERLT – violent extremism and radicalization leading to terror – in the parlance)? Is extremism itself – peaceful extremism – also a threat? Or is peaceful extremism simply a tolerable and even a natural exhibition of a free society?

A Peaceful Extremist?

These questions raise a host of other questions. In 2016, while travelling in the region and conducting interviews, the issue of Salafism as a potentially “extreme” interpretation of Islam relatively new to the region was often noted by respondents. In one case, I was told that I should remember that in the US we too have religious extremists – the Amish. I considered this: practicing one’s faith by opting out of most social, political and economic practices, eschewing electricity and other modern conveniences, etc., does qualify as extreme to many. Or, is it simply a fundamentalist interpretation? In either case, does such terminology matter if one’s practice of one’s religion is peaceful; if it does not involve the Internet in seeking new adherents, grooming or outreach? Is it then just a social outlier, an interesting oddity, a manifestation of freedom of religion, and of freedom of assembly?

This line of thinking leads to possible parallels and even more questions. Can one be a peaceful neo-Nazi, or does an organization with such a clearly and directly violent past mean that the specter of violence is ineluctably present, and is therefore always dangerous? If one eschews violence, is it possible to be a peaceful member of the Ravna-Gora Chetnik movement, and simply admire the traditional Serbian monar-



If one eschews violence, is it possible to be a peaceful member of the Ravna-Gora Chetnik movement, and simply admire the traditional Serbian monarchist army?

chist army? (This for me conjures up images of American fans of the Confederacy, which has contributed to similar debates in the US.) Does it matter if peaceful communities of Salafist adherents establish themselves in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or in Kosovo? Does it matter if these more “extreme” communities seek to reach new adherents, through traditional or online outreach? Would this, too, simply be an expression of new and liberal laws on religious freedom and the right to assemble – as one respondent called it, “the democratization of religion”? Or do such practices threaten the broader mainstream religious community and the wider community? Was the leader of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina right to seek to close down the para-dzemati (mosques unrecognized by the official Islamic community), or was this a violation of religious freedom? Where is the line between the sharing of ideas that are not mainstream and hate speech? Where is the line between promoting a specific worldview and inciting others to violence? What is the responsibility one may have if others use their peaceful words to justify violence in the name of

that cohort? And who (if anyone) should have authority to make these decisions and judgments?

Handling Extremism

These are questions that need to be asked and addressed in every society. However, an argument can be made that societies that lack a strong, cohesive sense of identity, with minimally accountable government, with a weak civil society, with fledgling or non-existent checks and balances – which are not resilient to use the terminology in the P/CVE world – that these societies are at a particular or a unique risk if within their midst are groups (dozens? hundreds? more?) of people who adhere to views and ways of living that are substantially out of touch with mainstream society. Can weak, unconsolidated democracies like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo withstand the social, economic, political and other consequences of having communities of believers opting out of participating in society, of participating in election processes, of running for office or of sending their children to public schools, relying instead on a parallel set of social services developed

specifically for that community? Can states that purport to have a European perspective sufficiently integrate groups of believers who hold beliefs that may be – or seem to be – contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights? An article published in the UK considers this challenge and notes, “But if extremism stops at the borders between words and deeds, liberal countries ought to be able to handle it.” This may be the case, but are the countries of the former Yugoslavia indeed able to handle it? And after years of democratic institution-building support, if they are not able, why not? These are the types of questions that need to be asked during the development and implementation stages of P/CVE efforts if the goal is long-term stability and sustainable social resilience.

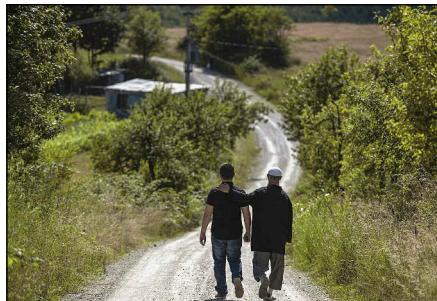
Bureaucratic Autopilot

The status quo, “bureaucratic autopilot” option would play out with more of the same – the development and implementation of projects and activities designed to produce practical and concrete results to achieve specific objectives, but without a coherent strategic policy. It would mean the continuing avoidance by influential external actors and domestic politicians of the messy political incentives and imperatives (e.g., constitutional, political) that hamper fundamental and systemic reform. Individuals and communities could continue to benefit from locally-based projects and activities and that could constitute a positive micro-outcome. Who would argue against refurbishing a rundown primary school or youth center? Or providing more responsive psychological care for prisoners? Or training adults to recognize signs of juvenile delinquency? But continuing progress of this kind lasts only so long as donors continue to provide funds for such initiatives.

The past two decades have shown that fundamental change to governance structures and community investment that go beyond the “quick fix” project approach is needed and that the donor/project cycle must be replaced. Only then will real sustainability of reforms be possible.

Some have argued that the “experiment” in encouraging the consolidation of multiethnic, civic states in the region has failed, and that lasting stability is only possible through more unyielding nation states. Already in 1996 one writer provocatively suggested that perhaps the only role of the international community in addressing war in multi-ethnic states is to assist in population movements to ensure more homogenous

enclaves. It is not conceivable that the international community would actively engage in efforts to peacefully separate populations. However, an indirect route to ethnically clean territories could be the outcome – intended or not – of international support to domestic policies which aim to subtly squeeze out non-majority populations.



Can weak, unconsolidated democracies withstand the consequences of having communities of believers opting out of participating in society?

In the Balkans, further regional partition and division, although a possibility, is not a sustainable option; a particularly unhelpful piece promoting this viewpoint came out in late 2016 and drew widespread criticism, as did an equally ill-considered piece published in 2017. Regardless of one’s stance on soft or hard partition, there is little reason to expect that such an approach would facilitate more effective P/CVE. On the domestic side, ethnic partition does not create more open and transparent government, and such an exclusive approach to the rule of law provides a flimsy foundation for future liberal development. On the international side, partition unleashes domino-like chain reactions; where does it start, and more importantly, where does it end? Also, this would not be non-violent, and would likely sow the seeds of future grievances. This approach is the precise opposite of what needs to be done to attain comprehensive and sustainable security. Regional policymakers should therefore be attuned to whether or not their own engagement with the countries in the region is perhaps having any unintended effect of fostering even more political and social divisions.

For all its faults, the notion that a liberal, democratic peace is good for international security and stability, as well as for a state’s domestic constituents, has been a foundational principle of western foreign policy and development strategy for decades. It should therefore not be surprising that this has been a key element of foreign policy in the West, with admitted significant variance in implementation and commitment. The Trump administration has sent clear signals that the era of democracy and human rights promotion is over within the scope of US foreign policy, at least

for now. As the short- and long-term risks inherent in a foreign policy grounded in nothing more than transactional “deals” become apparent, there may be a chance for this policy to evolve. Unfortunately, Trump’s recent comments on his first visit to Saudi Arabia suggest a purely militaristic approach to counterterrorism, with P/CVE, grounded as these processes are in rights and values, viewed (erroneously) as superfluous.

A Renewed Commitment

Critics will argue that liberalism has been tried in the region, and has failed. This would be an unfair reading of the environment, and of the content and sequencing inherent in the introduction of “liberalism.” Economies were liberalized, but without parallel political liberalization grounded in the rule of law, privatization led to little more than state-sanctioned theft; the region is still dealing with the consequences, and some remain at risk of state capture. The democratization of electoral politics has continued to result less in political parties that offer differing platforms based on political ideology, and more on constructed essentialist and exclusivist identity-focused parties. European accession standards profess shared values, yet those involved in the negotiations (on both sides) often fail to meet such stated norms. Citizens have either bought into the new patron-client networks or have completely opted out; it is difficult to identify any truly inclusive or representative notion of government/citizen accountability (other than patronage networks) in any of the states in question. Much of this is structural, grounded in transition-era wealth consolidation, and institutionalized by post-violent conflict political systems that favor centralized ethnic democracy over functional civic democracy.

Have I lost hope? No, but Brexit, the election of Trump, the specter of European nativist populism and the retreat of liberal democracy in Hungary and Poland point to troubling trends (only somewhat mitigated by the results of recent elections in the Netherlands, France and the UK) that could contribute to more alienation, dissatisfaction and grievance, in turn contributing to more radicalization. P/CVE efforts are necessary, but are not sufficient to address the political and values vacuum in the region. A renewed commitment by Euro-Atlantic institutions to genuine comprehensive security grounded in liberal democratic values, with eyes open to the real problems and drivers of future conflict in the region, remains vital.