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# New Tendencies on the Far–Right Scene in the Western Balkans. Mainstreaming the Extreme.

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**Authors of the Research:**

Richard Straka  
Balša Lubarda  
Dimitar Nikolovski  
Dalibor Savić

**Introduction:**

Tomáš Kolomazník  
Zdeněk Rod

**Conclusion:**

Halina Chraščová

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## About CAMR

CAMR gathers an international group of enthusiasts interested in topics of security, geopolitics, international relations, and related issues. It aims to provide further research and expertise leading to an expert discussion in the cooperation with academic field. CAMR was established in 2020 by, Mgr. Halina Chraščová.

Our office and dynamic team are located in the capital city of Slovakia, Bratislava.



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Halina Chraščová  
*CAMR, director*



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# Introduction

Right-wing extremism has been looming in Europe in recent years. These days it would be a challenge to find a country in Europe that has not experienced any form of right-wing extremism, and the Western Balkans is no different. There are currently many risk factors in the Western Balkans that are undoubtedly related to right-wing extremism. Among these factors are certain still unresolved problems related to local and national identity, conflicting historical problems, problems associated with political transformation, poor functioning of the state administration and frozen conflicts.

In terms of right-wing extremism, the Western Balkans has received attention from academic scholars and policy-makers in recent years. But why so late? Right-wing groups had already established themselves during the fragile period of the 1990s. The reasons behind this are multifaceted. Researchers and policy-makers dealt with issues such as the post-conflict reconstruction of war-torn countries, peace-building, nation-building, stabilisation missions, reconciliation, assessing building governance and so forth. After 2010, another serious topic emerged: ISIS recruiting Muslim citizens to fight in bloody wars in the Middle East. Consequently, researchers had to tackle how to manage the ISIS returnees and not threaten the societal security dimension in the Western Balkans by importing radical Muslim views.

In recent years, right-wing extremism in the Western Balkans, an often neglected topic in the region, has been approached by the research community, and this has also been the trend in Europe as a whole. However, it seems that right-wing extremism in the Western Balkans has rather different characteristics than elsewhere in Europe. The Croatian and Serbian right-wing groups have been associated with topics such as ecology (the use of environmental issues for mass mobilisation to promote right-wing influence), cultural (art, music, sport) and humanitarian activities (providing food and for basic needs). These groups are intentionally interested in those activities to gain the favor of locals living in remote

areas, which are often neglected by the official government and/or municipalities.

Another important touchpoint is that seemingly different right-wing organizations sometimes horizontally cooperate on environmental, cultural and humanitarian topics. Cross-border cooperation is somewhat known to occur among those groups. Not only do they cooperate among themselves, but also with external proxies in Russia, Ukraine and the Central European region. Organizations based in the Western Balkans can provide them with financial and ideological resources and give them a certain level of legitimacy.

The goal of this document, however, is not to analyze all the existing organizations. Instead, it will horizontally analyze ultra right-wing organizations based on the environmental and humanitarian themes, cultural focus and paramilitary activities they are associated with. Hence, we will present several case studies that analyze right-wing extremist organizations that take part in environmental, humanitarian, cultural (art, music, sports) and paramilitary activities. We will look on their international relations as well. By doing so, we can provide a rather different point of view and present right-wing extremism in a different context.

To carry out our study properly, we did not only rely on desk research associated with text and context analysis rather some data were collected via online environment sources. In each study, we will point out which particular organizations can be related to the given activities, how those organizations are governed, which other activities they carry out, why they carry out those activities (what are their objectives?), and whether they have some external support outside of the Western Balkan region. Lastly, we will assess the impact those organizations have in the Western Balkan societal context and present whether they represent a potential challenge or risk to the ongoing post-war democratic process.



## Environment

# BALŠA LUBARDA

Visiting Fellow (Fulbright)  
at the Center for Right-  
Wing Studies, UC Berkeley  
(US).

Head of Ideology  
Research Unit at the  
Centre for Analysis of the  
Radical Right (UK).

He completed his PhD  
at Central European  
University (2021),  
exploring far-right  
environmental politics  
in Eastern Europe.

He was published in  
several prestigious peer-  
reviewed journals, such  
as *Environmental Values*,  
*Environmental Politics*,  
*Sociologia Ruralis*.



Although environmental activism and politics seem to be a prime example of a "left-wing" issue (or a GAL issue on the GAL-TAN scale), the link between the far right and the environment is at least one century old. Dating back to the romanticist nexus between the nation and its nature, this "far-right ecologism"<sup>[1]</sup> has always implied an organic unity between the people, the nation and its environment. Far-right ecologism is a relatively broad ideological spectrum that cannot be simply reduced to "ecofascism". However, the value of this concept in directing attention is certainly recognized. As such, far-right ecologism comprises the most extreme, misanthropic ecofascists. On one extreme, it advocates for the eradication of (certain) human beings in the name of the nation's environmental purity. Those in this camp that are less extreme (albeit no less radical) advocate for energy and food autarky, the protection of domestic species and food habits from incursions related to globalist trade patterns. In doing so, the appeal of far-right ecologists often conflates with that of other, "non far-right" environmentalists, as the calls for localized environmental movements and farm-to-fork economies are a part of the broader environmentalist platform. For this reason, far-right ecologism can at times be difficult to differentiate from broader environmental activism in a given society. Simultaneously, far-right ecologism may seem to operate on the fringes of politics, but the increasing salience of environmental issues paired with the climate crisis have already indicated some important shifts with respect to how far-right parties engage with the environment topic.

This becomes particularly important in the EE contexts, including the Balkans, where the far right has always had substantial support - either directly through far-right parties (e.g., the Serb Radical Party in Serbia) or through proxies capitalizing on far-right narratives and talking points (the Serbian Progressive Party in Serbia or the Democratic Front in Montenegro). Thus, environmental issues may present themselves as useful opportunities for political mobilization, allowing the far-right populists to appeal to grassroots groups and "diligent people on the ground", which could bring about movements. Being ultimately dependent on the broader trends briefly outlined above, far-right environmental activism in the Balkans has been fairly limited. This is in line with other extreme-right organizations worldwide that operate based on similar themes and frameworks. The main focus is that of "purity" and "health". In their YouTube propaganda video from 2007, Rasionalists, a neo-Nazi organization from Serbia,

juxtaposes a "healthy natural environment" to a "multicultural environment", the latter being "infested" with Roma settlements<sup>[2]</sup>. Far-right ecologism rests on the ability to differentiate itself from green parties and politics through a set of seemingly radical proposals - the extent to which these are actually radical is a different topic. This accentuates Manichaeism, the fundamental separation between good and evil, as the centerpiece of far-right politics. For instance, Serb Action, an extreme-right group, dedicated one text on their blog to how their take is different from that of the Serb greens. Their take is ideologically unambiguous, echoing far-right ecologism worldwide, linking environmental issues to spiritual decay and presenting environmental politics as a Semitic conspiracy.

The "green" agenda was devised by the Zionists, with the aim of mobilizing apolitical people for globalist goals. And even if they were to assume that this agenda was truly spontaneous and independent, it would again be a failure because it overlooks the spiritual cause of the environmental problem. Idolatry towards the environment is a spiritual sin. Without Christ as the foundation, there is no ecological or any other valid renewal. The only measure that can increase the birth rate of Serbs is the strengthening of Christian faith in the people<sup>[3]</sup>.

In this case, the devastation of the environment is linked to Aleksandar Vučić's ruling Serbian Progressive Party, but it also includes a "wolves in sheep's clothing" - ecological organizations promoting the interests of different, non-patriotic actors.

Such ideological renditions about the environment are not specific to Serbia. For instance, the Bosnian Movement of National Pride (Bosanski pokret nacionalnog ponosa) presents ecological activism as an example of their "goodwill activities", indicating that the goal of their type of national socialism is "harmony in the body and mind, and organic harmony in nature,...". In calling for a consummation of "home-made and natural food", the organization venerates this "natural law" as the foundational principle of political organizing<sup>[4]</sup>. It is this focus on the "natural law" that determines the ecologism principles of the extreme right. They concentrate on the organic unity between a nation and its nature, as well as a Manichean struggle - good nationalists and nature-lovers on one side, and global corporations and foreign powers on the other<sup>[5]</sup>.

The reverence for home-made food also serves to reinscribe the patriarchies of the past - the smells of home and childhood with grandmothers preparing domestic dishes invoke nostalgia and also portray an image of women as housewives with traditional gender roles. The support for slow and home-made food also has a Manichean view against "globalism" – rejecting GMOs, as they are products of the influence of international organizations (the EU, WTO) and global corporations. The extreme-right Serbian Movement 1389 ("Nashi"), which was formerly led by Miša Vacić, has an entire section of their website promoting anti-GMO content. Celebrating rural livelihoods as an attempt to revitalize the country's economy is a common feature of the extreme right in Eastern Europe. Arguably the most influential case is that of Miroљub Petrović, a YouTube influencer and far-right pseudoscientist who advocates for a return to the Serbian medieval empire that was ruled by Tsar Dušan.

The nostalgia for ruralism also implies the more human treatment of animals. Even though supporters of far-right vivisectionism and veganism in the Western Balkans are relatively rare (with the exception of the Serbian chapter of the ecofascist and polytheistic Greenline Front <sup>[6]</sup>), animal welfare remains a relatively popular cause for the extreme right in the Balkans. Arguably the most infamous case is that of Leviathan (Levijatan), an organization-turned-party led by Pavle Bihali. Similar to the Hungarian Szurkolok, Leviathan gained popularity by acting as a vigilante unit that rescued animals from abusers and publicly offered compensation for information leading to their identification <sup>[7]</sup>. With brass knuckles and a claw as their logo, Leviathan has co-opted the "emotionally charged" issue of stray animals into their activism <sup>[8]</sup>. In doing so, the group has frequently targeted individuals belonging to disadvantaged communities (mostly Roma) and has espoused a strong anti-immigrant stance within their political platform, pairing up with the anti-vax movement "I live for Serbia".

Serbian Action: "People are not Cattle: We don't want to become a part of the WTO at the cost of GMO"

The focus on caring for the environment can also serve as a pretext for conspiracy theories. As an example, a North Macedonian nationalist organization called Tvrdokorni, the same name as a TV series there, linked the death of birds to the effects of 5G networks. Tvrdokorni also used ecological issues to point to other labor and

agriculture-related hardships, such as when agricultural producers threw their yearly harvest in Lake Prespa <sup>[9]</sup>. This way of bridging topics is characteristic of the instrumental value the environment has in extreme-right organizations' political communication in the region and arguably even beyond it.

The relative lack of interest by the extreme right in the environment does reflect broader currents related to the far right in Eastern Europe. At the same time, it also points to how interest in the environment is increasing among the far (or the extreme) right when these topics increase in prominence. A good example of how the domestic context determines developments in the ecological domain is the upsurge in environmental activism in Serbia following the announcement of Rio Tinto's lithium mine investment. The protests attracted the interest of a wide range of actors and political parties, including those not previously known for their environmental activism. The Serb Right (Srpska Desnica) and Dveri are two notable examples of this kind of behavior. This also allowed for the formation of far-right networks fighting for the same environmental cause. However, it is important not to blow the importance of these networks out of proportion given their rather loose nature. Miša Vacić, the leader of the extreme-right Serb Right, called for a termination of the contract with Rio Tinto because "if anyone is to use the natural resources of Serbia, it should be Serbs and the Serbian state, not foreign companies". Other extreme-right groups in Serbia such as the Serbian National Front <sup>[10]</sup> and Serb Action harshly criticized Rio Tinto on the same eco-nativist grounds, the latter even taking part in the ecological protests in Belgrade in 2021. Even football ultras groups from Vojvodina and Kragujevac, some of which are associated with local far-right organizations, have flown banners against Rio Tinto and lithium mining <sup>[11]</sup>. The arguments used in justifying these protests are not so much situated around the protection of the environment due to its intrinsic value, but rather about biopolitics, the harm such investments cause to demographics (e.g., cheap labor), how it is a form of patrimonialism, and their responsibility towards their ancestors (the "buried remains of our great grandparents").

Due to the limited possibilities for nationalist groups in the Balkans to cooperate, far-right ecologist networks are unlikely to become international. However, cases of far-right cooperation and (relatively pliant) networks based on ecological matters in Serbia show that the far right may well be

willing to increase its engagement with these topics. Whether this engagement is “pragmatic” or “ideological” does not matter. What matters is that the nationalists’ care for the nation’s nature is likely to appear sporadically, especially in times of environmental issues with a high salience (the fight against small hydroelectric powerplants, air pollution, deforestation, fracking).

For someone in the Balkans, the mainstreaming of the far right happening worldwide is an already “lived experience” of post-socialist politics. In other words, nationalism never totally disappeared from the region’s political mainstream, and it continues to affect the way we exercise our political thinking as a nation. When there is an absence of interest by the far right in environmental issues, some “professional” partisan analysts have begun to use their “expert status and well-oiled PR machine”<sup>[12]</sup> to scaremonger policymakers about the increasing influence of the far right in the environmental domain. In support of their claims, they provide meager evidence by pointing to the presence of individual members of far-right organizations taking part in environmental protests or smearing

environmental activists and green politicians by linking them to the far right. These findings should urge self-reflection, both for environmental activists and the broader public. Not only is it important to take such criticism with a pinch of salt, but it should be taken even further, meaning resolutely rejecting the logic of fascist hunting if it is used to undervalue the entire ecological cause. When it goes that far, it is similar to *reductio ad Hitlerum*. Environmental activists and politicians should be open to criticism, as should anyone daring to engage in public matters. However, using cherry-picked examples to allude to a “far-right ecologist” profile of environmental activism in the WB is not only inaccurate as this chapter has shown, but intentionally deceiving to shore up the potential of radical ecological change. Out of the many things the entire political spectrum agrees on in the Balkans (and elsewhere), it is the ecological cause that arguably has the greatest potential to offer a radical restructuring of the social, labor and gender relations that contributed to the emergence of nationalism in the first place. The promise of a better, more just and above all, equal society, is exactly why local ecological struggles are unlikely to make room for far-right ecologists in the Balkans.

<sup>[1]</sup> Lubarda, B. (2020). Beyond ecofascism? Far-right Ecologism as a Framework for Future Inquiries. *Environmental Values* 29(6): 713-732.

<sup>[2]</sup> Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWJxoJy6Y8Q>.

<sup>[3]</sup> Available at <https://akcija.org/o-ekoloskim-protestima-i-zelenim-pokretima/>.

<sup>[4]</sup> Available at <http://bosanskinacionalisti.org/pokret/stavovi/>.

<sup>[5]</sup> See also Olsen, J. (1999). *Nature and Nationalism: Right-Wing Ecology and the Politics of Identity in Contemporary Germany*. New York: St Martin Press and Forchtner, B. 2019. *Far Right and the Environment*. London: Routledge.

<sup>[6]</sup> Available at <https://vk.com/public111473833>.

<sup>[7]</sup> Djukanovic, V., Djureinovic, J., and Momcilovic, P. “In ‘Far-Right Ecologism’, European Extremists Pursue Broader Appeal.” *Balkan Insight*, 23.10.2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/23/in-far-right-ecologism-european-extremists-pursue-broader-appeal/>.

<sup>[8]</sup> Colborne, M. “Levijatan: Serbian Animal Rights Vigilantes Go To The Polls.” *Bellingcat*, 18.06.2020. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/06/18/levijatan-serbian-animal-rights-vigilantes-go-to-the-polls/>.

<sup>[9]</sup> Еколошка катастрофа во Преспа, наместо вода во реката течат јаболка. Република, 14.06.2019. [https://republika.mk/vesti/ekonomija/ekolosha-katastrofa-vo-prespa-namesto-voda-vo-rekata-techat-jabolki/?fbclid=IwAR22HEHaZW84MwjQ40lybqxJtDAqDYZwN\\_NV150L6bfvODW7vXdxJ8SA](https://republika.mk/vesti/ekonomija/ekolosha-katastrofa-vo-prespa-namesto-voda-vo-rekata-techat-jabolki/?fbclid=IwAR22HEHaZW84MwjQ40lybqxJtDAqDYZwN_NV150L6bfvODW7vXdxJ8SA).

<sup>[10]</sup> Available at <https://www.facebook.com/sfront/>.

<sup>[11]</sup> Available at <https://www.021.rs/story/Novi-Sad/Vesti/291185/FOTO-Firmasi-protiv-Rio-Tinta-Mars-iz-Srbije.html>.

<sup>[12]</sup> Mondon, A., and Winter, A. (2020). *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and The Populist Far Right Became Mainstream*. London: Verso, p. 193.

## Culture

# DIMITAR NIKOLOVSKI

Executive Director of  
the Center for European  
Strategies-Eurothink.

External Associate of  
the Institute for Advanced  
Studies Kőszeg in Hungary.

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.

He acquired a vast  
research experience by  
working as a researcher in  
several think-tank  
organizations in North  
Macedonia and Bosnia and  
Herzegovina.





The relationship between the far right and culture run deep, as culture is one of the most direct expressions of identity. Far-right groups in the region have engaged in various such activities, which serve several purposes: they present themselves to the public and aim to gather broader support, they can be used to recruit new members, strengthen internal ties and cohesion, network with other similar organizations or simply 'fill the time' during camps, occupations or protests.

Many of the culture-related activities, in fact, coincide or are closely related with activities from the other designated categories in this research such as **humanitarian work and religious/church-related instances**. An example of all three instances was the case when Tivat, the Montenegro-based Brotherhood of Serbian Orthodox Youth "St. Panteleimon" gifted baskets of sweets to children (like those given by Santa Claus/Father Frost) on the Old (Serbian) New Year. They were criticized for indiscriminately sending said gifts to elementary school students of various religions and denominations and imposing the Serbian Orthodox traditions upon them. Therefore, in 2021 they gave them away at the Port of Tivat. In their defense, however, the leader, Father Mijaljo Backovic, had used tolerant speech, which is unusual for a far-right movement:

"Our goal is not promotion or influencing children. Our goal is that children are made happy by sweets and to be happy about the birth of Christ. In this city, there are also Christians and those who are not, but this holiday is for everyone because it is the holiday of peace and love" [1].

**Sports** are another branch of culture that has traditionally been an interest of the far right. Besides the obvious hooliganism and football fandom, far-right groups have emerged as organizers of various tournaments (often of a humanitarian nature), nature walks with or without historical/cultural significance, or they simply promote the 'healthy living of the nation,' such as with the slogan "Sport, zdravlje, pravoslavlje" ("Sports, health, and orthodoxy"). In September 2022, the Brotherhood of Holy King Milutin and "All for Kosmet", along with the Brotherhood of Serbian Orthodox Youth, organized humanitarian tournaments for i futsal, darts and billiards that were aimed at helping Serbian families and Orthodox sites in Kosovo. They managed to gather over 1000 Euros for the cause. Considering these are all bar games, it was used as a way to gather the

youth of Bijelo Polje together so they could socialize and increase their patriotism [2]. The Novi Sad-based Fondacija Junak (Foundation Hero) organized a football tournament in Odzaci to gather funds for the treatment of two sick children. Again, the "All for Kosmet" humanitarian organization took part as co-organizers [3]. They have been known to have ties to Leviathan, the Serbian Chetnik Movement and the US Rise Above Movement [4].

Besides humanitarian purposes, sports activities are also used for socializing, networking and strengthening the ties among various similar groups from different cities, such as the football game between two Orthodox brotherhoods from Danilovgrad and Podgorica in Montenegro. Afterwards, the Orthodox Brotherhood of Montenegro promoted it on their Facebook page [5].

Considering the importance of national history in the building of far-right mythology, a special category are **commemorations** of right-wing historical figures and events. Perhaps some of the most famous examples of such activism are the various iterations of the Serbian Chetnik movement that commemorate Draza Mihajlovic, a figure often at odds with the law and banned by certain authorities. The "Kingdom of Serbia" group organized "Draza Day" on July 17, 2022, in Bijeljina, BiH, on church grounds after being banned from public areas in the city. The Ravnogorski Cetnicki Pokret (Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement) regularly organized commemorations in Visegrad until it was banned in 2022. On the other hand, those organized within Serbia have not met such reactions, like one that took place in the village of Dadinci near Vlasotince, Serbia, in June 2022 by the Ravna Gora Movement. The Night Wolves have also taken part in various commemorations such as regularly visiting Jasenovac in Croatia, a place of Serbian suffering in World War II [6].

Srbski Svetionik (Serbian Lighthouse) is, in this regard, a particularly notable organization since they deal with various cultural activities such as marches and walks. Founded in 2014, they gather participants to take part in historically significant marches for Serbs, either ad hoc marches or ones that take place on planned routes and are organized regularly every year. On their website they provide information about 9 such marches (not all organized by them) [7].

**Public visual art**, primarily murals, have raised much controversy because of their invasive nature in public spaces and how they are aimed at 'marking territories'. In particular, the mural of Ratko Mladic in Belgrade has been a place of constant struggle between supporters and opponents, and it has been regularly painted and repainted. Similar forms of art have been created in many other cities in the region, such as one depicting the late Night Wolves leader Sasa Savic Svabo in Nis<sup>[6]</sup>. Fondacija Junak has painted murals of various Orthodox religious figures and Albert Andijev, a Russian who fought on the Serbian side in the Kosovo War<sup>[9]</sup>.

**Music** has also been a traditionally important channel for spreading and strengthening right-wing ideology. Aside from the old school RAC (rock against communism) and various white power skinhead bands and music, nowadays the far right expresses its musical interests in several ways such as through traditional music, spiritual Orthodox music and popular music (electronic, drum and base, hip hop and others). The Serbian chapter of the Blood and Honour white power group tried to organize a punk/metal music festival honoring the founder of the international Blood and Honour organization, Ian Stuart Donaldson. The authorities banned it in 2020, but the bands that were on the roster had already played many shows throughout Serbia dating back to the 1990s<sup>[10]</sup>.

In 2020-22, Fondacija Junak (there will be more on them in the section on humanitarianism) set up the "With All Heart for the Heroes" and the subsequent "Junak Fest" in Bogojevo, Serbia, which, in addition to organizing small humanitarian sports tournaments, had an evening program of hip hop groups and DJ's. According to the organizers, the purpose was to "express respect and gratitude to war veterans, military war invalids and families who lost their dearest in the homeland wars"<sup>[11]</sup>. For the Serbian right wing, the hip hop group Beogradski Sindikat (the Belgrade Syndicate) holds a special place and particular popularity. They have participated in many humanitarian and commercial events held by Serbian nationalist groups such as the July 2021 concert in Tivat that took place with the support of the Brotherhood of Serbian Orthodox Youth in Montenegro<sup>[12]</sup>. Besides the BS, other performers were a children's choir and several folk singers. The Night Wolves also organized a trip for a children's choir called "Branko" to go to Moscow to perform in front of the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch, Cyril.

Within the music category, a special part for the far right are biker gatherings and festivals, which do not always have an exclusively 'right-wing' music repertoire and can thus be effectively used to recruit new members outside of the known circles. The Skopje chapter of the Night Wolves has been organizing their festival, which is often supported by the City of Skopje, for over 10 years and featuring popular rock bands and tattoo artists. The festival came under scrutiny in 2015 when they used a homophobic sign on the festival's poster<sup>[13]</sup>.

Finally, various cultural festivities are used to **simply 'fill the gaps' and help 'pass the time'** during activities that might take a longer time or require waiting. During the controversial period of changing the name of the Republic of Macedonia, which nowadays is the Republic of North Macedonia, several public space occupations were carried out by organizations such as the Orthodox Brotherhood, Tvrdokorni and Prerodba. When misinformation became prevalent that the monument of Alexander the Great would be forcefully removed during the finalization of negotiations between the governments of North Macedonia and Greece, citizens gathered to 'protect Alexander' and were on constant watch for several weeks. Fearful that the enthusiasm would drop because nothing was happening (the plans to remove the monument did not exist), each evening they set up various cultural activities in order to create events, i.e., give people a reason to attend and make the whole situation more visible to other citizens who had no idea they were gathering in the main Skopje square. The events and activities included reading children's poetry, juggling performances, acoustic concerts and conceptual art around the monument.

[1] "Mališanima svih vjera i nacija djelili slatkiše na Pinima." Boka News, 13.01.2021. <https://bokanews.me/malisanima-svih-vjera-i-nacija-djelili-slatkise-na-pinima/>

[2] Bratstvo pravoslavne omladine Crne Gore. Facebook, September 26, 2022. [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid029AZrzcG1o2qFAT2RbYKtcvuYKT94FqZaYoMxPvoW42MkPd5FiDMTUR3YlK1H6a8pl&id=100886478702418](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid029AZrzcG1o2qFAT2RbYKtcvuYKT94FqZaYoMxPvoW42MkPd5FiDMTUR3YlK1H6a8pl&id=100886478702418)

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## Far-Right Humanitarian Activity

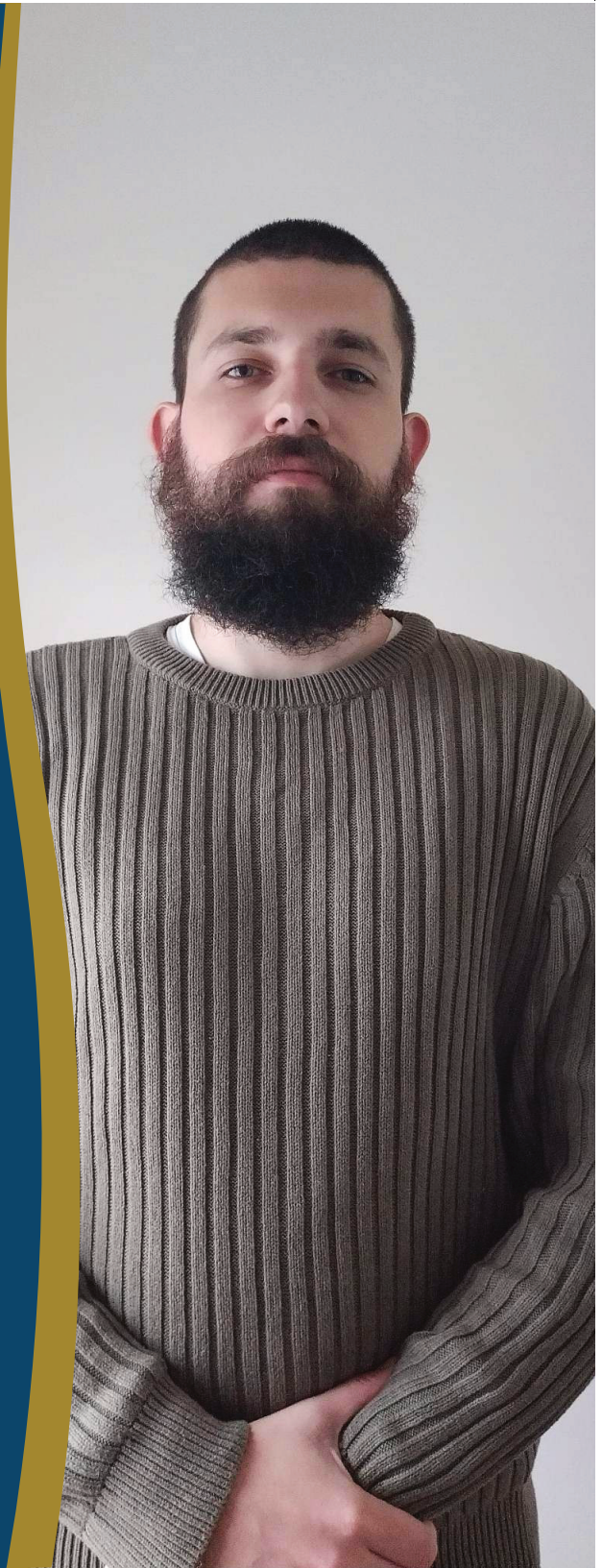
# RICHARD STRAKA

International relations  
and European studies  
Graduate.

His research interests  
include a variety of global  
issues, from security to  
social and economic  
issues.

He has written articles  
about the region of Asia.

He is currently a member  
of CAMR and  
[infosecurity.sk](http://infosecurity.sk).



One of the inspected aspects of far-right organizations in the Western Balkans in this research is humanitarian and charity activity. Some of the organizations are registered in their countries as non-governmental humanitarian organizations. According to the Red Cross, humanitarian organizations are, in general, entities with a mission to prevent or alleviate human suffering<sup>[1]</sup>. Their reason to exist should be to assist a civilian population through the provision of humanitarian relief. What we can assume and expect from non-governmental humanitarian organizations is for them to be independent groups of people with specific activities that assist the civilian population in their states or municipalities. Since there are not currently any armed conflicts in the Western Balkans, it is most practical to look for activities mostly related to charity and humanitarian events.

The ability to sell and promote humanitarian activities to the public is the main characteristic and aspect for this research. For instance, the social media accounts of far-right organizations are the best way to gather this kind of information. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Telegram are used depending on the given organization. Unfortunately, in many cases there has been an absence of activity on social media in recent years and in general. There are also cases when social media accounts were most likely deleted by the previously-mentioned platforms for rule violations. Despite this, there are more or less enough sources and material from some countries to be able to create a general view that is supported by evidence.

Organizations from Serbia are the most active in humanitarian and charity activities. They are sometimes also active in Kosovo. These organizations can be divided into two groups. The first group consists of organizations that are active in humanitarian and charity activities and actively present their ideology during these activities. The second group are organizations that do not present their humanitarian and charity activities on their social media platforms or portals, or are not active in these activities at all. This division into these 2 groups can be used to represent the region as a whole.

From Bosnia and Herzegovina, almost all of the far-right organizations operate in the federal entity of Republika Srpska. Some of the non-Serbian organizations are The Bosnian Movement of National Pride and the Croatian Skinheads Mostar. Organizations from Montenegro are significantly less active in humanitarian and charity activities

compared to those in Serbia. Organizations based in Montenegro and Bosnia do not use or promote ideologies during these kinds of events if they hold them. The same is applied to what they post and present on social media. In general, their humanitarian activity and ideological promotion is very limited compared to the most active Serbian organizations. North Macedonia currently lacks far-right organizations actively taking part in humanitarian activities.

The best example of active far-right organization is the Serbian **Junak Fondacija**. It is a smaller nationalistic-oriented humanitarian organization located in the municipality of Odžaci in the West Bačka district of the autonomous province of Vojvodina<sup>[2]</sup>. The organization has been active since the first half of 2019, but according to the material on their social media, the intensity of their activities increased only in the second half of 2021 and continues to the present. The organization is famous for its charity events and humanitarian collections. Their most popular event is their darts tournament, which has been held regularly since the organization's inception. Most of the money raised is usually given to war veterans and their families in Serbia<sup>[3]</sup>. Other interesting activities related to charity are food and drug collections for poorer or families of war veterans<sup>[4]</sup>, and this is usually also connected with the delivery of firewood<sup>[5]</sup> or funds raised for house-related issues<sup>[6]</sup>. The organization also organizes specific fundraisers for individuals, mostly veterans, where the goal is, for example, to purchase necessary medicines<sup>[7]</sup> or to help a victim of a NATO bombing with prostheses for both feet<sup>[8]</sup>. **Junak Fondacija** also organizes Christmas events, volleyball tournaments and other outdoor activities where humanitarian collections are an essential part and a goal<sup>[9]</sup>. It is important to note that these events and collections are always accompanied by nationalist themes by using flags, banners or additional descriptions on social media with ideological overtones. Based on observational data, the organization has not significantly changed its modus operandi, and it continues to carry out the same activities as it has since its inception.

The second great example is the **Kormillo** organization, which appeared in 2018, earlier than **Junak Fondacija**. This Serbian organization was also formed with the narrative of being humanitarian. Their activities are similar or almost the same as those of Junak Fondacija. It mostly consists of repeated humanitarian collections for a few poor families that mainly take place on

the streets of Belgrade <sup>[10]</sup>. They have participated in a larger event organized by **Junak Fundacija** called *"With all our hearts for heroes"*, which is oriented towards helping war veterans <sup>[11]</sup>. They have also cooperated in taking up Christmas collections on the streets <sup>[12]</sup> and in humanitarian concert events <sup>[13]</sup>. They differ from the

**Junak Fundacija** in the sense that they do not help war veterans, but are oriented towards poor families with different backgrounds and members with health issues <sup>[14]</sup>. Each of their actions is accompanied by nationalistic appeals connected to Kosovo (that it is Serbian) or some other material about the "great Serbian nation". They use their banners and flags with nationalistic themes at each event, every time they take collections and with every social media post. From this point of view, the two organizations are almost identical and represent ideal subjects for further research on this issue. The rest of the Serbian far-right organizations carry out minimal or no humanitarian activity. If they organize or participate in such events, they do not use them to publicly disseminate ideologies like the **Junak Fundacija** and **Kormillo** organizations do.

There are only a few organizations outside of Serbia that can be considered at least close to **Junak Fundacija** and **Kormillo** or were close to them in the past. The Montenegrin **Brotherhood of Orthodox Youth in Montenegro**, the **Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi** and two organizations from Bosnia's Republika Srpska, **Srbska čast** and **Sveti Georgije Lončari**.

**The Brotherhood of Orthodox Youth in Montenegro** was founded sometime around 2019 and 2020. Humanitarian and charity work is not the most common type of content they publish or the most typical activities they carry out, but it is present. For example, they organized a collection for an elderly man, and they purchased food and other necessities for him and gave him some money <sup>[15]</sup>. It seems that their charity is connected to the orthodox Christmas and New Year festivities. They organize a collection of packages for poor families, and they have also supported a fundraising campaign for packages for other local kids <sup>[16]</sup>. The **Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi**, founded in 2020, distributed Christmas packages that included food, other necessities and even washing machines for poor families on orthodox Christmas in 2022 <sup>[17]</sup>. During 2021, they sporadically delivered humanitarian aid to poor families across the country <sup>[18]</sup>. They do not use

ideological narratives in charity content or at events. The only theme they use is the orthodox religion, but they do not use it extensively.

**Srbska čast** is active on their Facebook page with more than 60k followers <sup>[19]</sup>. However, their main topics are politics. Humanitarian and charity content is extremely rare, the most recent post being from 2020. Following that post there are only a few examples, which usually went along with a video on their abandoned YouTube channel <sup>[20]</sup>. They organized a very small number of collections for poor families with ill or many kids and for a poor elderly man <sup>[21]</sup>. These kinds of activities are very rare, meaning we can't describe this organization as humanitarian anymore. Their facade of being a humanitarian organization was properly debunked in 2018 <sup>[22]</sup>. The second organization is **Sveti Georgije Lončari**. Their Facebook page was most likely either blocked or deleted by members of the organization. However, there is enough material in the media about this group's humanitarian activities. Since 2019 they have organized dozens of events where they distributed aid to elderly women, single mothers and families - regardless of ethnicity <sup>[23]</sup>. By the end of April 2021, they had organized at least 70 humanitarian events for vulnerable citizens of all ethnic groups and religions <sup>[24]</sup>. Based on the available photographic material in the mentioned articles, we can say that they wore black clothes with insignias during most of these events to express their political stance and promote their ideologies. Both of these organizations expressed their narratives during humanitarian events and activities.

Based on the evidence available on social media, news and online portals, there are a few clear findings. The most popular activities are the simplest ones. Mostly, these are fundraisers by their own members, a small group of supporters or occasionally the general public. Other popular activities include various sports tournaments such as darts, football and volleyball. E-sports tournaments are a novelty. Most organizations have a specific target group of citizens they are trying to help or have tried to help in the past. These usually include children, poor families, war veterans and/or pensioners. There is also increased activity by all four organizations during the Christmas and festive season. In most cases, systematic and regular assistance is lacking.

Serbian far-right organizations that are based in both Serbia and Bosnia's Republika Srpska were or have been using

humanitarian work and activities to openly and visibly spread their ideology and narratives for a few years. In some cases, however, they completely ceased these activities and switched to pure politics and other kinds of activities. Some of them, namely **Kormillo** and **Junak Fondacija**, are still continuing in these activities, which they are using to spread their ideological

propaganda, mostly related to Kosovo and anti-NATO and anti-West narratives. Montenegrin organizations gave us examples of religious narratives being pushed during their humanitarian activities. North Macedonian organizations did not provide us with valuable information for any research in this chapter.

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## International Cooperation

Collaboration is always a good tool for any organization, especially if it is trying to get new resources for its activities or looking for ways to present its achievements. In the case of the far right, it is all about ideologies. In recent years, the Western Balkans have become increasingly popular among the leaders and followers of the far right, mainly in the Western world and the US [1]. Some local far-right organizations are trying to take advantage of this situation by building friendly relations through joint, mostly political events at home or abroad. These meetings are used to get to know each other better and build contacts for wider and more effective international cooperation.

The most common way in which relationships are built and strengthened is through international events. Often these are conferences that take place across Western Europe, and they are not just limited to the Western Balkans. For the most part, these events are not annual events. Rather, in this case, they are one-off events that respond to a specific selected issue. They can also possibly have a different objective, for example, such as when they happen before elections in some countries.

If we look at organizations in the Western Balkans, namely Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, we predominantly see links to organizations based in the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Central Europe [2]. Of course, there is also a visible connection with organizations in other countries. However, in these cases it is more visible through their joint activities, events they put on and interactions between representatives of the organizations, not only what can be seen on social networks.

As previously mentioned, looking back over the past few years, the spectrum of far-right movements on the internet from the Western Balkans has become increasingly popular across the far right in much of the Western world [3]. In the case of web content originating from Serbia, which is mostly available in Serbian and to a certain degree in English, the main narratives and content that attract viewers were about the issue of Kosovo, Greater Serbia, opposition to the European Union and the adoration of Orthodox Christianity with Russia at the forefront. Regarding Russia, approval and support for Moscow's actions against Ukraine is and has been very much present, whether it is the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the subsequent outbreak of war in the Donbas or, most recently, the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

The Serbian far right has the most active international cooperation, which is mostly oriented towards Russia. However, Central Europe, Italy, Germany and Greece are not lagging behind. One example of the connection between the German and Serbian far right is the interaction between members of Serbian Action, Dveri and specific far-right politicians and the Alternative for Germany party [4]. However, these relationships were mostly short-term and were based on the situation, such as elections either in Serbia or Germany. Another case is the cooperation between Italian and Serbian organizations. Mutual relations between the Serbian and Italian far right have been building up for several years through meetings and small conferences in Belgrade and Rome [5]. However, this cooperation is not as widespread as cooperation with the Russian side. The international cooperation between Serbian and Italian far rightists deepened during a small conference in Belgrade in September 2022 [6]. The event took place at a well-known Belgrade rally of far-right groups - club 451. Attendees at the forum were representatives of the "Student Bloc" organization (Blocco Studentesco). This is the youth branch of the neo-fascist organization "CasaPound", which has been

accused of attacking migrants and leftists in Italy. From the Serbian side, one attendee was Marko Gajinović, who is registered as a representative of the 451 Club and is linked to the far-right groups "Zentropa Srbija" and the "National Serbian Front".

Significant international cooperation of the far right was also demonstrated in September 2021, when the Nations of Europe conference was held in Belgrade [7]. The conference was held at Hotel Moscow. The organizer was Alliance for Peace and Freedom, a far-right group uniting several far-right and neo-Nazi parties across Europe. From the Serbian side, Miša Vacić was a representative at this conference. The other participants were from France, Greece, Italy, Germany, Spain, Romania and Russia. The main topics were Kosovo and politics in connection with COVID-19.

The specific cooperation of the subsidiary Blood and Honour in Serbia under the name Krv i čast made no secret of its neo-Nazi stance on its official website, which, however, is no longer functioning today [8]. In this case, it is possible to speak of an active international cooperation between the British and the Serbian far right.

The cooperation of the Serbian far right with movements from Central Europe has been going on for more than 10 years [9]. One example of this cooperation is a regular event on 11 November - Polish Independence Day. In addition to Serbs, groups from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia regularly take part in this event where Polish nationalists and the far right commemorate Polish independence. In 2011, the Serbian Pokret 1389 (The 1389 Movement) was active at this event. As the popularity of the event grew, international participation gradually expanded to include other Western European countries [10]. This presents a good opportunity to build an international far-right network for Serbian movements as well as those from other countries.

The relevance of the link between the Serbian far right and the Russian regime was directly confirmed by the visit of the leader of Narodne Patrole (People's Patrols), Damjan Knežević, to Moscow [11]. He spent a week in Moscow doing several interviews for Russian media, even Russia Today [12]. He was invited there as a reward for putting on pro-Russian rallies, which were set up by his organization in Belgrade after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine [13]. During his visit to Moscow, he also met with the leader of the notorious Russian mercenary and private military company "The Wagner Group", Yevgeny

Prigozhin, Putin's friend and ally. During a guest appearance, Knezevic told RT that "Serbs and Russians are brothers" and that there is a "media campaign against Russia, as was the case with Serbs in the 1990s" <sup>[14]</sup>. He also claimed that they will continue to support Russia so the Russian people understand that they have true strategic partners in the Balkans. The radical and paramilitary link between the Serbian and Russian far right can be seen in the participation of Serbian citizens in the war in Donbas as early as 2014. There were dozens of Serbian citizens who joined the ranks of pro-Russian proxy republics in Donbas, mostly in Donetsk <sup>[15]</sup>. However, a new wave of fighters also arrived in eastern Ukraine after the full-scale invasion in February 2022 <sup>[16]</sup>. This is the result of years of mutual cooperation between the Serbian and Russian far right. Another of the most recent and public cases of cooperation that excludes direct involvement in fighting is the participation of two members of Serbian Action in the military training of the Russian Imperial Legion <sup>[17]</sup>. The "Imperial Legion" is the militant wing of the "Russian Imperial Movement" (RIM). The United States designated this ultra-nationalist organization as being a global terrorist threat in 2020. A video of their visit to Russia was published on their YouTube channel in May of 2022 <sup>[18]</sup>. In this twenty-minute video, the leader of the Imperial Legion, Denis Garijev, leads two members of Serbian Action through the facility. They also undergo some kind of basic training. Members of this Russian organization have also been fighting in eastern Ukraine since 2014, just like many Serbian citizens.

The case of Bosnia shows the international link with internal developments. Far-right ethnic Croats operated on the Internet from Germany <sup>[19]</sup>. Far-right ethnic Bosniaks, in turn, operated on the Internet from Sweden. Finally, in the case of the ethnic Serb party, the bulk of them operated from Serbia.

The ethnic Croatian far right from Bosnia has a long-standing active cooperation with the Ukrainian far right <sup>[20]</sup>. This is most evident in their participation in the fighting in eastern Ukraine, where they sided with the Ukrainians as members of the Serbian far right went with the Russian side. Between 2014 and 2015, a few ethnic Bosnian Croats joined the ranks of the Azov Battalion, which was connected to far-right ideologies at that time. They belonged to the ultras from Mostar, a mostly Croatian city in Bosnia. On the other hand, members of Serbian ultras from Prijedor joined the other side of the conflict <sup>[21]</sup>. Almost all the far-right

organizations from Republika Srpska have links to both Serbian and Russian movements.

Regarding Montenegro, the most popular organization with international links is the Night Wolves. A subsidiary of a Russian biker group, it pretends to be a sport, humanitarian and religious organization on Montenegrin territory. However, as in other countries, it serves to spread Russian propaganda and interests <sup>[22]</sup>. In this case, they take advantage of the strong presence of the Orthodox faith, and their close ties with the Serbian Orthodox Church operating in Montenegro create a proxy system for Moscow through which the Kremlin seeks to manipulate and influence events in the country. Since they began their presence in the country several events have taken place, and these events were also attended by guests from Serbia and Russia. According to Radio Free Europe, in August 2022 the National Security Agency initiated a procedure to ban the activities of the "Night Wolves" organization by the Montenegrin government <sup>[23]</sup> following the example of several European countries after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine <sup>[24]</sup>. However, no further details have emerged as of October 2022. The Brotherhood of Orthodox Youth in Montenegro cooperates with church organizations across Europe, but there is no element of the far right present <sup>[25]</sup>. Most of its activities are purely religious. Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi only has a small amount of cooperation with Serbian partners that have a humanitarian aim <sup>[26]</sup>. In general, far-right organizations from Montenegro do not belong to a wide international network. Aside from the Night Wolves, they lack a significant network through which they can spread their own influence or foreign influence at home.

Lastly, North Macedonia is a case where broader international cooperation of local far-right organizations is absent. The only significant element of such cooperation is the ethnic Albanian football ultras, who have established relations with ultras from Albania. An example of this are the ultras Ballista, fans of a club from Tetovo <sup>[27]</sup>.

To summarize, the far right in the Western Balkans has experienced a growth in popularity and a network of mutually beneficial relationships with organizations across Europe in the last decade. The most active organizations are those that originate from Serbia or are formed by ethnic Serbs, as is the case of Bosnia and Republika Srpska. They are followed by organizations from Montenegro and the rest of Bosnia and

Herzegovina. The main points and themes of far-right cooperation are Kosovo, the Orthodox faith, and anti-immigration and anti-EU stance, and in some cases also an anti-NATO stance. The far right is evolving in light of current events on the European

continent, and relations are developing accordingly. Therefore, it is possible to speak of new trends of the far right on a regular basis, even if they try to stick to their basic ideological concepts.

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## Far-Right Paramilitary Organizations in the Western Balkans

### DALIBOR SAVIĆ

Assistant professor -  
Faculty of Political Science,  
University of Banja Luka.

Research interests:  
sociological theory and  
methodology, culture of  
remembrance, gender and  
peace studies.

He has published around  
twenty scientific papers in  
national and international  
journals.

He currently holds the  
position of the Vice-Dean  
for Science, Research and  
International Cooperation  
at the Faculty of Political  
Sciences University of  
Banja Luka.



There is an extremely long tradition of parainstitutional violence in the Western Balkans. Although its origin and development can be traced far into the past, it expanded during the 90s of the last century, i.e., within armed conflicts in the post-Yugoslav area. During this period, many far-right paramilitary organizations directly participated in the aforementioned hostilities, and they were most often a tool for realizing the political and/or economic interests of certain political parties and state apparatuses, i.e., ethnonational elites that were created during the post-socialist period. Although the patterns of (re)production of parainstitutional violence throughout the Western Balkans are still based on similar assumptions (of course, with a drastically lower scope and intensity of violence compared to the 90s), during the second and early third decade of the new millennium, there was a series of global geopolitical changes, which to a certain extent influenced the modification of the aforementioned practices. In this context, this text will try to approach this issue from a structuration perspective, i.e., by pointing out the mutual relations between different state and non-state actors at the micro, meso and macro levels of social reality. Accordingly, after presenting the conceptual framework used, we will also offer certain analytical insights into the current practices and patterns of paramilitary organizations in the Western Balkans.

In the academic literature, there are many more or less similar conceptual definitions of paramilitary organizations:

- Autonomous groups of armed men gathered around their leaders and linked to extremist political parties, i.e., formed by governments that want to distance themselves from radical forms of violence;
- Self-defense instruments used by social sectors that doubt the state's ability to guarantee their security;
- Warlords or criminals who want to rule over citizens in line with the patterns of a mafia regime;
- Unofficial security forces that have a military or quasi-military function;
- Death squads that advocate right-wing ideologies and, as the state's accomplices, violate human rights;
- Former members of the army and police who act with impunity because they have the state's open or tacit support;
- Armed groups created and financed by sectors of capitalist society that receive unofficial military and logistical support from a capitalist state.<sup>[1]</sup>

Even though most of these conceptual definitions can, in principle, be used to

identify paramilitary organizations in the Western Balkans, none of them are broad enough to encompass the wide range of different groups associated with parainstitutional violence that have operated or are currently operating in said area. We take the view that in this context it is heuristically more justified to use the conceptual model of paramilitarism proposed by the Dutch historian Uğur Ümit Üngör. Üngör claims that conceptual definitions of paramilitarism based on binary classifications, i.e., the establishment of essential characteristics or specific differences on the basis of which it is possible to make a clear distinction between paramilitary groups and those that are not (e.g., based on their structure, tactics, training, subculture, etc.), have less cognitive value compared to the approach according to which this social phenomenon includes a continuum of parainstitutional activity and organization mediated by different levels of state involvement - from tacit to open support. On the far left side of that continuum are spontaneous initiatives such as local vigilantes, lynch mobs and self-defense groups, while on the far right side are professional paramilitary units backed by the state. Between these extremes, from the left to the right of the continuum, there are citizen patrols, off-duty policemen and soldiers paid by businessmen or politicians, clandestinely organized armed groups whose connection to the state is denied (e.g., death squads and proxy militias), and armed groups of citizens that function as auxiliary forces in violent conflicts (e.g., civilian militias)<sup>[2] [3]</sup>. Therewith, Üngör also provides other researchers with two very useful general guidelines for studying the phenomenon of paramilitarism:

- Paramilitary groups should always be viewed from a wider social perspective, i.e., with a focus on their institutional environment, present political interests and specific topics (such as rebellions, election violence, state building, etc.)
- Relations between paramilitary groups and the state are sometimes extremely complicated and/or changeable, which is directly reflected in the emergence, development and disappearance of specific paramilitary groups<sup>[4]</sup>.

Üngör's approach to the conceptualization of paramilitarism can simultaneously be operationalized from a diachronic and a synchronic perspective. In the first case, it can be used as an analytical framework for understanding sociohistorical changes in the patterns of paramilitary activity and organization, as well as changes in the patterns of activity and organization of

specific paramilitary groups. At the same time, we are of the opinion that it constitutes a solid basis for the analysis of existing paramilitary practices in addition to the mutual relations of non-state and state actors involved in their (re)production.

If we approach the phenomenon of far-right paramilitarism in the Western Balkans from a diachronic perspective focusing on the period from the 1990s up to the present, we can notice two turns from the right to the left end of the presented continuum. The first turn is connected with the gradual ending of armed conflicts in the post-Yugoslav area, i.e., the gradual dissolution of paramilitary formations that were actively participating in hostilities and the initiation of legal proceedings against their members suspected of violating the International Humanitarian Law and/or the laws of their own countries. In other words, the aforementioned turn implied the dissolution of semi-professional and professional paramilitary units, which were more or less openly supported by certain political parties and/or state security structures. We believe that the aforementioned turn in the symbolic sense ended with the dissolution of the Special Operations Unit in 2003, which between 1996 and 2002 operated within the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia<sup>[5]</sup>. On the other hand, the second turn from the right to the left end of the "continuum of paramilitarism" in the Western Balkans took place within the global trend of the rise of the extreme right, i.e., it is associated with a series of social crises (such as the global economic crisis of 2008, the European migrant crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the military conflict in Ukraine, etc.) that led to the resurgence of xenophobia, racism, nationalism, religious intolerance, sexism and other anti-liberal/anti-democratic ideas. The normalization of right-wing ideas in the principally democratic public sphere also implied a change in the image of far-right political movements and parties, which was also manifested through a more or less honest rejection of their (para)militaristic heritage and/or goals. The above-mentioned process had a different impact on Western Balkan countries. In this context, we particularly single out the examples of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The process of normalizing the extreme right in Serbia followed global trends and mostly led to the (apparent) transformation or disappearance of far-right organizations with paramilitaristic characteristics. For example, during the aforementioned period, paramilitary organizations such as the National Machine (Nacionalni stroj) and Obraz were banned from operating, and the Serbian movement Dveri grew into a political party.

Other organizations with paramilitaristic characteristics claim that they are basically engaged in humanitarian work (e.g., Serbian Honour/Srbska čast) or animal protection (e.g., Leviathan/Levijatan). At the same time, the global trend of normalizing the extreme right in Bosnia and Herzegovina was almost not even felt, as it is a country that has been dominated by ethno-national politics for over 30 years. Let us also add that during this turn, there was an increased amount of cooperation among paramilitary groups and organizations from the Western Balkans and like-minded people from various European countries, primarily Russia and Ukraine<sup>[6]</sup>.

For the purposes of this text, we will briefly analyze the public activities of the following far-right organizations from the Western Balkans: People's Patrols (Serbia), Serbian Honour (Serbia/Bosnia and Herzegovina), Saint George (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Skinheads Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement (Bosnia and Herzegovina/Serbia). In addition to determining their basic ideologies, patterns of activity and connection with other social actors, we will position each of the aforementioned organizations within the "continuum of paramilitarism". We based the aforementioned analysis and positioning on publicly available data such as media articles, websites of the said organizations and videos of their activities published on YouTube.

The informal organization People's Patrols (Narodne patrolе) was established in October 2020, and its core comprises former members of different far-right organizations throughout Serbia (in addition to Belgrade, their activities were recorded in cities such as Piroć, Bela Palanka, Apatin, Sombor, Sid, Loznica and Subotica). Its leader is Damjan Knežević, co-founder of the informal organization "Nema predaje Kosova i Metohije" and former vice-president of Zavetnici (a far-right political party and former movement that gained parliamentary status after the general elections held in April 2022). The members of this organization primarily promote xenophobia and the need to expel migrants from the territory of Serbia, as well as the possibility of "civil arrest" in all other situations that are not under the direct control of police forces<sup>[7]</sup>. In addition, this organization advocates ethno-nationalism, racism, denies war crimes, and promotes heterosexism and homophobia. The actions of its members have so far included organizing protests against the presence of migrants in Serbia, patrolling around migrant centers, incursions into alleged illegal migrant camps, verbal conflicts with

migrants, threats to Serbian citizens who help or provide services to migrants, harassment of journalists, physical clashes with the police during EuroPride 2022 in Belgrade, the organization of rallies in support of Russia, etc. [8] [9]. In addition to the above, members of the aforementioned organization published videos on YouTube of civil arrests they conducted against migrants who were allegedly pickpocketing or selling drugs [10] [11]. The manner in which these arrests were carried out is directly linked by certain experts to unlawful deprivation of liberty, violation of freedom of movement, violent behavior and even abuse, torture and persecution, i.e., criminal association [12]. When they participate in these kinds of activities the members of this organization are usually dressed in black and masked. Even though there is no direct evidence of a connection between this organization and state actors, some Serbian media and public figures claim the opposite and directly point to the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and his Serbian Progressive Party. In addition to certain indications, they base this claim on the arguments that the current Serbian authorities tacitly allow the activities of the People's Patrols, i.e., that there is a direct connection between this organization and other far-right organizations or hooligan groups that are allegedly close to the authorities [13] [14]. In public, on the other hand, Knežević does not miss an opportunity to mark Vučić as a traitor who pursues the interests of the so-called "globalists" [15]. Knežević's public display of animosity towards Vučić is used by the right-wing media in Serbia as the main evidence to dispute the allegations of their mutual connection, and they particularly point out that Knežević is a nuisance to the authorities because he is pro-Russian [16]. According to the information above, we do not think that it would be justifiable to place the People's Patrols at the left end of the spectrum of the "continuum of paramilitarism". We suggest they should be moved to the right and, in the absence of more concrete evidence, at least for the time being, should be defined as a form of citizen patrol, and potentially as a transitional form between citizen patrols and a kind of proxy forces (in the case that some of their activities are directly supported by Russia).

The organization Serbian Honour was originally founded in Niš (Serbia) in 2014, and three years later it established its branch in the Republic of Srpska [17]. Its leader in Serbia is Bojan Stojković, a close friend and associate of Saša Savić, the deceased leader of the Night Wolves in Serbia. Encouraging the youth to take active part in social life, the promotion of healthy lifestyles, the

promotion of European values, the promotion of environmental protection and the observance and promotion of fundamental human rights and freedoms have, among other things, been set forth as the main objectives of its activities in its statute [18]. According to its members, the primary activity of the organization is humanitarian work, which, in principle, can be determined by looking at most of their posts on YouTube. However, contrary to its own statute and at the same time their humanitarian work, the members of this organization publicly promote traditionalism, ethno-nationalism, historical revisionism, chauvinism, homophobia and other far-right ideas. In addition, some of its members are actively involved in shooting and undergo other forms of military training [19]. The members of this organization came into the focus of the regional and world public with their activities in the Republic of Srpska, where from 2016 to the present time they have paraded publicly dressed in military uniforms on several occasions. Certain opposition politicians in the Republic of Srpska along with part of the regional and world public connected them at that time with Milorad Dodik, the leader of the political party Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and the president of the Republic of Srpska. Some of these sources claimed that the Serbian Honour, under the auspices of the then authorities of the Republic of Srpska, had taken part in the recruitment and training of members of paramilitary units, which were allegedly supposed to be a means of intimidating the opposition and implementing Dodik's secessionist plans to secede the Republic of Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina [20] [21]. At the same time, the media in Serbia mentioned certain actions in which members of the Serbian Honour "took justice into their own hands" and acted with the use of violence, e.g., the stoning of the Media Centre in Niš in 2017 due to the planned showing of a film about the coexistence of Serbs and Albanians, the physical harassment of one of their minor members who misused membership of the organization, and the intimidation of a Roma youth who abused animals [22] [23] [24]. We would especially like to single out the public message that Stojković sent to the President of Serbia, Vučić, in March 2018, in which he declared that the members of the Serbian Honour were ready for "general mobilization", i.e., to "protect all the Serbian population in Kosovo and Metohije" [25]. In addition to the above, it should be noted that the members of the Serbian Honour do not hide their sympathies towards Russia, but some regional and foreign media, as well as politicians, indicate that Russia uses them as a kind of proxy force in the pursuit of its interests in the Western Balkans [26] [27]. However, Stojković

denies such allegations <sup>[28]</sup>. According to the available data, we believe that on the "continuum of paramilitarism", Srpska čast should currently be designated as a form of civil patrols with pronounced characteristics of proxy forces. In addition, we are of the opinion that if necessary and with appropriate support, the inner circle of membership of the mentioned organization, i.e., those members who regularly engage in shooting and other types of military training, could very quickly transform and be labeled on the "continuum of paramilitarism" as a clandestinely organized armed group or an auxiliary force in violent conflicts or even as a professional paramilitary unit backed by the state.

Since 2020, an informal humanitarian organization called Saint George (Sveti Georgije) has been operating in the Brčko District in Bosnia and Herzegovina with its headquarters in Lončari. Its leader is Srđan Letić, who has been convicted of different criminal offenses on several occasions. From its establishment up until today, the members of the this organization have carried out a great number of humanitarian actions, which were mostly aimed at delivering food to people in need, regardless of their ethnicity <sup>[29]</sup> <sup>[30]</sup>. At the same time, its members advocate far-right ideas such as ethno-nationalism, glorification of war and war crimes. They wear black uniforms, which, among other symbols, have Russian inscriptions on them. Some of the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina claim that this organization looks up to Serbian Honour in its activities. However, the actions taken so far by its members outside the sphere of humanitarian work mostly involved parading in the formation of a military column and did not involve the use of physical or verbal violence. In their posts on Facebook, they often promote Russian-Serbian friendship, and some of them have also participated in rallies in support of Russia in Serbia. The members of this organization boast of good relations with the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and they claim that it donated two cars to them <sup>[31]</sup>. According to the available data, it is evident that this far-right organization has certain paramilitaristic characteristics, whereby we are primarily targeting the wearing of uniforms, the use of specific flags and military formations. It seems that these characteristics, at least for the time being, point more to the respect of the patterns of a specific ideology of ethno-nationalism in a symbolic sense than to its consistent application. In addition, this organization's capacity to transform into a proxy force is questionable. In this context, we believe that the Saint George organization can currently

be positioned in the immediate vicinity of the far-left end of the "continuum of paramilitarism". In other words, it is probably a spontaneous initiative that, due to certain circumstances, received some external support, but it has still not decided or been conditioned to use parainstitutional violence.

Since 2015, a group of Zrinjski Football Club supporters has been operating in Mostar, and it bears the name Skinheads Mostar (SH-MO) <sup>[32]</sup>. It consists of several dozen young Croatian men. Ivan Ferenc, Davor Škobić, Marko Vidović and Dino Lovrić are mentioned in the media as prominent members of this group. This informal organization publicly propagates neo-Nazism and historical revisionism (via social networks and at sports events), which is largely based on the legacy of the Ustasha movement. Some members of the aforementioned group maintain direct contact with Ukrainian neo-Nazis <sup>[33]</sup>. Some journalists point to the fact that this group is prone to parainstitutional violence, but that this is covered up by the relevant police structures because its members are mostly members of the upper social classes <sup>[34]</sup>. In this sense, it is indicative that certain media convey information about neo-Nazi groups that perpetrate violence against ordinary citizens (most often members of other ethnic groups, such as Bosniaks and Serbs), political dissenters and/or monuments to anti-fascism in the city of Mostar, especially during holidays or events which are associated with the anti-fascist heritage from the Second World War; however, very often it is not possible to identify those groups based on media articles <sup>[35]</sup> <sup>[36]</sup>. On certain occasions, "hooligan attacks" or "hooligan violence" by Zrinjski supporters are mentioned in that area. In such attacks, members of these groups are usually dressed in black and masked <sup>[37]</sup> <sup>[38]</sup>. In some of the media, the aforementioned neo-Nazi and hooligan groups are directly associated with the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), i.e., the most influential political party in that part of Bosnia and Herzegovina <sup>[39]</sup> <sup>[40]</sup>. According to the available data, it is currently not possible to fully confirm these allegations, but it is reasonable to assume that there is a connection between certain actors of the city/cantonal authorities and actors of parainstitutional violence. Although this connection may not necessarily imply direct support, the context of tacit support for perpetrators of violence is evident <sup>[41]</sup>. From that perspective, we place Skinheads Mostar, i.e., the hooligan faction of the Ultras-Zrinjski supporter group, within the left and towards the central part of the "continuum of paramilitarism".



A far-right organization called the Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement (Četnički ravnogorski pokret) operates throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. A total of 16 Chetnik associations operate legally in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that is, the Republic of Srpska<sup>[42]</sup>. Their leaders claim that they have over 9,000 members and that they have inherited the tradition of the Chetnik movement from World War II. In this context, they advocate historical revisionism and deny the fact that in that period the Chetniks were Nazi collaborators. Members of this movement promote traditionalism, ethnonationalism, clerico-fascism and other far-right ideas. Many of the older members of this movement directly participated in the armed conflicts in the post-Yugoslav area, and some of them have been convicted or are currently on trial for war crimes. Certain media claim that among their membership there are also active members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Srpska<sup>[43]</sup><sup>[44]</sup>. At their gatherings, they wear black uniforms, hats, caps and flags with specific labels, and the status of individuals in their organizations is expressed by military ranks. Until 2019, members of this movement traditionally gathered and lined up in Višegrad on 13 March (and on that occasion marked the anniversary of the arrest of Draža Mihailović, the leader of the Chetniks during World War II). However, in 2022 for the first time, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Srpska did not allow that<sup>[45]</sup>. Certain local authorities in the Republic of Srpska have co-financed the holding of those manifestations on several occasions<sup>[46]</sup>. Dušan Sladojević, Slavko Aleksić and Risto Lečić, members of the Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement, were accused of inciting national and religious hatred, discord and intolerance in Višegrad in March 2019. They were initially acquitted of the charges in December 2021, but that verdict was overturned. In a retrial in June 2022, they were each sentenced to five months in prison<sup>[47]</sup>. In addition to the above, several members of the aforementioned movement harassed and physically attacked Bosniak journalists during a gathering in Višegrad in 2016 (Blagovčanin, 2016). Despite this, the security agencies in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not consider them to be a threat to national security<sup>[48]</sup>. Let us take this opportunity to refer briefly to the activities of members of the Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement from Serbia. There is less information about them in the media, and the exception in this regard is their leader, Bratislav Živković, who together with several members of the movement fought on the side of the Russians in Ukraine. In that context, they described themselves as volunteers, while representatives of the Serbian authorities characterized them as mercenaries. In one interview, Živković

himself points to the direct connection between certain members of the Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia with Russian volunteers who took part in armed conflicts throughout the post-Yugoslav area in the 90s<sup>[49]</sup><sup>[50]</sup><sup>[51]</sup>. After returning to Serbia, Živković organized riots with his supporters on several occasions and was under police investigation for recruiting Serbian citizens to participate in the Ukrainian conflict. However, he was never convicted of those acts<sup>[52]</sup><sup>[53]</sup>. According to the data above, it is evident that the Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement should be positioned from the center to the far right side of the "continuum of paramilitarism" because it more or less operates with the open support of various government structures (especially in the case of the Republic of Srpska, i.e., Bosnia and Herzegovina), and some of its members directly participated in the hostilities in Ukraine (as members of civilian militias and/or professional paramilitary units).

The results of the presented analysis indicate that there are forms of far-right paramilitary organizations that extend along the entire "continuum of paramilitarism" in the Western Balkans, i.e., from spontaneous initiatives to professional paramilitary units. A common feature of those organizations is (the potential for) participation in proxy crises. On the other hand, they differ in their degree of organization, training and readiness to commit physical violence. In this sense, it is evident that differences in terms of training and readiness to commit physical violence can also be observed within the mentioned organizations, most often by making a distinction between the very core of membership around the leader/leaders and the wider membership. Finally, we also wish to emphasize the difference between organizations that are on the left and right of the spectrum in terms of accumulated social capital, i.e., the support they enjoy from state actors. Namely, it is obvious that organizations whose existence can be traced back to the 1990s (maybe even earlier), such as the Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement, have a far more extensive network of (para)institutional support than is the case with "deviant" subcultural groups (such as football hooligans). It should also be noted that the presented analysis had a preliminary character, and it did not include all the far-right paramilitary organizations in the Western Balkans.

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- [2] Ümit Üngör, U. (2020). *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 7.
- [3] Although Üngör does not list them, we believe that the "continuum of paramilitarism" should also include certain subcultural groups (such as football hooligans and bikers), which are frequent actors of para-institutional violence, not only in the Western Balkans but also globally. In our opinion, they should be positioned within the left and towards the central part of the aforementioned continuum.
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- [5] The Special Operations Unit was mainly composed of members of paramilitary formations such as Knindža and the Srpska dobrovoljačka garda, which directly participated in the hostilities in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some of its members that were led by commander Milorad Ulemek Legija were convicted of the murder of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in Belgrade in 2003, as well as a number of other serious crimes (murders, kidnappings, the drug trade or trafficking, etc.).
- [6] There is more about those connections in the remaining part of the text, as well as in the chapter of this publication that is dedicated to the international cooperation of far-right organizations from the Western Balkans.
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- [17] The official registration of this association in the Republic of Srpska never took place, and its original leader in this Bosnian-Herzegovinian entity, Igor Bilbija, was dismissed from that position in 2018 because in the meantime he took a photo with the former wartime commander of the R BiH Army in Srebrenica, Naser Orić.
- [18] Available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kNITxYUpWg4p0lY5ikMJTjEHVZy-KibJ/view>.
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## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was not to introduce an end ready research but rather to present the possibilities of further investigation and to justify the chosen categories for it by showing their importance and potential.

Current geopolitical situation causes changes in nearly all fragments of political, social, ecologic, economic, cultural, and other scenes. The transition of the ultra right-wing scene into being more accessible and less closed to the public has already started with Covid pandemics and this trend continuous further on. We might observe a certain shift in the ultra right-wing activities that aim for broader reach on potential members, regular mainstream masses. These activities are seemingly carefully chosen to address also the variety of age groups. Whether those are sport activities for the youth or religious activities related to the Orthodox Church for elderly people. Nevertheless, they are able to address also different social groups ranging from poor social background to wealthy people, that means from receivers to donors, through the humanitarian activities. With their social attitudes they also create a space to reach for young families with children, mothers, etc. All of the above-mentioned activities are gradually bringing these, before relatively closed groups closer to the ordinary people who would not label to themselves as ultra right-

wingers at all. Referring to that we also might observe that this notion is gradually being replaced rather with the term nationalist, or more adequate ultra nationalist. Being nationalist does not bear that degree of negative connotations as ultra right-wing and to some point also leads to mainstreaming it. We might observe that ultra right-wing groups tend stop being perceived as somewhat extreme but are definitely getting closer to mainstream. Not only because the environment and circumstances has changed but also due to broadly accessible programmes and often more moderate narratives of their representatives. This represents a phenomenon that, we suggest, should be carefully observed, and studied, defining the potential to change and shape further social and subsequently geopolitical environment. Hence, in every chapter we aimed to introduce the insight of our researchers onto the given problematics in fields that should require further attention in deeper and more complex and continuous research. Nevertheless, there are some more areas that had not been covered yet as for example political activities of ultra right-wing subjects that would definitely be worth of further study and analyses. We do strongly believe in the potential and importance of the research activities focused on the new tendencies of ultra right-wing subjects and would appreciate any support that would enable us to continuously convey it.