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HOW VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS IS FUNDED

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SUMMARY

Over the past decade, thousands of euros have entered or been generated in the Western Balkans to finance violent religious and far-right political extremism. It is a complex arena, with both legal and illegal sources used to support causes driven by ethnic tensions, strict or radical interpretations of Islam and Orthodox Christian conservativism.

This policy brief explores the financial foundations of violent extremism in the region. It analyzes the fundraising and fund-moving activities of violent religious and far-right extremist groups, including licit or illicit sources and national and international movements. It also offers recommendations to policymakers tackling the issue of financing violent extremism in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

Our research shows that violent religious and far-right extremisms in the region share some commonalities but vary in their financing methods and sophistication. Cash predominates in both cases, as the large informal economy hampers regulatory oversight and taps into diaspora remittances and illegal activity. However, the financing methods of violent religious extremist groups are simpler and depend less on illicit profits than those of violent far-right extremist groups.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Salafi-jihadists in the Western Balkans received funding from the Arab world and the Islamic State. During the peak of conflicts in Syria and Iraq, between 2011 and 2018, they relied on non-profit organizations and charity donations. At first, they used small informal cash transfers, staying below regulatory thresholds to sustain operations while avoiding detection. Funds were transferred through intermediaries and microfinance and money-transfer services, often using safe third-party accounts. After 2018, Salafi-jihadists shifted to self-financing and crowdfunding, and began to use bank accounts for fund transfers. Criminal activities have played only a minor role in their funding.

In contrast, violent far-right extremist groups use a blend of licit and illicit sources and more sophisticated financing methods. They generate funds through public procurement and legitimate business in the construction and hospitality sectors as well as through organized criminal activities like drug trafficking and extortion. They also have external backing from diaspora-related institutions and state-owned enterprises. While violent far-right extremist groups sometimes focus on building their businesses or increasing illicit profits, these funds can be repurposed for the violent pursuit of their ethnonationalist goals when political conditions permit.

Serbian far-rightists display Orthodox Christian icons at a Belgrade rally in support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, March 2022. *© Milos Miskov/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

These far-right groups employ complex mechanisms to move funds and conceal their trails. Those with legitimate businesses may use conventional transactions within the formal financial sector, but the movement of cash in the region's robust informal economy remains crucial. Money laundering techniques are similarly used to shift funds, especially for high-risk transactions. Digital assets have only been minimally detected, but these also offer discreet, tangible pathways and transfer methods.

Methodology

This policy brief aims to support institutional practices for tackling violent religious and political extremism in the Western Balkans, with an explicit focus on financing. It draws on a work on terrorism financing,[1] highlighting these groups' methods of raising and moving funds, adjusted to the Western Balkan context through a case-study approach.

It also builds on recent GI-TOC research into the connections between organized crime and violent extremism in the Western Balkans, which identified and mapped 34 violent extremist actors.[2] Of these, 16 were selected to represent a sample of violent religious and far-right extremist groups. The selection process was rigorous and included at least two cases per country, adjusted for the national prevalence and relevance of each type of violent extremism.

However, the sample has certain limitations. It may not fully reflect the diversity and complexity of violent extremism in the region, and it may overlook less visible but significant actors or emerging trends, such as another form of violent extremism or group that is rising in prominence. Consequently, these findings should be considered indicative rather than comprehensive.

To analyze the selected groups' financing, the research team examined the methods used to raise and move funds and their possible connections to legal entities. In addition to media and research reports, this entailed access to public financial registries and court records, and the use of digital financial tools to survey relevant legal entities.[3] Nearly 50 interviews were conducted with law enforcement, counterterrorism and national security officers; investigative journalists; civil society, academic and independent experts; members of financial intelligence units and tax authorities, private financial-sector representatives and former extremist group members. These provided valuable perspectives and insights.

Key findings

- Violent religious extremist and violent far-right extremist groups in the Western Balkans are adapting their financing methods to local conditions and external developments, and pose a complex threat that requires tailored financial monitoring based on each group's specific funding patterns.
- While the overall threat from violent religious extremism has declined since 2018 in the Western Balkans, small-scale and harder-to-detect financial flows persist and may re-emerge in response to ongoing crises in the Middle East.
- Violent far-right extremist actors in the Western Balkans have established resilient financial structures by combining legitimate business, organized crime and political support, making them difficult to investigate and disrupt.

FUNDING VIOLENT RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

Since the 2000s, violent religious extremism in the Western Balkans has been shaped primarily by external events. Supporters of Salafi-jihadism from the region, especially from Kosovo, have promoted the Islamic State's ambitions through embracing radical religious beliefs and involvement in violent conflicts. These include the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, as well as targeting local and international opponents in the Western Balkans, including formally established Islamic organizations. Additionally, Albania's hosting of an Iranian opposition group has led to Iranian-sponsored activities and cyberattacks there.

It is therefore not surprising that funding for violent religious extremist organizations and their operations in the Western Balkans has largely come from donors, but the kinds of donors and methods of transfer have shifted over time, from the emergence of these groups around the turn of the 21st century, through the conflicts in Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2018, and up to the present (see Figure 1). Such donors can be divided into state sponsors, extremist organizations, identity-based support networks, charitable and non-profit organizations, and self-financing.[4]

	1990s–2000s	2011–2018	2018–PRESENT
Raising funds	• External sponsors	• Extremist patronage • Identity-based support networks • Charitable and non-profit support	• Self-financing • Crowdfunding • External sponsors • Charitable and non-profit support
Moving funds	• Cash movement	• Cash movement • Commercial money transfer services	• Cash movement • Formal financial sector

FIGURE 1 Violent religious extremism in the Western Balkans: key methods for raising and moving funds, 1990s–present.

More than a thousand people from the Western Balkans are thought to have joined Islamic State operations in Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2018.
© History/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

Salafi-jihadism

The early development of Salafi-jihadism in the Western Balkans in the 1990s and 2000s was supported by sponsorship from the Arab world. Arab countries financed the education of imams in Salafi beliefs and the construction of mosques.[5] In Bosnia and Herzegovina, funding at the time reportedly came from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in small, indirect contributions through cash couriers and cultural centres, with Salafi-jihadists receiving around €200 monthly to maintain their traditional clothing and adherence to specific behavioural norms.[6]

2011–2018

During the peak of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State provided funds, training and resources to further its strategic aims in the Western Balkans. In one case from Kosovo, Lavdrim Muhaxheri, a Kosovar Albanian Islamic State leader and recruiter of ethnic Albanian fighters for Syria and Iraq, had secured funding for a planned terrorist attack on the Israeli national football team during their visit to Albania in 2016.[7] Prosecutors revealed that Muhaxheri had managed the financing and logistics, including purchasing weapons and securing between €1 350 and €1 500 for the chosen attacker.[8] Although authorities could not trace the source of the funds, this case highlighted the ability of Islamic State affiliates to transfer funds through local fixers in the region.

In September 2019, a Kosovan court sentenced Bujar Behrami to 10 years in prison for terrorism-related offences carried out between December 2017 and June 2018. Two others received sentences of seven and four years, respectively.[9] Prosecutors accused the Behrami group of receiving funds from the Islamic State to pay for weapons and explosives for attacks in Kosovo, France and Belgium.[10] According to the indictment, the group received €9 000 in three money transfers from MoneyGram and Western Union in April and May 2018.[11]

During the trial, Behrami admitted that he had contacted ethnic Albanian members of the Islamic State on Telegram and that the group's funding allegedly came from Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.[12] Police investigations revealed that the money was transferred to Kosovo from Germany, where the significant Kosovan diaspora is a primary source of remittances.[13] An Albanian national sent the funds, which were withdrawn by an intermediary in Kosovo and delivered to Behrami.

In Montenegro, Salafi-jihadists have historically received external financial support from both private and state-affiliated sources, primarily originating in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Instead of direct transfers, these funds were typically channelled through intermediaries and couriers based in Austria, Türkiye, Sweden and Switzerland. Austria has been a key hub for fundraising events disguised as humanitarian gatherings. Many of these took place in Vienna and Graz, due to their large diaspora communities from the Western Balkans. The funds have been used to provide financial incentives to potential recruits, including monthly salaries reportedly reaching up to US$1 700, typically targeting low-income individuals.[14]

Identity-based support networks also emerged between 2011 and 2018, where financial support was motivated by common religious, ethnic or ideological commitments in communities sharing extremist beliefs. Benefiting from the dynamics of close-knit communities, these networks allowed funds to be discreetly channelled to extremist causes.

In Albania, Salafi-jihadists raised funds through private donations and charity collections, often appealing to ideological and religious sentiments. In 2016, three imams were convicted of terrorism-related offences, having solicited alms amounting to €1 500 monthly, which were directed to support foreign fighters and war efforts in Syria.[15] These funds were collected with minimal transparency and without donor identification, making it challenging to track the total contributions.[16]

In the first case of its kind to reach a judicial conclusion in Serbia, four individuals were convicted in 2018 for collecting funds to finance, recruit and train individuals for terrorist activities. The court found that at least €3 700 was raised in Serbia and Europe to exploit the difficult financial situations of potential recruits and send them to the battlefield in Syria, and to support individuals already engaged in combat.[17]

Some groups exploit legitimate channels to secure donations and grants under the guise of humanitarian or social projects. For example, an Islamic youth association called Furkan was established in 2009 in Novi Pazar, a city in south-western Serbia with a Muslim-majority population, to promote tolerance and ensure equal rights among citizens. By 2013, however, Furkan had become a centre for organizing and supporting the departure of individuals from Serbia and elsewhere in the Western Balkans to join combat units of the Islamic State in Syria.[18] The association was also used to collect funds for terrorist activities from supporters in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Austria, Germany and Luxembourg. The court judgment found that funds were used to purchase a van to transport volunteers to Syria and to buy a bus ticket from Istanbul to Kilis, on Türkiye's southern border.[19] From there, fighters were illegally transported to Azaz in north-eastern Syria, where they attended a camp for basic military training.[20]

There are also reports of the presence in Montenegro and Kosovo of organizations operating as *parajamats*, Muslim communities that function outside of officially registered Islamic associations. In 2012 and 2013, numerous organizations were established and formally registered as non-profits in Montenegro, funded by similar organizations in Austria. Montenegro's national security agency reportedly monitored 18 such organizations, which primarily attracted young people.[21]

In response to this trend, more than 10 non-profit organizations with alleged ties to ideological groups linked with terrorism were closed in Kosovo between 2015 and 2017. The closures were ostensibly due to non-compliance with financial reporting requirements, although the authorities found no direct evidence connecting their funds to terrorism financing.[22] Nevertheless, it appears that funding through non-profits significantly financed Salafi-jihadist supporters. Following the shutdown of several organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the resources of Safadi-jihadist communities drastically decreased, according to a local expert.[23]

Some individual violent religious extremists relied on self-financing by means of their own personal assets and businesses. Shkëlzen Dumani from Albania, for example, raised €100 000 through the sale of property and carried it to Syria, declaring he was travelling for medical reasons.[24] In Kosovo, Fatos Rizvanolli, the owner of a car dealership who was sentenced to prison for seven years for terrorism recruitment in 2016, financed several individuals to travel to Syria and Iraq. According to the judgment, he paid the airfare for at least three fighters who travelled from Kosovo to Hatay on the Türkiye–Syria border. Rizvanolli also offered rentals and provided cars to groups operating in Kosovo.[25]

Notably, criminal activity has not been a significant funding source for violent religious extremism in the Western Balkans. Such incidents were confined to Kosovo during the height of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, when some violent extremists engaged in robberies (such as targeting jewellery stores) to finance their activities.[26]

2018–present

In the post-conflict period after 2018, most religiously motivated groups in the Western Balkans have remained non-violent.[27] However, a small number have been linked to individuals who joined armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2018. As a result, violent religious extremism in the region is largely viewed through the lens of foreign terrorist fighters and their limited connections to global terrorist networks.

Current security concerns include so-called lone actors, returnees from conflict zones, radicalized individuals and preachers who have completed prison sentences. In August 2024, Serbia's interior minister announced that police were monitoring around 100 individuals with radical beliefs who may pose a security risk. One of them, previously accused of terrorism in 2009, was killed in a confrontation with police in the same month. Although no operational Islamic State cells have been confirmed in the Western Balkans, the region is occasionally viewed as a potential logistical base or transit point – particularly for the movement of foreign fighters and the revival of extremist recruitment networks.

These developments have also had an impact on how violent religious extremism is financed in the region. A shift toward self-financing and crowdfunding has emerged, which enables radicalized individuals to operate independently of traditional external support and patronage, reducing their risk of detection by law enforcement and national security. Two local experts, one a former security sector professional, in Bosnia and Herzegovina explained that most followers use profits from personal ventures to fund their activities.[28]

Covert Iranian networks in Albania

The case of Bijan Pooladrag, discussed below, involving covert networks operating in Albania under the influence of Iran, highlights elements of contemporary state-sponsored violent religious extremism.

Iran's regime has instrumentalized Ja'fari Shia Islam, a mainstream Islamic legal school, to maintain ideological control, justify political repression and legitimize violence.[29] In January 2025, a European Parliament resolution condemned Iran's repression of human rights, citing a sharp rise in executions – with more than 900 persons executed in 2024 – and denouncing the arbitrary detention of EU nationals in Iran's strategy of hostage diplomacy.[30] The resolution underscored Iran's use of state-controlled religious ideology to justify political repression and transnational threats.[31]

Iran has also extended its influence beyond its borders, using religious narratives to support proxy groups, intelligence operations and extremist networks. This has been most evident in its apparent response to prominent Iranian opposition group the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK). The MEK has operated from Albania since 2014. The organization presents itself as a government-in-exile and holds annual political summits in Albania, which has brought significant consequences. Between 2022 and 2024, an Iran-based hacker group reportedly launched a series of cyberattacks on Albania's critical digital infrastructure, escalating tensions and deepening the rift between Albania and Iran.[32]

Pooladrag, an Iranian national, was arrested in Albania in 2020 and later sentenced to five years in prison for offering services to designated terrorist organizations and 10 years for participating in a terrorist organization.[33] He first arrived in Albania in 2010 as a MEK supporter but later became an operative for the Iranian Intelligence Ministry. The court found state-sponsored religious extremism and the discreet financial channels used to sustain such activities.

The first annual Free Iran conference took place in July 2019 at the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran's headquarters in Albania. *© Siavosh Hosseini/NurPhoto via Getty Images*

Pooladrag's main means of communication were secure messaging apps such as Telegram and personal networks. According to Albanian prosecutors, he received financial support from Iranian sources, which included small stipends and a one-time offer of 3.7 million (currency unspecified by prosecutors).[34] The indictment suggested that he received cash payments, bypassing conventional banking channels. Although the details are limited, the funds were reportedly used to disseminate anti-MEK propaganda and to gather intelligence on the MEK's leadership.[35]

The Iranian regime may also be using charitable and non-profit organizations to support its activities in Albania. Authorities suspect the Tirana-based Association for the Support of Iranians Living in Albania (ASILA), registered as a non-profit in Albania,[36] of building an agent network to collect information on MEK members residing in Albania.[37] In 2022, two German-Iranian individuals who had been invited to the country by ASILA were detained by Albanian police.[38] They were suspected of planning terrorist activities and deemed to be national security risks.[39]

Declining risk but persistent vulnerabilities

The financing of violent religious extremism in the Western Balkans is currently far less prominent than during the peak years of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts. Since the post-conflict period beginning in 2018, most religiously motivated groups in the region have remained non-violent and the overall threat level has decreased.

Nonetheless, this decline should not lead to complacency. Today's risks stem from an albeit limited number of returnees from conflict zones, as well as radicalized individuals and ideological influencers who continue to operate on the margins. Although large-scale financial support has diminished, isolated cases of self-financing, crowdfunding and informal donor networks indicate that small, harder-to-detect financial flows still persist.

The situation remains fluid and may change quickly in response to external developments. Ongoing regional crises – such as the war in Gaza or the recent escalation in the Israel–Iran conflict – can act as push factors, potentially reactivating dormant networks or encouraging new forms of support. These factors are especially relevant given the Western Balkans' strategic location and connections to diaspora communities and ideological movements.

Law enforcement across the region must adjust its focus accordingly. While past efforts have centred on preventing extremist acts and dismantling networks, there is now an urgent need to strengthen the financial dimension of counter-extremism and terrorism efforts. This includes systematically tracking and disrupting financial flows that support extremist ideologies. A more proactive and integrated approach to financial investigation is essential to addressing the evolving nature of the threat.

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR VIOLENT FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

In the Western Balkans, violent far-right extremism is primarily shaped by local factors and concerned with ethnicity. Violent far-rightists draw their ideological force from historical nationalist and ethnic tensions embedded in past armed conflicts, amplified by contemporary economic instability and migration crises.[40] Violent ethnonationalism, hooliganism and organized crime have also fuelled each other, offering funding opportunities for violent extremist agendas and creating mutually reinforcing ties.[41] Finally, violent far-right extremists have external support, mainly from Russia.[42]

However, the situation is not uniform across the region. Each country has distinct features that shape violent far-right groups' identities. For example, ethnonationalism in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro is closely tied to unresolved ethnic tensions paired with pro-Russian positions in the state. In Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, state nationalism is linked to ethnic solidarity and tempered by these countries' pro-Western orientations.

As a result, violent far-right extremist actors in the Western Balkans use diverse organizational models, from paramilitary-like units to clandestine or semi-legal entities to registered organizations that present themselves as humanitarian, sports, or human- and animal-rights groups. They draw on various funding sources, blending legitimate and illicit means (see Figure 2).

Amounts	< €10 000	€10 000–€100 000	> €100 000
Raising funds	• Self-financing • Crowd funding	• External sponsorship • Wealthy donors	• Legal business and investments • Illicit business and crime
Moving funds	• Formal financial sector • Cash movement	• Formal financial sector • Cash movement	• Formal financial sector • Cash movement • Money laundering • Financial technologies

FIGURE 2 Violent far-right extremism in the Western Balkans: key methods for generating and moving funds, by amounts.

Legitimate sources

Some leaders, high-ranking members and influential supporters of violent far-right extremist groups are engaged in legitimate businesses, the proceeds of which may be used to further their ideological goals. Political connections sustain these businesses by enabling access to public procurement contracts. The growing use of consortiums is a major challenge.[43] These allow small, new companies with little-to-no track record to function as 'subcontractors', creating opportunities to finance various interests. At the same time, they gain references that enable them to qualify for larger projects.[44] However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which these businesses fund violent far-right extremist activities.

Serbia: The Ultra Boys

The Ultra Boys is a violent football hooligan group that support Red Star Belgrade. Formed in 1995, the group promotes an irredentist Serbian ethnonationalism that includes the notion of a Greater Serbia state – which would encompass historically Serbian areas and populations beyond the country's modern borders – and anti-Albanian-Bosniak-Croat rhetoric.[45] They glorify past acts of ethnic violence and express admiration for Serbian war criminals from the 1990s wars.[46] In 2009, their violence and organized crime activities led to a failed prosecutor's attempt to ban the group.[47] In the past decade, the group's leaders have formed legitimate businesses with political backing, creating a stable financial base for themselves within the formal economy.

Ultra Boys is led by Marko Vučković, also known as 'the Commander'.[48] Vučković has reportedly faced around 10 criminal charges, with two conditional convictions for public-order offences.[49] In August 2014, he was banned from entering Montenegro due to suspicions that he attempted extorting wealthy individuals.[50]

Ultra Boys leader Marko Vučković seen at a rally in Belgrade, Serbia, June 2024. *© N1 Beograd via N1info*

In July 2015, Vučković founded a construction company called Ultra Kop, whose name and logo reflect the identity of the Ultra Boys group.[51] The company is registered at an address associated with the football club they support, and its cranes at construction sites are painted in the group's red and white colours, often accompanied by Russian flags.[52] The company secured state contracts and at least 79 public procurement contracts between 2015 and 2024.[53] This increased its revenue from €260 500 in 2015 to nearly €3 million in 2020. Its revenue fell to €314 500 in 2023.[54]

Ultra Kop has rarely responded to public allegations, but in June 2017, the company stated that it obtains contracts solely based on the quality of its work, not through political connections.[55] The statement was issued in response to media claims that the company benefits from ties to the Serbian Progressive Party to secure contracts from state-owned enterprises. Following the statement, Vučković confirmed that he is an employee of Ultra Kop, expressed full support for the company's position on accusations, and stated he would not comment further on the matter.

According to extensive local media reporting, Dragan Vasić, a boxer and bodyguard known as 'the Tank', is another high-level member of the Ultra Boys and a former Red Star Belgrade assembly delegate, where he was the fans' representative.[56] The Red Star statute states that the assembly is the club's highest body.[57] A delegate is authorized to make decisions, represent the club's interests and implement assembly decisions. In February 2015, Vasić was shot near the Red Star stadium. At the time, media coverage highlighted his connections with the Ultra Boys and the football club.[58] Following the shooting, fans reportedly assembled around the stadium to show their support for Vasić.[59] Vasić has publicly spoken about his work with crime groups and the special-forces training he received in Canada.[60] Vasić and Vučković together founded Gama Solution in December 2016, a company that extends the Ultra Boys' reach into the IT management sector.[61] At least seven public procurement contracts with state entities (including the central bank) and electricity suppliers have fuelled the company's growth. Its revenue reached over half a million euros in 2022.[62]

Ultra Boys' affiliates are also connected to professional sports. Slobodan Govedarica, who is reportedly close to Ultra Boys,[63] is the chairperson of Grafičar Beograd, which is the reserve team for Red Star Belgrade. According to media reports, Govedarica was arrested alongside Vučković in Montenegro in February 2014 on suspicions of attempted extortion.[64] He also owned a restaurant in Belgrade frequented by fans of Red Star.[65] Govedarica's position gives him influence in player development and access to the lucrative player-transfer market. Under his leadership, the club's revenue rose from €68 000 in 2017 to over €2 million in 2023.[66] He has reportedly also expanded into real estate, with sponsorship from prominent Serbian companies that have been tied to the political structures.[67]

Montenegro: Orthodox brotherhoods

Violent far-right extremists are also active in Montenegro, where several pro-Serbian groups emerged after a series of protests related to the 2019 enactment of the Law on Religious Freedom and the 2020 parliamentary election.[68] These groups, including Saint Michael's Choir, Stupovi and Zavjetnici Tvrdoš present themselves as patriotic, humanitarian organizations and usually are registered as non-profit organizations.

However, they mix nationalist conservatism with radical Orthodox Christianity and make use of symbols associated with violent far-right groups.[69] These groups, according to media reports, openly threatened peace in Montenegro. For example, following an armed conflict between a pro-Serbian paramilitary group and Kosovo police in September 2023, one of the groups, Saint Michael's Choir,[70] used social media platforms to call for the mobilization of civilians and veterans, urging them to go to Kosovo to fight in the clash.[71]

Orthodox brotherhoods in Montenegro are supported by complex networks of actors within the Serbian Orthodox Church, affiliated organizations and the state at national and local levels. In February 2021, for example, the interim Montenegrin government granted €120 000 to the Church's Eparchy of Budimlja and Nikšić, along with affiliated non-profit organizations such as Saint Michael's Choir.[72] In July 2021, the country's state-owned electricity company donated €1 000 to the non-profit Veterans of the 63rd Parachute Brigade.[73]

Saint Michael's Choir was co-founded by Mijajlo Backović, an Orthodox priest and secretary to the bishop of Budimlja and Nikšić, who is also a member of the 63rd Parachute Brigade.[74] In public appearances, Backović often combines military attire with clerical robes. Both organizations are registered in Montenegro.[75]

Kotor Municipality sponsored a cultural-historical forum organized by Saint Michael's Choir, contributing €400 in August 2021.[76]

The IN4S media outlet, which has reportedly strong links to Russia,[77] has also been accused of circulating Serbian ethnonationalist propaganda.[78] In June 2020, Montenegro's Agency for Electronic Media initiated a hate speech investigation into IN4S for content that challenges Montenegrin identity, rejects human rights and advocates for Montenegro's alignment with Serbia and Russia, according to the Digital Forensic Centre, a civil society organization that investigates disinformation and fake news.[79] In the centre's words, 'These are precisely the channels through which soft power is spread, which does not have to turn into concrete violence, but which significantly affects the increase of tensions in society.'[80] IN4S operates from the Serbian House, located in Podgorica, Montenegro, and funded by the Serbian government.[81] In August 2022, the Saint Michael's Choir group and IN4S organized an event there to discuss the Russia–Ukraine war.[82]

Saint Michael's Choir also raises funds through identity-based networks and crowdfunding, with details for donations available on their Facebook page.[83]

Illicit backing

Montenegro: Police cartel

In addition to pro-Serbian violent far-right extremist groups in Montenegro, there are others that support pro-Montenegrin ethnonationalism, such as the so-called 'police cartel'. Their violent activities in 2020 and 2021 reportedly aimed to block the formation of a government with pro-Serbian parties and the enthronement of the Serbian Orthodox Church's Metropolitan in Cetinje Monastery, which is a symbol of Montenegrin sovereignty.[84] Intercepted communications by law enforcement suggest that some members of the cartel incited ethnic tensions and planned to mobilize up to 50 individuals to disrupt the political process.[85]

Police investigations identified key members of the cartel, including police officer Ljubo Milović, currently at large and wanted by Montenegro's police because of cocaine trafficking,[86] and national security operative Petar Lazović, now in custody on charges of arms smuggling, drug trafficking and abuse of office.[87] Beyond inciting ethnic tensions, cartel members are believed to be involved in the Kavač clan, one of the two strongest criminal organizations in the country.[88] Proceeds from organized crime play a significant role in funding violent far-right extremism in the Western Balkans. Although the exact amount is unknown, the significant resources controlled by organized crime groups require careful monitoring.

Milović, for example, reportedly earned a monthly police salary of €700, but his savings rose from €12 000 in 2017 to €21 000 by 2021.[89] He also took a €212 000 loan from an undisclosed source in 2017, followed by a €49 900 housing loan in 2022, and registered ownership of a 64-square-metre apartment in Kotor.[90] Prosecutors in Montenegro and Serbia, where he faces separate criminal cases, have however linked him to much larger sums from organized crime. In Serbia, he faces trial for laundering more than €6 million.[91] Montenegrin prosecutors have also accused him of laundering €1.35 million during the cartel's extremist activities in September 2020.[92] In May 2022, the Libertas media portal revealed that he held €50 million in cryptocurrency.[93]

Lazović also had notable financial resources that could support violent far-right extremist activities. In April 2024, judges rejected his bail proposal, which included €9.3 million in assets backed by mortgages on properties owned by his relatives and associated entities.[94]

Arms and the Church

A security-sector professional from Montenegro has alleged that some Orthodox brotherhoods may be engaged in illegal arms trade and that temples belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church may be used to store weapons.[95] Two reported incidents present circumstantial evidence that suggests there may be links between the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and weapons dealers.

In 2022, M-portal published transcripts of text conversations from 2020, which had been decrypted by law enforcement in Belgium and the Netherlands in coordination with Europol. In one, a member of the Montenegrin Škaljari clan tells another that the church is requesting 100 AK-47 rifles in order to organize armed resistance. The attached security-service analysis surmises that this would be in the event of an 'undesirable outcome' to the then-upcoming election.[96]

Armed police and plain-clothed men provide security for Metropolitan Joanikije and others at the Cetinje Monastery in September 2021. *© Stevo Vasiljević/Reuters via Radio Slobodna Evropa*

In another example, armed civilians were observed inside the Cetinje Monastery during the Metropolitan's enthronement in September 2021. The incident was discussed by the Parliamentary Committee on Security in a closed session in 2021, but was subsequently reported on by local media.[97] ■

Serbia: Principi

The Serbian football hooligan group Principi (originally known as Janičari) has consistently promoted violent ethnonationalism since its formation in 2013, primarily through organized displays and chants at football stadiums.[98] Alongside their ideological activities, Principi developed a network of illicit financing. What began as a hooligan faction supporting Partizan Belgrade has reportedly evolved into an organized crime group engaged in drug trafficking, extortion, private security services and murder-for-hire.[99] This shift illustrates the complexities and possibilities of violent extremist financing.

Drug trafficking has been the primary revenue source for Principi, who have capitalized on their alliance with the Montenegro-based cocaine-trafficking Kavač clan. This partnership established Principi as a dominant street-level distributor in Belgrade, handling cocaine as well as cannabis, amphetamines and MDMA.[100] Drugs and weapons were stored and distributed directly by members of Principi,[101] underscoring the blurred boundaries between hooliganism and organized crime.

Prosecutors suspect that the group has made use of popular Belgrade nightclubs and bars to expand their reach. By also controlling security at these locations, they monopolized drug sales, using intimidation or violence against anyone attempting to buy from other dealers. This control allowed them to generate significant profits while maintaining a strong street presence.[102]

Principi also engages in extortion, often under the guise of legitimate security services through their company, T&T Protect, which is currently undergoing liquidation.[103] These operations enable them to infiltrate businesses and pressure owners to pay protection fees – those who refuse face harassment, property damage or even takeovers. High-profile hospitality establishments were allegedly extorted and turned into bases for criminal activities, including drug distribution.[104]

Principi also receives financial support directly from Partizan Belgrade because it is a fan organization registered with the club. A former club vice president claimed they paid Principi around €90 000 annually (€5 000 per match) to fund choreographed displays, travel expenses for away games and security at home matches. Ticket resales and fan merchandise provide further revenue for the group.[105] The stadium is also allegedly used for crypto-mining at the club's expense.[106]

Expanding its influence within Serbian football, Principi began to manage young players from lower-tier clubs, tapping into the youth football pipeline for additional revenue and influence in the player-transfer market. Though specific profits are uncertain, these activities suggest a broader embedding strategy within mainstream sports to increase both finances and influence.

Serbia's prosecutors suspected the Principi leadership of using money laundering methods to conceal their criminal proceeds, primarily by investing in real estate. According to an indictment filed in one case, leaders and associates have allegedly purchased properties, undertaken construction projects and acquired luxury items like high-end cars and watches.[107] However, their methods were unsophisticated: properties were often bought with cash or at prices below market value, leaving a paper trail that eventually drew prosecutorial scrutiny.[108] Principi also supposedly tried to enter the automotive sector, buying and reselling cars at low prices, renting parking lots and establishing car rental companies to channel illicit funds into the legal economy.[109] Although rudimentary, these methods allowed the group to diversify revenue streams while maintaining a cover of legitimacy.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Funding Ultras Mostar

Ethnonationalism and football hooligan groups are not limited to Serbia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ultras Mostar, a hooligan group that supports Zrinjski football club, illustrates the connection between sports, ethnic identity and nationalism. Rooted in Croatian nationalism, Ultras Mostar members are known for displaying far-right and neo-Nazi symbols alongside Croatian flags and slogans, reinforcing an exclusive ethnic identity in a city with both Croat and Bosniak populations.[110]

Ultras Mostar finances its activities through a combination of private donations and illicit sources. According to a former police officer who monitored the group, it receives support from a business figure.[111]

In addition, Ultras Mostar reportedly generates income independently through membership fees, private contributions and criminal activities, including street-level drug sales.[112]

Mixed sources

Kosovo: Milan Radoičić

Violent pro-Serbian ethnonationalists in northern Kosovo have established a complex fundraising network that relies on organized crime, external sponsorship from the Serbian government and local alliances in Kosovo to support their activities. The example of Milan Radoičić illustrates the merging of violent far-right extremism, organized crime and legitimate business in the Western Balkans. His group utilizes both legal and illicit channels to strengthen and expand its influence – a trend that has intensified since Kosovo's independence in February 2008.

Following the declaration of independence, dissatisfied Serbs set fire to crossing points on the Serbian border. In response, Kosovar authorities relocated customs operations to Mitrovica, leaving an uncontrolled 50-kilometre area that covers four municipalities with around 50 000 residents.[113] Over the next three years, it became a key hub for smuggling between Kosovo and Serbia. Kosovar customs investigators estimate that smuggling activities, including fuel, tobacco and alcohol, generate up to €100 million annually for smuggling groups.[114] Radoičić raised capital in connection with these smuggling activities through alliances with criminal figures beyond Serbia, including Albanian criminal groups.[115]

Radoičić has established a foundation in illicit activities along with considerable political influence in northern Kosovo, primarily through the Serbian List, a political party closely aligned with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. Leveraging ethnonationalist sentiment, he positions himself as a defender of Serbs in Kosovo. His power within the Serbian List grew with his appointment as vice president of the party in 2018, solidifying his control over Serb communities, as well as public appointments and procurement contracts.[116] Kosovo's 2013 amnesty law, which pardoned local Serbs who had fought Kosovar authority, further enabled him to legitimize assets acquired through illicit activities and to establish legitimate businesses in both Serbia and Kosovo.[117]

Between 2019 and 2023, three Serbian companies tied to Radoičić – Inkop, Novi Pazar-Put and Betonjerka – reported a combined net profit of €104 million.[118] This was despite sanctions imposed by the US and UK in December 2021 on Radoičić and affiliated entities due to their involvement in organized crime.[119]

Radoičić uses proxies to maintain control in Kosovo, registering businesses under the names of his associates, such as Radule Stević, which allows him to benefit financially while avoiding direct ownership. Stević's companies received around €5 million from the Kosovo budget between 2018 and 2024.[120] Since the US and UK sanctions, Kosovo authorities have frozen almost €300 000 linked mainly to Stević's companies registered in Kosovo. However, Radoičić's business operations in Serbia remain largely unaffected.

In September 2023, a group of armed Serbs attacked the Kosovo police close to the Banjska Monastery in northern Kosovo, causing the death of a police officer and three members of the group. Radoičić admitted to orchestrating the attack and is now in Serbia,[121] intensifying the already tense relations between Kosovo and Serbia.

The event's aftermath was marked by various political and official interpretations. Kosovo authorities labelled the event as a terrorist attack organized by Radoičić, allegedly with Serbian political support. Serbian authorities focused on accusations that Radoičić acquired high-powered weapons, ammunition and explosives from Bosnia and Herzegovina through Serbia,[122] framing these actions as a significant security threat. US representatives branded the attack as a coordinated violent attack on the Kosovo police,[123] while the European Parliament, in an October 2023 resolution, named it a terrorist attack in the north of Kosovo.[124]

Following this chorus, the Kosovar special prosecutor charged Radoičić and 40 others with terrorism and endangering the constitutional order of the country. He and Stević and one of Stević's companies were also charged with financing terrorism for the same attack.[125] The court in Pristina has applied to the Supreme Court to try him in absentia.

Serbian prosecutors have charged Radoičić for the purchase and cross-border transport and storage of weapons, ammunition and explosives, but not for terrorist offences.[126] Local media have reported that Radoičić has discreetly transferred his holdings in Inkop to longtime associates, hoping to shield these assets from potential seizure.[127]

In a public statement delivered by his lawyer, Radoičić took full responsibility for the events in the village of Banjska in September 2023.[128] He confirmed his presence in Banjska and stated that the action was intended as a response to what he described as pressure from the Kosovo government, aiming to support the Serb population in the north of Kosovo. Radoičić claimed to have organized the operation independently, without the involvement or knowledge of Serbian state institutions or local political structures. He also announced his resignation from his position as vice-president of the Serbian List.[129]

Weapons, ammunition and vehicles seized from a paramilitary group of Serbs, September 2023. *© Erkin Keci/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

Albanian ethnonationalist extremism

Violent pro-Albanian ethnonationalists have maintained a presence in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia – particularly in border areas with an ethnic Albanian majority – with peak militant activity in the early 2000s.

Following the end of the conflict in Kosovo in 1999, several paramilitary groups emerged: the Albanian National Army (ANA), the National Liberation Army and the Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac. These groups engaged in bombings and other acts of violence to advance nationalist aims and rights for their people.[130] The UN Mission in Kosovo, as well as the governments of Serbia and North Macedonia, designated the ANA as a terrorist organization, leading to their dismantlement. The US government described the ANA as a loosely organized criminal extremist group responsible for sporadic violence in the Western Balkans,[131] froze assets linked to the group in the country and barred US nationals from engaging in transactions or dealing with the ANA or its affiliates.[132]

In May 2015, an attack in Kumanovo resulted in the deaths of eight Macedonian police officers and 14 militants, and injuries to 37 officers. After a trial in which 33 members of the so-called Kumanovo group were convicted in November 2017, incidents of violent pro-Albanian ethnonationalism decreased notably.[133] This period of heightened militancy had a significant impact on regional security and deepened ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans. ■

Members of Albania's National Liberation Army in line to deliver their weapons to NATO after an armed clash with North Macedonian security forces in August 2001. *© Kael Alford via Getty Images*

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Saint George of Lončari

Violent extremist organizations that promote pro-Russian and ethnonationalist sentiments in the region often mix self-financing with external sponsorship that is hard to track. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Saint George of Lončari group operates informally, conducting humanitarian activities that may mask other objectives. However, members are frequently seen wearing black attire adorned with symbols linked to far-right ideology, such as swords and Russian emblems.[134] This leads to suspicion that its activities may serve as a cover for promoting militarism and far-right ideologies, fuelling polarization. Reportedly funded through local and external sources, the group has received vehicles from the Russian Embassy in Sarajevo, which they publicly acknowledged in social media posts thanking the embassy.[135] It also receives occasional support from pro-Russian organizations in Serbia to pay for expenses such as uniforms, fuel, promotional materials and travel. However, a former member said that this funding remains modest and sporadic.[136]

North Macedonia: Tvrdokorni

With its alleged links to Russia, the Tvrdokorni group reflects similar patterns seen in other far-right movements in the Western Balkans.[137] The group emerged around 2017 as a nationalist movement strongly opposing policies perceived as undermining national identity. It gained prominence by protesting the Prespa Agreement, which renamed the country to North Macedonia – a move they saw as a betrayal of national interests.[138] The group also opposed the expansion of Albanian as a second official language.[139] The group is known for organizing demonstrations, spreading nationalist propaganda and occasionally confronting political opponents. In March 2018, for instance, Tvrdokorni announced plans to block Skopje's airport in protest of the removal of the Alexander the Great monument, which they described as an attack on the Macedonian people and a declaration of war.[140]

Primarily self-funded, Tvrdokorni has suggested political interest and potential support from Russia and their former ally, United Macedonia.[141] Although Russian financial backing is difficult to confirm, Tvrdokorni's pro-Russian narratives and ties with United Macedonia hint at possible influence. Tvrdokorni president Dragan Ugrinovski stated that they are no longer affiliated with United Macedonia and fund their own activities. While recent initiatives have slowed, Ugrinovski confirmed the movement's ongoing activity.[142]

Since 2018, there has been speculation about Russian funding of small right-wing parties across North Macedonia. Suspicions of Kremlin support are fuelled by the attendance of Russian public figures, such as far-right philosopher Aleksandr Dugin and Putin adviser Leonid Savin, at events organized by United Macedonia and other right-wing groups.[143] A foreign policy expert who specializes in Russian influence in the Balkans claims that Moscow has discreetly supported certain right-wing groups to embed its influence within the political system. Again, solid evidence of Russian financing has remained elusive.[144]

Growing threat with limited oversight

The financing of violent far-right extremism in the Western Balkans is an increasingly visible and concerning trend. Unlike violent religious extremism, violent far-right extremism is strongly rooted in local dynamics, often linked to unresolved ethnic tensions and past conflicts. Over time, extremist actors have expanded their funding sources, drawing on a combination of legitimate business activity, organized crime, public sector resources and external ideological support.

This overlap of political, criminal and ideological interests has created a stable financial base for violent far-right extremist actors. In Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo in particular, extremist groups benefit from political protection, privileged access to state contracts and weak oversight. Many operate through legal entities in sectors such as sports, construction, IT and private security, allowing them to build influence and sustain their operations over the long term. Regional trends mirror broader developments in Europe,[145] where far-right movements are gaining traction. Russian ideological influence adds another dimension, further strengthening extremist narratives, even though direct financial links remain difficult to prove.

The threat posed by violent far-right extremism is growing and financial flows are becoming more sophisticated. However, the capacity to investigate and disrupt these networks remains limited. Political backing continues to shield key actors from accountability, reducing the likelihood of effective enforcement. Moving forward, greater attention must be given to the financial dimension of violent far-right extremism.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The financing of violent extremism in the Western Balkans presents a multilayered and diverse landscape shaped by each country's challenges and opportunities. Violent religious and far-right extremist groups in the region use various methods to raise and move funds, drawing on both legitimate and illegal sources. Despite these differences, the groups benefit significantly from the region's informal economy. With informal employment rates ranging between 20% and 30%,[146] the widespread use of cash-based transactions enables fund movements with minimal regulatory oversight.

As there are only a few related indictments and convictions, legal action against violent extremist financing needs to be improved across the region. Law enforcement and state auditors should prioritize the financial monitoring of these actors, particularly focusing on cash flows. With the advancements in technology, financial oversight must extend to digital transactions, including cryptocurrencies. A more nuanced approach is necessary to effectively counteract these funding networks.

Building on the key challenges outlined in this policy brief, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Integrate financial tracking into counter-extremism strategies.** Financial investigations are often considered secondary to counter-extremism efforts, missing chances to uncover and interrupt funding schemes. Law enforcement should integrate financial tracking as a core investigative process, ensuring real-time analysis of transactions alongside criminal investigations. This requires continuous training and access to digital tools for financial monitoring.
- **Tailor financial monitoring for different extremist groups.** Violent religious extremist groups tend to rely on donations through external sponsorship, self-financing and identity-based support networks, while violent far-right extremist groups combine legal and illegal funds. Law enforcement, financial intelligence units and state auditors must develop tailored monitoring approaches to disrupt their financial sources effectively. This includes identifying key extremist drivers, financial methods, registered and unregistered entities and transaction patterns for each group. Law enforcement could develop custom risk-assessment frameworks for financial institutions to identify violent extremist financing typologies.
- **Improve oversight of cash transactions.** Cash remains the primary means of moving funds among violent extremist groups in the Western Balkans. Stricter financial regulations should target the

informal economy, and expanding digital payment systems can reduce reliance on cash and enhance transaction monitoring. Authorities should incentivize digital payments, enforce stricter reporting for large cash transactions and integrate digital payment systems into anti-money laundering and counterterrorism frameworks.

- **Enforce cryptocurrency regulations.** While cash is still dominant in extremist financing, digital assets, including cryptocurrencies, are becoming more present. Authorities must adopt and enforce cryptocurrency regulations, including mandatory reporting of suspicious transactions for all financial institutions. Law enforcement, financial intelligence units and state auditors should be equipped with blockchain analysis tools and receive specialized training to effectively track and monitor extremist-linked digital assets.
- **Disrupt organized crime links to far-right extremism.** Violent far-right extremist groups receive funding from organized crime actors. To counter this, law enforcement in the region must strengthen intelligence-sharing across borders, build robust data-sharing protocols, conduct regular financial and business inspections of legal entities linked to violent extremist leaders, and improve coordination between national agencies. When there is evidence linking a legal entity to violent extremism, authorities should blacklist the company from government contracts and enforce asset seizures to prevent extremist financing and disrupt their operations.
- **Ensure transparency in public procurement.** Political intervention in public procurement provides funding opportunities for violent extremist groups, particularly violent far-right extremist groups. Governments in the region should enforce stricter procurement audits, ensure full public access to contract records and conduct conflict-of-interest checks to prevent contracts from being awarded to entities linked to extremism or organized crime. Increased transparency in high-risk sectors such as construction and hospitality will also help prevent illicit funds from flowing into extremist activities.
- **Strengthen oversight of non-profit organizations.** Violent religious extremist groups have long used non-profits for financing and some far-right non-profits receive support from religious institutions. The lack of taxation and financial reporting requirements for religious organizations creates vulnerabilities that violent extremists can exploit. Financial intelligence units should apply risk-based monitoring to high-risk non-profits and religious organizations, even if they are registered religious communities. Additionally, dialogue should begin on introducing obligatory financial reporting for religious organizations to improve oversight.
- **Enhance financial oversight in sports.** Violent far-right extremist groups with ties to football hooliganism exploit sports clubs and related entities as funding sources. Law enforcement and financial intelligence units should strengthen oversight of sports clubs by improving transparency, enforcing reporting mechanisms and applying risk-based monitoring. International cooperation with football organizations is also necessary to detect and disrupt the funding of violent extremism through the sports sector.

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