HIRED GUNS OR IDEOLOGUES?

RETURNING FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND MILITARY TRAINED PERSONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Western Balkans is a region defined by complex socio-political challenges, economic disparities and fragmented institutions. One of the most pressing threats to regional stability is the growing involvement of returning foreign fighters (RFFs) and military trained persons (MTPs) in a complex web of organized crime and violent extremism.

Violent extremists and criminals have long exploited a legacy of economic deprivation, corruption and weak governance across the region to recruit members, exert influence over the state and build their networks.[1] In recent years, there has been increasing overlap between these groups, partly through their growing recruitment of MTPs and RFFs. The expansion of illicit operations and networks over the past decade has presented people with military training the opportunity to market their skills, experience and international connections. Having held national defence or post-conflict security roles in the region or received hands-on combat training in foreign conflicts, MTPs and RFFs are highly effective assets for both criminal networks and violent extremist organizations and have become a vector for their cooperation.[2]

This policy paper examines the role of MTPs and RFFs in a growing nexus of violent extremism and organized crime in the Western Balkans – analyzing their diverse pathways, typologies and behaviours, while also evaluating the effectiveness of current regional and national policies in curbing this combined threat.

The precise relationship between MTPs, extremism and organized crime varies significantly by country.[3] In Albania, the interaction between organized crime and violent extremism appears to be largely transactional and limited, with multi-targeted perpetrators primarily involved in drug trafficking, contract killings and armed robberies.[4] Meanwhile, in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), there seems to be a combination of financial pragmatism and ideological commitment at work. MTPs have increasingly aligned themselves with nationalist or political causes, with some participating in foreign conflicts such as the war in Ukraine and becoming RFFs in the process.[5] Serbia's criminal networks are violent and highly active in the cocaine trade in particular, although direct evidence linking MTPs and RFFs to these operations remains less clear.[6] On the other hand, close links with the far-right and pro-Russian groups are much more apparent both in Serbia and across the border in Kosovo.[7]

North Macedonia and Montenegro occupy intermediate positions, where political rhetoric and criminal opportunism intersect in complex ways.[8] In Montenegro, the criminal landscape is highly fluid, with substantial overlap between legal and illegal activities, particularly in tobacco smuggling.[9]

Policy responses to the challenges posed by MTPs and RFFs in the Western Balkans are also vary. The threats are fluid and interconnected, encompassing radicalization, terrorism, socio-economic problems, organized crime and geopolitical influences, and so require a cooperative and integrated approach from all relevant countries. A deeper examination of the policies being pursued by the Western Balkan countries – Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – reveals a mixture of legal and institutional efforts. But there are significant gaps in addressing the full scope of these issues.[10]

Methodology

The research for this paper was completed in four phases – data collection, interviews, analysis and peer review – between March and December 2024. The report is based on both qualitative and quantitative data, drawing on approximately 60 semi-structured interviews with 12 experts conducted across the Western Balkans. The latter phases involved an international peer reviewer to ensure academic rigour.

There were some challenges, particularly a lack of cooperation from experts in law enforcement agencies (especially in Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo), that had on impact on the diversity of perspectives. It should be noted that the main findings are derived primarily from fieldwork due to a significant gap in existing research and secondary literature on this topic and therefore do not fully reflect the broader scope of academic or policy research on this issue.

Working definitions

This policy paper analyzes the typologies and roles of two critical groups, which are defined as follows:

Military trained persons (MTPs) are people who received formal military training from national armed forces, police or paramilitary groups either within the Western Balkans or other countries, who are no longer in active service. Following their service, many have leveraged their expertise to provide muscle, logistical support and insider information to organized crime and increasingly to violent extremist groups.[11] This broad category includes former special forces operatives, soldiers, police and border agents involved in trafficking operations (drugs, arms, people) and extremist groups from across the political spectrum (including Islamists, far-right nationalists and pro-Russian groups).

Returning foreign fighters (RFFs) are generally citizens, typically from economically deprived areas, who have participated in armed conflicts abroad for ideological reasons and returned to the region.[12] Balkan RFFs have fought in Syria, Iraq and more recently Ukraine, for variously religious, nationalist or political reasons.[13] Upon returning, they pose a unique threat due to their exposure to radical ideologies and combat skills, as well as their integration into local or transnational extremist networks. ∎

Key findings

- **MTPs and RFFs a threat to regional security**. MTPs and RFFs are exploiting long-term socio-political and economic vulnerabilities in the region to participate in a broad range of illicit activities. In particular, their role in linking organized crime and violent extremism has sharpened the security challenge.

- **Links between organized crime and violent extremism.** The nexus between organized crime and violent extremism varies by country. In Albania, the relationship between organized crime and violent extremism is predominantly transactional. In contrast, criminals in BiH, northern Kosovo and Serbia exhibit stronger connections with radical groups. North Macedonia and Montenegro represent intermediate cases, where criminal opportunism occasionally overlaps with radical political rhetoric.

- **Similar backgrounds, diverse motivations**. Although MTPs in the Western Balkans tend to have similar military or paramilitary backgrounds, their behaviour and motives vary across the region. In Albania, MTPs have clear links to organized crime, whereas in Serbia and BiH they are more aligned with nationalist or ideological causes, leading to involvement in external conflicts such as the war in Ukraine.

- **Need for a comprehensive regional approach**. A more strategic, cooperative and integrated approach is necessary to tackle the interconnected threats of radicalization, terrorism, organized crime and geopolitical destabilization. Current legal and policy frameworks need to be updated to fully address the dynamic and evolving nature of these threats.

INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans faces a growing threat from a nexus of violent extremism, organized crime and former military persons. Decades of instability have produced large numbers of individuals with combat experience, creating a fertile ground for radicalization. This risk was first nurtured within the region – through ethnic conflicts, political fragmentation and economic hardship – before being exported abroad. Many former police, ex-military individuals and radicalized civilians went on to hone their skills in foreign battlefields and extremist causes. Now they are returning home, re-importing the violence and criminal expertise they acquired, and embedding themselves within regional extremist and organized crime networks. This pattern of local radicalization, foreign deployment and domestic return reveals a disturbing cycle of risk that continues to fuel insecurity.

The region, no stranger to internecine violence, has long been a crucible for ideological extremism (religious, political and ethno-nationalist) shaped in part by its strategic location and its repeated role as a theatre for international and internal conflicts. The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia (1991–2001) marked a major turning point for the importation of extremism to the region. Initially driven by ethno-nationalist separatism, the Balkan conflicts soon took on a religious dimension and combatants from outside the region flooded in to assist their co-religionists.[14] During the Bosnian War (1992–1995), the Bosniak army was bolstered by many volunteer troops (mujahideen) from around the Muslim world, while Serb forces took on similar numbers from Orthodox Christian countries such as Russia and Greece.[15] By contrast in Kosovo (1998–1999), while many ethnic Albanians joined the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) out of solidarity, the KLA rejected support from the so-called 'international mujahideen groups',[16] reflecting the complex interplay between ethnicity and religion in the region.[17]

The resolution of the Yugoslav conflicts saw the emergence of a new challenge – the incubation of radical ideologies and networks in the region and the proliferation of people with military training without an outlet.

The downsizing of the Albanian army post-communism, for example, led to a large pool of unemployed men with military expertise, a few of whom were drawn into organized crime.[18] In recent years, MTPs have expanded their links with criminals and international cartels to offer their skills in trafficking operations, contract killings and armed robberies – interests that overlap with extremist groups in many parts of the Balkans.

Over the past decade, the Western Balkans have been a prominent exporter of fighters to international conflicts. From 2012 to 2016, approximately 1 070 Balkan nationals (including women and children) travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State group and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra.[19] In 2019, it was estimated that, including new births, the total number of people of Balkan origin who had spent time in Syria or Iraq since 2012 stood at around 1 225.[20] Since the ousting of President Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, the future of volunteer militant groups in Syria has become highly uncertain and they are likely to return to their home countries. One significant Islamist rebel group, the Xhemati Alban (aka Katibat al-Alban), was composed of ethnic Albanians (principally from Kosovo, North Macedonia and the Presovo Valley in Serbia) who had joined the conflict for ideological reasons but whose role in the new regime is unclear.[21]

Citizens from Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and BiH have fought in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and more recently in Ukraine,[22] gaining combat experience and links to radical networks before ultimately returning to the region.[23]

The Western Balkan region therefore represents a fascinating case study for the mobilization of MTPs and RFFs in the service of violent extremism and organized crime. Whether motivated by religion, politics or ethnic solidarity, people with military skills continue to have a significant impact on regional security by perpetuating cycles of violence and complicating post-conflict reconciliation and governance.

The evolving collaboration between organized crime and violent extremism has been highlighted in broad terms in publications such as the European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2024.[24] This paper seeks to underline the role of people with military or police backgrounds in this process, intensifying and diversifying ties with international crime and extremism – thus linking the situation in the Western Balkans with broader EU security concerns.[25] Finally, it highlights how the problem has been compounded by policy frameworks that fail to account for the unique risks posed by these individuals, and recommends more effective ways to counter it.

An army recruitment billboard on the former Yugoslavia Ministry of Defence building in Belgrade, damaged by NATO missiles during the 1999 war over Kosovo. Yugoslavia's violent breakup was a turning point for extremism in the Balkans. © Svetlana Dojcinovic/Bloomberg via Getty Images

COMPLEX MOTIVES OF MILITARY TRAINED PERSONS AND RETURNING FOREIGN FIGHTERS

I t is difficult to make overarching statements, given the complex web of motivations, backgrounds and methods of operation among Balkan MTPs and RFFs. However, one salient point of convergence between the two is their exploitation of porous borders, weak governance and corruption that have existed in the region for decades.[26] The fragmented political landscape of the Western Balkans facilitates the movement of goods, people and money across national borders, allowing both criminal and extremist networks to flourish.[27] MTPs and RFFs exploit these systemic vulnerabilities to seize effective control of certain territories, build complex illicit networks, reinforce their operational capabilities and capture state institutions.[28]

Despite exploiting the same structural weaknesses, MTPs and RFFs generally diverge in their core motivations. These are complex and differ by country, but at root MTPs are driven by financial or pragmatic considerations to align with criminal organizations or paramilitary groups, while RFFs tend to be more deeply entrenched in the ideologies of religious or nationalist extremism.

Across the region, economic factors are central in driving MTPs towards organized crime and violent extremism, and they find themselves in high demand. In Albania, for example, there are concerns that some former army officers with experience in specialized missions, including in Afghanistan, could be vulnerable to involvement in organized criminal activities. Such a high degree of discipline is valuable to criminal networks in ensuring operations run smoothly. Meanwhile, an intimate knowledge of border security arrangements and practices, gained by working in security roles, for instance, is particularly useful in drug trafficking and smuggling operations.[29]

MTPs are not always home-grown – another key dynamic in the Western Balkans is the influx of military expertise from overseas, particularly in the form of former secret service or special forces operatives. Examples in Albania from the past few years include an Iranian national, Bijan Pooladrag, who was found guilty of spying on opposition exiles for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps;[30] a former Greek special forces member who received a life sentence after being hired by an organized crime group to kill a local businessperson;[31] and an ethnic Greek who had served in the Hellenic Armed Forces before developing links to Albanian extremist groups, who later died in a police shootout.[32]

A building belonging to Serbian paramilitary group Civilna Zastita in Mitrovica, Kosovo, where it is designated a terrorist organization. © *NurPhoto via Getty Images*

Increasingly, MTPs are blurring the boundaries between organized crime and extremism through their involvement with nationalist paramilitary groups. In Kosovo, MTPs operating in criminal enterprises are often linked to Serbia's parallel security structures, such as the Civilna Zastita (Civil Protection) and Severna Brigada (North Brigade), which were established during the 1998/9 conflict. Both groups were designated as terrorist organizations by the Kosovan government in June 2023.[33] Other extremist groups founded in the aftermath of the war, such as Rojat e Urës (Bridge Watchers) in the divided city of Mitrovica,[34] are militarily trained, loyal to Serbian nationalist ideologies and have exploited their control of territories to become heavily involved in organized crime, especially racketeering and drug trafficking.[35] These structures functioned outside the legal frameworks of both Serbia and Kosovo, operating clandestinely and allegedly were not formally registered as legal entities in either jurisdiction.[36]

In Serbia and BiH, there have been similar cases of MTPs aligning themselves with nationalist groups and political causes for financial gain (with some even fighting in Ukraine on this basis).[37] These alliances reflect a complex blend of financial pragmatism and ideological commitment that is present throughout the region.[38]

The major unifying factor among MTPs (whether trained within the region or hired in from outside) is their reliance on marketing their military skills and knowledge to organized criminal networks – skills that help to augment cross-border crime and reinforce illicit economies.[39]

RFFs, by contrast, are motivated primarily by ideology and more often linked with transnational extremist movements. The Syrian civil war and Ukrainian conflict serve as pivotal case studies. Recruitment for these conflicts in the Western Balkans has concentrated on marginalized and impoverished communities, where narratives of victimhood and empowerment resonate strongly.[40]

Although economic motives tend to be at the forefront for MTPs, poverty and deprivation are also important early pull factors for foreign fighters. While MTPs are often former members of the military or paramilitary, RFFs are overwhelmingly disenfranchised civilians, particularly from socio-economically vulnerable regions. RFFs typically come from disadvantaged backgrounds, with many having previous convictions for low-level crimes.[41]

Economically disadvantaged regions in Montenegro[42] – particularly the Muslim-majority areas of Plav, Gusinje, Rožaje, Petnjica and Ulcinj – have been identified as potential centres for radicalization and the recruitment of fighters who joined the Islamic State in the mid-2010s.[43] Many of these recruits were previously unemployed or engaged in manual labour.[44]

As such, the initial motivation for joining foreign conflicts can be financial, particularly for those who have accumulated debts. One practitioner who works with former Serbian prisoners, including people who had fought in Russian units in Ukraine, noted a similar phenomenon:

> Most operate in a legal grey area, often involved in security [work] or untaxed trade. They frequently face legal issues, using their war experience to boost their status. Nearly all who went to Ukraine were financially motivated, struggling to earn a living or in debt. This primarily applies to the first wave of fighters, many of whom had received military training during mandatory service in Serbia.[45]

Despite this, our findings suggest that RFFs across the region are primarily ideologically motivated.[46] Since 2017, at least seven BiH citizens have been linked to pro-Russian paramilitary groups in Ukraine.[47] In Serbia, charismatic political leaders play a significant role in recruiting the disenfranchised to extremism, offering a sense of purpose and belonging through social media platforms, group events and football fan networks.[48] Former members of the Serbian Yugoslav Army, paramilitary and police units who were involved in the war in Kosovo are particularly susceptible to joining foreign military groups, such as those fighting in Ukraine.[49]

Yugoslav army convoys leaving Pristina in 1999. Veterans of the Kosovo War are particularly susceptible to joining foreign military groups. *© Patrick Robert/Sygma/ CORBIS/Sygma via Getty Images*

From the Serbian far-right to the Donbas

In downtown Belgrade, a mural of Joe Strummer from the British rock band The Clash adorns the side of a university building. Next to it, a portrait dedicated to a Serbian far-right militant, Stefan Dimitrijević, suddenly appeared in April 2022, featuring symbols invoking the former Russian Empire.

Dimitrijević, born in Belgrade in 1989, was killed in Ukraine after a decade of fighting for pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas. He had been convicted in Serbia in 2015 for joining the international unit of the notorious Prizrak Brigade, before later rejoining the front. Photos on social media show Dimitrijević associating with Serbian far-right groups, including neo-Nazi movements, as far back as 2014.[50] The appearance of the mural so shortly after his death is a testament to the growing strength of the far-right in Serbia and its close links to international extremist networks. ■

A portrait of Serbian far-right militant Stefan Dimitrijević appeared next to an image of British musician Joe Strummer in Belgrade in 2022. © Andrej Isakovic/AFP via Getty Images

In recent years, the drafting of Serb volunteers for the Ukraine war appears to become highly organized under the influence of Russian officials, and focused on exploiting pro-Russian sentiment among Serbian ultra-nationalist groups. This recruitment drive has reportedly been led by Serbs with previous involvement with Russian paramilitary groups (such as the Wagner Group) in Syria and Ukraine.[51] Inconsistent counter extremism policies in Serbia have allowed far-right groups and RFFs from the Ukrainian front to flourish. This has led to a cycle of people becoming radicalized, travelling back and forth from war zones and becoming ever more integrated into transnational extremist networks. This process of radicalization, return and recruitment highlights the ongoing threat of RFFs and MTPs re-engaging in extremist activities. [52]

RFFs also have distinct experiences of reintegration across the region. In Albania and Kosovo, returning fighters face social stigma and limited access to rehabilitation programmes, perpetuating cycles of alienation and potential recidivism.[53] In Albania, radicalized women, whose husbands or sons joined the Islamic State, present a risk of perpetuating extremism within their families and communities.[54] Meanwhile, children born in Syrian camps face significant psychological trauma, requiring focused mental health support and stable environments to aid their recovery and social adaptation on their return.[55]

In BiH, RFFs have also tended to return to areas of the country where they were first radicalized. These (generally Wahhabi) enclaves have historically maintained insular networks, complicating state efforts to disrupt them as ideological hubs.[56] Meanwhile, in Montenegro and North Macedonia, effective reintegration is mainly undermined by weak institutional frameworks and interethnic tensions.[57]

The ethnic and religious composition of North Macedonia adds another layer of complexity, as it influences both the motivations of returning foreign fighters and how they are received by local communities. Many of these individuals are driven by a perceived duty to protect their ethnic or religious groups. Upon return, however, there is a significant risk that some may establish links with organized crime networks, participating in illicit activities such as drug trafficking and migrant smuggling – both within North Macedonia and through cross-border routes involving Kosovo and Albania.[58] As with MTPs, the convergence of interests between extremist networks and RFFs should serve as a critical indicator in the development of preventive strategies against organized crime.

Analysis of MTPs and RFFs across the Western Balkans reveals a complex landscape marked by shared characteristics and distinctive attributes. While both groups have combat experience, are involved to some extent in criminal networks and face reintegration challenges across the region, their precise motivations and affiliations differ significantly by country (see Figure 1) and require targeted responses.

Country	Distinctive features of MTPs	Distinctive features of RFFs

Albania	• Economically and ideologically driven.
	• Tend to be from elite units (e.g. Albanian Commando Battalion), but also include:
	  • former commandos from neighbouring countries;
	  • agents of foreign intelligence services from nations unfriendly to Albania; and
	  • military-trained individuals from terrorist organizations overseas.
		• Driven by religious and socio-economic factors.
		• Male returnees from Syria with combat experience pose direct security threats.
		• Women sentenced to probation risk radicalizing others.
		• Children born in conflict zones face reintegration challenges.

Bosnia and Herzegovina	• Ideologically, religiously and economically driven. • Combat experience from conflicts such as the Ukraine war. • Connections to pro-Russian paramilitary groups (e.g. Republic of Srpska Army).	• Driven by religious and socio-economic factors. • Males typically participated in Syria and Iraq. • Mainly recruited from Wahhabi enclaves in the country.
Kosovo	• Ideologically, religiously and economically driven. • Linked to parallel Serbian security structures, such as the Civil Protection and North Brigade groups, which are organized and active in northern Kosovo. • Strong presence in drug and weapon trafficking and connections to criminal organizations. • Have numerous businesses, which generate millions, including public procurement contracts in Kosovo and Serbia and throughout the region.	• Young Albanian-Kosovans primarily recruited by the Islamic State. • Kosovan-Serbs driven by far-right and Serb nationalist views.
Montenegro	• Motivated by religious ideologies or historical ties to Russia. • Difficulty identifying MTPs due to lack of institutional clarity. • Often involved with far-right groups, such as the Night Wolves motorcycle club.	• Driven by religious and socio-economic factors. • Participants in Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts. • Predominantly from economically deprived areas such as Plav, Gusinje, Rožaje and Petnjica.
North Macedonia	• Often linked to organized crime due to unemployment and ethnic tensions. • Many have poor psychological support and suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence of involvement in previous conflicts.	• Young individuals radicalized by religious or ideological beliefs. • Connections with organized crime in North Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania. • Susceptible to further radicalization due to inadequate reintegration programmes.
Serbia	• Driven by personal ambition, ideology, religion and financial motivations. • Primarily former members of the Yugoslav Army or associated paramilitary units. • Strong ties to pro-Russian units fighting in Ukraine. • Motivated by historical victimhood and Serb nationalist narratives. • Some involved in football hooliganism and have a history of crime before joining foreign conflicts.	• Driven by religious and socio-economic factors. • Smaller numbers joined Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, mainly from Salafi communities.

FIGURE 1 Characteristics of military trained persons and returning foreign fighters in the Western Balkans, by country.

CRIMINAL MARKETS

The flourishing of criminal markets in the Western Balkans is a reflection of both its position as an entry point into the EU for major trafficking routes from the Middle East, Africa and Latin America and its legacy of socio-political upheaval, economic hardship, porous borders and corrupt institutions.[59] People with military experience have become vital cogs in the machinery of organized crime, using their skills, knowledge and connections to exploit existing vulnerabilities.[60]

In Montenegro, the blurred lines between legal and illegal activities, coupled with a tacit level of state protection for organized crime, have created an environment in which MTPs with established connections and insider knowledge can operate freely, often hiding behind these affiliations.[61] In the cigarette trade, for instance, real and fake-branded cigarettes mix freely in the key Montenegrin port of Bar before being distributed internationally.[62] Albania is affected by more overt cases of corruption and organized crime, where MTPs use their connections with political and business elites to facilitate illicit transactions.[63] According to a former state police officer in Tirana, 'In some regions of Albania, including Shkodra, Durrësi, Fieri and Vlora, the boundaries between politics, business and crime appear to be less distinct, with instances of organized crime potentially interacting with political parties and prominent businessmen.'[64]

However, while shared socio-political factors unite the criminal markets of the Western Balkans, there are important national variations, especially when it comes to the involvement of MTPs. Albania arguably has the most entrenched networks,[65] with MTPs and RFFs playing a significant role in drug trafficking, contract killings and armed robberies.[66]

Serbia's criminal markets are among the most organized in the region, with extensive international networks in drug trafficking (particularly cocaine) and arms smuggling, although there is less direct evidence linking MTPs and RFFs to these activities as in Albania and BiH.[67] By contrast, Serbia's criminal landscape is characterized by a more complex interplay between foreign fighters, extremist groups and traditional organized crime.[68] Meanwhile, BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo have more opportunistic markets, where socio-economic pressures and weak institutions combine to enable a diverse range of illicit activities.[69]

Drug trafficking

Drug trafficking dominates the illicit economies of the Western Balkans. The region is a critical transit hub between the main production zones in Afghanistan (opium) and Latin America (cocaine) and the markets of Western Europe. While the involvement of MTPs in drug trafficking across the Western Balkans is relatively well documented, the role of RFFs remains less visible; nevertheless, it can be alleged that a small number may have been utilized by organized crime groups in enforcement or protection roles, especially where their combat experience and ideological networks offer strategic value.[70]

Albania, long known for its cannabis production, has evolved into a crucial player in cocaine trafficking. MTPs perform various roles in the industry, overseeing the security of smuggling operations and enforcing discipline.[71] Their ability to navigate complex logistical challenges is of particular value to organized crime syndicates (see box below).

Serbia, which sits at a major crossroads with central Europe, is a major hub for the smuggling of cocaine, synthetic drugs, arms and people into the EU. Its dominance in these markets is underpinned by sophisticated trafficking systems that are deeply embedded in transnational criminal networks.[72] While the evidence for the direct involvement of MTPs in Serbian organized crime is not conclusive, historical connections to far-right militias and political factions suggest that they are at least indirectly contributing to the cocaine trade and associated smuggling networks.[73]

Montenegro also serves as a vital drug transit hub into Europe, particularly for cocaine shipments coming from Latin America.[74] Military training and an intimate knowledge of security systems are critical for the organized criminals operating through the Montenegrin ports. Former police staff have allegedly supplied information about border security systems at Bar to cigarette smuggling operations.[75] While the role of MTPs in the trade is less overt in Montenegro, they are likely to be involved in securing routes and protecting shipments. MTPs play a more fragmented role in BiH and mainly participate in local trafficking networks.[76] Yet, despite their smaller scale, these activities contribute significantly to regional drug flows.[77]

Albania, long known for its cannabis production, has become a hub in the international cocaine trade, with links to arms trafficking and violent extremism.
© Albanian Interior Ministry/ Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Air force pilot by day, drug trafficker by night

The case of Major Sokol Feka, a helicopter pilot in the Albanian air force for 15 years, illustrates the link between MTPs and organized crime.

Feka became involved with a drug trafficking ring operating in the Mediterranean region, using his military experience to fly helicopters at low altitude to avoid radar and to navigate the tricky mountainous terrain at night. In 2015, Feka took an unexplained leave of absence, ostensibly to take part in a smuggling operation. He was piloting a helicopter transporting 900 kilograms of hashish from Morocco to Spain when he struck an electricity pylon in the Valle del Genal region. Feka and his passenger died in the crash and the extent of the drug operation was revealed. The leader of the group, which was thought to have started smuggling in 2014, was eventually arrested in Spain in 2023.[78] ∎

Arms trafficking, robberies and contract killings

The flood of weaponry into the region during the Yugoslav Wars has cast a long shadow over the Balkan arms trade, with surplus stocks of weapons and ammunition having fuelled smuggling networks since the 1990s.[79] MTPs participate heavily in the trade, leveraging their military connections to source and distribute firearms.[80] In contrast, RFFs tend to operate on the fringes of these networks, sometimes contributing through informal channels and extremist-linked networks, particularly in post-conflict zones.[81]

In Montenegro, the overlap between legal and illicit arms trading has fostered a thriving black market in weaponry. According to expert interviews, Montenegro is well known as a main transit country for arms smuggling. There are approximately 35 registered arms trading companies in the country, some of which are believed to engage in trade with countries of the former Soviet bloc, with surplus weapons possibly being sent to conflict zones.[82] These companies are often owned by or linked to criminal groups, with a significant number of employees being former military persons, and a smaller portion being former police officers. This environment has created ample opportunities for organized criminals to exploit the arms trade, with MTPs playing a prominent role in securing routes and facilitating the movement of arms across the region.[83] Serbia is also a major focal point for the region's arms smuggling, with its close links to transnational criminal organizations.[84] Albania is another major player, where the trade in arms often intersects with drug trafficking networks.[85]

Their proficiency in military tactics allows MTPs to offer a range of other services, including security, extortion and protection racketeering. MTPs have been known to engage in meticulously planned armed heists on behalf of criminals.[86] In one such robbery in 2019, a group of five armed men seized approximately US$10 million in cash at an airport in Tirana, Albania, as it was being loaded onto a plane.[87]

Contract killings (characterized by precision and tactical execution, as opposed to random violence or thuggery) are another highly specialized market in which both MTPs and RFFs have been able to distinguish themselves by offering assassination services to rival criminal factions.[88]

RFFs, who have returned from conflict zones, can bring a unique set of skills to these networks.[89] Their previous experience in organized, high-stakes military environments makes them particularly adept at managing the risks involved in smuggling operations.[90]

Human smuggling

The region's strategic location on major sea and land routes between the Middle East, Africa and Europe has made it a hub for human trafficking. MTPs and RFFs play a significant role providing services, including logistical support and protection of trafficking routes to organized crime. It should be noted that while clear evidence of the role of RFFs is limited, their potential involvement in human trafficking – whether directly or as facilitators – adds a troubling ideological and operational dimension.

In Albania, MTPs use their military training and criminal connections to move migrants across borders, exploiting corruption in border areas.[91] Kosovo and BiH face similar challenges,[92] with MTPs commonly acting as enforcers within smuggling networks,[93] using their cross-border connections to enhance the efficiency of operations.[94] In Kosovo, sex trafficking is the predominant form of human smuggling, with groups targeting girls from within the country but also from Albania, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and elsewhere in Europe.[95]

Country	Main criminal activities	Involvement of MTPs/RFFs	Key characteristics
Albania	• Drug trafficking • Armed robberies • Contract killings	High level of involvement in drug smuggling and engagement in protection racketeering and contract killings.	MTPs utilize military skills in heists and security provision; notable incidents include major drug smuggling and robberies.
BiH	• Economic crimes • Drug trafficking • Contract killings	MTPs involved in economic crimes and protection for organized crime; less direct link to RFFs.	Increased hiring of MTPs as contract killers in post-war Yugoslavia; complex criminal dynamics, with some engaged in migrant smuggling.
Kosovo	• Economic crimes • Arms smuggling • Terrorism	MTPs more heavily involved in organized crime operations (e.g. smuggling, drug trafficking, arms deals), corruption and terrorism. In contrast, RFFs are more focused on disseminating extremist ideologies.	MTPs maintain ties to political and criminal elites, influencing local governance. RFFs are present in northern Kosovo.
North Macedonia	• Drug trafficking • Human trafficking • Arms smuggling	Limited structured involvement; drawn into crime opportunistically due to socio-economic instability.	MTPs may utilize military training for illicit activities; socio-economic challenges create opportunities for crime.
Montenegro	• Tobacco smuggling • Drug trafficking • Arms smuggling	MTPs involved in smuggling operations, but less organized.	Fluid overlap between legal and illegal activities; former police and military persons exploit connections for illicit gains.
Serbia	• Drug trafficking • Human trafficking • Arms smuggling	RFFs have potential connections, but less well documented.	MTPs active in organized crime that is structured; strong ties between RFFs and organized crime.

FIGURE 2 Involvement of military trained persons and returning foreign fighters in criminal markets in the Western Balkans.

In North Macedonia, MTPs and RFFs have provided logistical support for trafficking operations, exploiting the country's socio-economic instability and weak border enforcement to smuggle people for sex and forced labour (particularly in Europe's construction and agricultural sectors). Criminals are increasingly using fake online profiles on social media platforms and other applications to draw in potential targets.[96] In Montenegro, former police and military persons are also engaged in facilitating trafficking operations, using insider knowledge and links to senior officials to smuggle migrants as well as arms and drugs.[97]

Finally, Serbian organized crime is heavily involved in human trafficking, particularly of women and children. While the involvement of MTPs and RFFs in these operations is slightly more indirect, both groups provide crucial logistical support, contributing to Serbia's role as a central transit country on the Balkans human trafficking route.[98]

These dynamics underscore the challenges of addressing organized crime in the Western Balkans. The involvement of MTPs and RFFs adds a layer of complexity, intertwining national security concerns with the broader struggle against organized crime. As these markets continue to develop, their regional and global impact demands sustained attention and coordinated policy responses.[99]

ASSESSING STATE RESPONSES

Policy responses to MTPs and RFFs in the Western Balkans have been a confused mix of legal and institutional efforts, underscored by significant political and operational hurdles. The changing nature of these threats – which combine radicalization, terrorism, organized crime and geopolitics – requires a comprehensive, cooperative and integrated response from the constituent nations. Analyzing the policies and judicial responses of each country offers some insight into the strengths and limitations of their current efforts and how these are shaped by both internal and external factors.

Judicial responses across the region

In 2022, Kosovo recorded the highest number of convictions for terrorist offences overall (including citizens travelling to Syria and Ukraine, as well as domestic terrorism), followed by BiH and North Macedonia.[100] Albania had the highest average prison sentences, while Montenegro had the lowest. Notably, across the region, individuals participating in the Syrian conflict faced significantly harsher penalties than those involved in the war in Ukraine.[101]

Over a thousand Serbian ultra nationalist supporters march in Belgrade in support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia's influence in the region has complicated efforts to combat violent extremism. © *Andrej Isakovic/AFP via Getty Images*

Country	Total number of cases and convictions	Average prison sentence (total)	Domestic terrorism	Foreign conflicts	Key points
Albania	12 cases; 11 convictions	13.24 years	3 cases (2 convicted; 1 acquitted) Avg. 16.5 years	Syria – 9 convictions	Highest average sentence for foreign conflicts
BiH	45 cases; 42 convictions	4 years	16 cases (14 convicted; 2 acquitted)	Syria – 28 convictions Ukraine – 1 case (acquitted)	Second-highest number of convictions overall
Kosovo	171 cases; 123 convictions	3.5 years	Data not provided	Syria – 87 convictions (57 ongoing; 107 suspended; 21 on trial)	Highest number of foreign fighter convictions
Montenegro	2 cases; 2 convictions	6 months	N/A	Syria – 1 conviction Ukraine – 1 conviction	Lowest number of foreign fighter convictions and shortest average sentence
North Macedonia	29 cases; 29 convictions	5.66 years	11 cases Avg. 6.45	Syria – 18 convictions	Moderate sentences
Serbia	23 cases; 7 convictions	9.93 years	N/A	Syria – 7 convictions Ukraine – 16 cases (all acquitted)	Penalties only for participants in Syria

FIGURE 3 Convictions across the Western Balkans for participating in foreign conflicts and domestic terrorism.

NOTE: This data is drawn from the period 2012–2016 due to limitations in availability and reporting beyond this time frame. 'N/A' indicates that data was not available for those categories.

SOURCE: Delfinë Elshani, An overview of policies and efforts on P/CVE in the Western Balkans (III), Pristina Institute for Political Studies, June 2022

Albania: Bridging gaps between violent extremism and organized crime

Albania has made some positive steps in addressing the challenges posed by organized crime and violent extremism, which is reflected in various national strategies and supported by its criminal legislation, mainly involving targeted anti-money laundering laws. While the country has achieved notable progress in strengthening its national security framework, there is an opportunity to enhance efforts by focusing on the connections between MTPs, RFFs and organized crime.[102] This would encourage more comprehensive counterextremism strategies. Albania's National Security Strategy (2023–2028) reflects a commitment to improve efforts, and ongoing work on the repatriation and reintegration of nationals from conflict zones is a positive step – but it needs a more holistic approach.[103] Although challenges remain, such as institutional fragmentation, limited resources and the need for stronger interagency coordination, overall Albania's work in tackling these issues provides a solid basis for future improvements in national and regional security.[104]

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Legislative alignment and political fragmentation

BiH has made strides in aligning its legal framework with EU standards, particularly with the adoption of laws targeting terrorism, money laundering and terrorist financing. Despite these advances, political fragmentation and obstruction remain significant challenges. The Strategy for the Prevention and Fight Against Terrorism (2021–2026) and the Strategy for Combating Organized Crime (2023–2026) reflect international best practices, but their implementation has been impeded by political infighting and weak law enforcement coordination.[105] These strategies have not tackled the specific risks of MTPs and RFFs becoming involved with organized crime or violent extremism. The influence of Russian-backed politicians in BiH politics has further complicated efforts.[106] As such, BiH's counterterrorism and anti-crime measures often fall short due to a lack of political will and resource constraints.[107]

Kosovo: Institutional fragmentation and international isolation

Kosovo has invested heavily in legal and strategic measures to combat violent extremism and terrorism, with laws criminalizing participation in foreign conflicts and frameworks including the Strategy for the Prevention of Violent Extremism (SPVERT) and the National Strategy Against Terrorism (2023–2028). However, Kosovo faces significant institutional challenges, including the fragmentation of its security agencies and a lack of coordination in rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for radicalized individuals.[108] Furthermore, Kosovo's exclusion from key international law enforcement organizations such as INTERPOL hampers its ability to cooperate effectively with other countries in countering transnational threats.[109] The absence of a unified national database for extremist activities exacerbates the problem, highlighting the need for investment and enhanced interagency communication.[110] However, Kosovo appears to have not paid sufficient attention to the challenges posed by RFFs and MTPs in hotspot areas.

Montenegro: Weak implementation and transparency challenges

Montenegro's legal response to RFFs is rooted in the 2015 amendments to its criminal code, which criminalize participation in foreign armed groups and emphasize border control measures. The national strategy, aimed at combating terrorism, money laundering and terrorist financing (2022–2025), reflects a recognition of the growing threat.[111] However, the implementation of this strategy is undermined by a lack of demographic and behavioural data on MTPs and RFFs, as well as limited international cooperation, particularly with key regional players such as Türkiye and Serbia. Institutional transparency issues and reluctance to share sensitive information further hinder the effective application of the legal frameworks.[112]

North Macedonia: Bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption

North Macedonia has a good legal framework, including laws targeting organized crime, money laundering and terrorism, as well as national strategies focusing on prevention and interagency

coordination. Despite these efforts, the country faces significant bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption, which undermine the effectiveness of its counterterrorism and counterextremism measures.[113] The country's national strategies, such as the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism, are well aligned with international standards but their implementation is often stymied by inadequate resources, insufficient law enforcement training and a lack of public engagement in counter-radicalization efforts.[114]

Serbia: Geopolitical complexities and inconsistent enforcement

Serbia's approach to MTPs and RFFs is shaped by its complex geopolitical situation, including its attempt to strive for EU integration while maintaining close ties with Russia. Although Serbia has made strides in criminalizing foreign fighters and addressing terrorism, enforcement has been inconsistent, with many offenders from far-right or nationalist groups who fought in Ukraine receiving minimal punishment.[115] The country's national security framework, which includes laws on organized crime and terrorism financing, is primarily focused on Islamic extremism, leaving gaps in the response to other forms of radicalization, such as far-right extremism. Serbia's political landscape, marked by a state-controlled media and a lack of government transparency, presents challenges for counter-radicalization efforts, especially when tackling pro-Russian extremist networks.[116] Furthermore, inter-institutional cooperation remains weak, with external pressures on the judiciary further complicating effective law enforcement.[117]

Overall, while there are significant efforts underway to address the threats posed by MTPs and RFFs in the Western Balkans, the countries of the region face a range of challenges that hinder the effectiveness of these responses. A more integrated, cooperative and regionally coordinated approach is essential. This would require enhanced cross-border collaboration, improved institutional capacity and a stronger focus on rehabilitation and reintegration strategies. Moreover, overcoming political fragmentation and corruption will be crucial in ensuring the success of regional counterterrorism and counterextremism efforts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The role of individuals with military, policing or paramilitary backgrounds in organized crime in the Western Balkans is complex. The motivations and patterns of behaviour among MTPs and RFFs vary across the region, with some primarily involved in drug and arms trafficking – the traditional diet of organized crime – and others (particularly in Serbia and BiH) aligned with nationalist or ideological causes and forging transnational links by joining external conflicts.

The precise nexus between organized crime and violent extremism also varies across the region, with countries such as Albania, BiH, Montenegro and North Macedonia having more business-oriented or transactional relationships, while in others, including northern Kosovo and Serbia, criminal groups have much stronger ideological ties to extremists. This complex interplay has added to the sophistication of criminal markets. Many of these markets thrive where there is socio-political instability and economic hardship, and MTPs and RFFs are currently well placed to exploit these vulnerabilities.

To counter the threats posed by MTPs and RFFs effectively, a more comprehensive, cooperative and integrated regional approach is essential. Threat assessments of MTPs and RFFs should be included in national strategies that align with international standards and are capable of addressing the interconnected issues of radicalization, terrorism, organized crime and geopolitical destabilization.

Based on our findings, we propose the following recommendations for all six countries:

- Acknowledge the convergence of MTPs and RFFs with violent extremism and organized crime in national security and counterterrorism strategies.
- Align definitions with international standards, ensuring consistency with EU, United Nations and NATO terminology to facilitate better cooperation.
- Harmonize national legislative frameworks to facilitate extradition and prosecution of RFFs and MTPs across borders.
- Include strategic assessments in national risk reports, identifying high-risk zones and populations vulnerable to RFF or MTP recruitment by organized crime.
- Incorporate RFF and MTP prevention strategies into community policing models.
- Hold regular meetings of national law enforcement agencies at the regional level to discuss common trends.
- Establish a regional training academy for countering extremism and organized crime. This would provide specialized training for law enforcement, prosecutors and security officials, ensuring more effective coordination and response.

- Establish mechanisms for collaboration between media outlets, law enforcement and intelligence agencies to share insights that can help uncover emerging patterns relating to MTPs and RFFs in organized crime and violent extremist networks.
- Promote and support investigative journalism focusing on the interconnection of MTPs, RFFs, organized crime and links to violent extremism.
- Encourage partnerships between government agencies, civil society and media to coordinate efforts in identifying, monitoring and addressing the threats posed by MTPs and RFFs.
- Encourage and support academic research on the risks posed by MTPs and RFFs, particularly in relation to national and regional security concerns.
- Foster trust-building between local communities, particularly ethnic and religious minorities, and state authorities, to prevent the spread of extremism and radicalization.

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