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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Stellungnahme / comment

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dzihic, V. (2023). *The Far-Right in the Western Balkans: How the Extreme Right is Threatening Democracy in the Region*. (Policy Analysis / Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik, 1). Wien: Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik (oiip). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-85191-9>

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Policy Analysis

1 / January 2023



Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik
Austrian Institute for International Affairs

The Far-Right in the Western Balkans. How the Extreme Right is Threatening Democracy in the Region

Vedran Dzihic



This policy analysis was produced as part of the cooperation between oiip and the Ministry of Defence.

Zusammenfassung

Zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts ist der Aufstieg der Rechtsextremen in Europa nicht mehr nur als Randerscheinung zu betrachten, sondern als ein ernstes Zeichen der Krise der liberalen Ordnung. Die Zunahme rechtsextremer Wähler:innen und die Verbreitung rechtsextremer Parteien, Bewegungen und subkultureller Gruppen steht für eine veränderte politische und ideologische Landschaft, in der die liberale Demokratie zunehmend und offen herausgefordert wird. „Rechte Bedrohungsallianzen“ als direkte Opposition zur offenen Gesellschaft sind damit ein nicht zu vernachlässigendes Phänomen geworden. Dieses Papier befasst sich am Beispiel Serbiens näher mit den wichtigsten rechtsextremen Gruppierungen und Organisationen während der letzten zwei Jahrzehnte. Auch wenn die extreme Rechte in den meisten Westbalkanländern noch keinen entscheidenden politischen Faktor darstellt, wird die Grenze zwischen ihrer politischen Agenda und den etablierten politischen Parteien immer dünner. Die Internationalisierung des Rechtsextremismus hat die strategischen Möglichkeiten rechtsextremen Handelns über nationale politische Strukturen hinaus erweitert und diesem damit eine internationale Perspektive und globale Bedeutung verliehen. Diese neuen internationalen „Rechten Bedrohungsallianzen“ stellen somit vermehrt eine Bedrohung für die Demokratie sowohl im nationalen als auch im regionalen Kontext auf dem Westbalkan sowie über die Region hinaus dar.

Executive Summary

At the beginning of the 21st century, the rise of the far-right in Europe should no longer be considered as a peripheral phenomenon but rather as a serious sign of the crisis of the liberal post-Cold War order. The growth of far-right voters and the proliferation of far-right parties, movements, and subcultural groups stands for a changed political and ideological landscape, one where the notion of democracy is increasingly and openly contested. “Rechte Bedrohungsallianzen” – “Right-wing threat alliances” as a direct opposition to open society constitute a phenomenon that must not be ignored. This paper looks closer into the most representative far-right groups and organisations in Serbia during the last two decades. Even though the far-right in most Western Balkan countries is not a decisive political factor yet, the boundary separating its political agenda from mainstream political parties is becoming thinner. The internationalization of right-wing extremism has expanded the strategic possibilities of far-right action beyond national political structures thus giving it an international perspective and global meaning. These new international “signatures of the far-right” continue to be a threat to democracy both in the national and regional context in the Western Balkans as well as beyond the region.

Keywords:

far right, Western Europe, Serbia, threats to democracy

Autor

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Impressum:

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At the beginning of the 21st century, the rise of the far-right in Europe should no longer be considered as a peripheral phenomenon, one that has been long absent from the political spectrum of European democracies, but rather as a serious sign of the crisis of the liberal post-Cold War order. The growth of far-right voters and the proliferation of far-right parties, movements, and subcultural groups (but also of intellectuals, figures in the church, and so on) stands for a changed political and ideological landscape, one where the notion of democracy is increasingly and openly contested. “Rechte Bedrohungsallianzen” – “Right-wing threat alliances” (Wilhelm Heitmeyer) as a direct opposition to open society constitute a phenomenon that must not be ignored.

The multiple challenges facing European societies in overcoming the consequences of severe crises, especially the economic crisis of 2008 and the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, have shaken well-established forms of political consensus, and in doing so, are reaffirming the ideas of the far-right and placing them in the midst of our political systems. The European right’s nationalist appeal proved to be the most effective means of political mobilization during times of crises; without it, arguments about the threat to identity and sovereignty seem vacuous. Europe or more precisely the EU has a constitutive role almost in all of these far-right ideologies because most of them are Eurosceptic. What is more, the rise of far-right

politics is very often embedded in the geopolitical conflict between the EU and Russia. Skepticism toward the EU and frustration with globalization in general often go together with a strong affirmation of national identities, the territorial unity of the nation-state, “superior” and homeland-centric policies, and the xenophobic and chauvinistic construction of the “other”. Skepticism toward the EU is frequently combined with the defense of an imagined European white identity. The so called “migration crisis” is obviously one of the most important causes of the big surge of the far-right: the fear of mass immigration (for which mostly the EU is blamed) and strong Islamophobia (appearing both as hostility toward refugees and toward already-existing Muslim communities in Europe) result in serious social tensions and the polarization of societies. It is very important that almost all these far-right actors appeal to working-class fears of social decline while also fueling strong anti-establishment feelings and animosity with regard to representative democracy. Opposition to abortion and homosexuality, violent anti-LGBT actions, criticism toward same-sex marriage, and the repeal of laws against gender-based violence, are just some of the typical characteristics of these ideologies and practices. Generally, they are also opposed to some “progressive” issues and ambitious policies, such as the fight against climate change or political correctness.

On the political front, the far-right no longer presents itself as a revolutionary force of the “third way,” but instead as an agent of potential reform for disenfranchised and dissatisfied citizens. As Ivan Krastev notes, the disintegration of the liberal order before the rise of the far-right does not raise the question of where mistakes have been made in European politics in the last three decades, but instead asks how much Europe has changed since then and, respectively, how much is it changing right now.¹

The concept of “illiberal democracy” in Eastern Europe and the differentialist racism of the Western European right testify to the heterogeneity of the new extreme and radical right movements at the beginning of the 21st century. It further calls for an intensive inquiry into the phenomenon of the far-right, its ideological roots, narratives, tools, and tactics – into the “signatures of the far-right” and its threat to democracy (“Signaturen der Bedrohung”). Furthermore, the transnational character of the far-right and far-right communicating vessels stretching from Europe to the USA and Australia and in all possible directions within the European continent, therefore require a great deal of caution when conducting comparative analyzes.

The rise of the far-right in the Western Balkans contained all the features of the Eastern European post-communist right spectrum (anti-

communism, ethnic nationalism, xenophobia), but, at the same time, expressed its own particularities, mainly due to the burdensome legacy of the wars of the 1990s. At a time when the far-right in Europe was building its political profile on themes such as national identity, Islamophobia or an anti-immigrant policy, its variability in the former Yugoslavia was subject to the effects of interethnic conflicts. The bloody disintegration of the multinational Yugoslav state represented a different direction for the end of the Cold War from what was envisioned in the plans of liberal-democratic triumphalism. In the eyes of the new political elites, the deconstruction of the authoritarian Leninist legacy was replaced by exclusive authoritarian nationalism. The political subjects of the modern right in the Western Balkans were constituted during a time of nationalist homogenization and war policy. Its ideological strongholds at the end of the second decade of the 21st century are based on three important sources: the attitude towards the wars of the 1990s, ethnonationalism, and historical revisionism.

Starting from the end of the 1980s, ethnonationalism became the dominant ideology of post-Yugoslav societies. As a collective phenomenon, it served as the most effective means of political mobilization and the strong-

¹ <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-specter-haunting-europe-the-unraveling-of-the-post-1989-order/>

est catalyst for the destruction of socialist socio-economic relations. An ethnocentric worldview has become the only possible one in relation to the challenges of the time, and has taken the form of complete totalitarianism.² Its “natural” meaning was promoted in all spheres of society, became completely institutionalized, and expressed itself as an unchanging historical continuity of national identity. With the help of ethnonationalism, new (old) values were standardized which clearly identified the “century-old external enemy” and the “internal traitor.” Political changes in the Western Balkans did not imply a discontinuity towards the foundations of wartime ethnonationalism but instead its normalization as a decisive element of national identity.³ For most countries in the Western Balkans, nationalism has proven to be a successful means of marginalizing unwanted social and political alternatives (especially the left ones), thus enabling the survival of an authoritarian political culture and repression.⁴ The war in Yugoslavia became engraved as an important element of the new post-socialist national identity, and the politics of its recollection served as the political instrumentalization of the ruling elites. More than two decades after the end of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, there is no political will for

post-war societies to face the consequences of their war policies. Self-victimization and historical moralization prevailed over empathy, compassion, and solidarity. The brutal violence of the interethnic conflict is not delegitimized; rather, it is seen as a necessary and legitimate means of ending historical “misconceptions” and realizing national programs. Similar to the example of the Yugoslav experience from the Second World War, the violence from the wars of the 1990s set boundaries in affirming the ideas of ethnic equality and coexistence in a multinational environment.⁵ Most members of the far-right in the Western Balkans glorify war crimes, popularize the names of perpetrators as national heroes and close off any prospect of a possible reconciliation. In such a process of historical selectivity and ethnocentrism, historical revisionism has played a crucial role since the mid-1980s. Historiography has served as a “focal point of nationalism” and an important participant in the new political legitimacy.⁶ Historical interpretations imitated nationalist euphoria by re-evaluating historical events and actors. The values of anti-fascism, Yugoslav socialism, and a common cultural space were rejected as undesirable and foreign to new versions of the nationalization of the past.⁷

² Dušan Kecmanović, *Etnonacionalizam*, Beograd 2014, 174-176.

³ <https://pescanik.net/dobri-nacionalizam/>

⁴ Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, Palgrave Macmillan 2018, 122-124.

⁵ Max Bergholz, *Nasilje kao generativna sila: identitet, nacionalizam i sjećanje u jednoj balkanskoj zajednici*, Sarajevo 2018, 271-299.

⁶ D. Kecmanović, *ibid.*, 161-163.

⁷ Srđan Milošević, “Istorijski revizionizam i društveni kontekst.” In: *Politička upotreba prošlosti: o istorijskom revizionizmu na*

This short analysis introduces a few selected organizations that are most representative of the far-right in Serbia during the last two decades. In the terminological sense of defining the modern European right, the term “far-right” is accepted and can be divided into “extreme” and “radical” while still respecting their specific differences. The extreme right relies directly on the influences of classical fascism — thus rejecting the essence of the liberal-democratic order, and Enlightenment traditions — and uses violence as the main means of applying its ideas in practice.⁸ Alternatively, the radical right accepts the democratic system but resists the values of liberal democracy and instead advocates xenophobic and authoritarian nationalism.⁹ This paper tries to emphasize the examples of both poles of the far-right although the stress is more on the activity of extreme right-wing organizations.

postjugoslovenskom prostoru (eds. Momir Samardžić, Milivoj Bešlin, Srđan Milošević), Novi Sad 2013, 11- 25.

⁸ Jovo Bakić, *Evropska krajnja desnica 1945-2018*, Beograd 2019, 35-36; Cas Mudde, *The far-right today*, Cambridge Polity Press 2019, 20-26.

⁹ Bakić, *ibid.*, 35-36.

¹⁰ I have decided not to include in the list the extreme Islamist movements that propagate radical adherence to Islam and which often resort to the popularization of terrorism (The Wahhabi Movement). The functioning of these movements in the region requires a different approach and therefore I mention them here, but do not offer a detailed analysis.

¹¹ The National Serbian Front (Nacionalni srpski front); the National Front (Nacionalni front); the Serbian League – the new Serbian right (Srpska liga – nova srpska desnica); the Serbian National Front Movement (Pokret Srpski nacionalni front), the Honor of the Homeland (Čast otadžbine); the Citizens’ Association Delije North (Udruženje građana

Exemplary case Study - Serbian far-right and extreme right scene

When compared to most of the countries of the Western Balkans, the largest increase in organizations and parties of the far-right was documented in Serbia after the first two decades of democratic changes starting in 2000¹⁰. The research of the Anti-Fascist Coalition (Where Extremism Lives) mapped 23 extremist organizations that are currently operating in Serbia.¹¹ There are multiple reasons for their rise. The complex process of democratic transition in Serbia since the fall of Milosevic regime in 2000 has caused periods of severe political crises which have significantly affected the support for extremist and radical options. The expectations of a significant part of Serbian society that the October 5th democratic changes would mostly be focused on economic

Delije sever); the Serbian National Movement 1389 (Srpski nacionalni pokret 1389); the Serbian Right (Srpska desnica); the Serbian Pride (Srpska ponos); The Serbian Convocation Zavetnici (Srpski sabor Zavetnici); the Serbian People’s Movement Zbor (Srpski narodni pokret Zbor); the Patriotic Movement Obraz (Otačastveni pokret obraz); Rise Up for Kosovo (Ustani za Kosovo); the Serbian Action (Srpska akcija); Youth Club Serbian Honor (Omladinski klub Srpska čast); the Starostavnik Reading Room (Čitaonica Starostavnik); the Serbian Volunteer Corpus 1941–1945 (Srpski dobrovoljački korpus 1941–1945); the Serbian People’s Movement Ours (Srpski narodni pokret Naši); the Center for the cultural Renewal Arheofutura (Centar za kulturnu obnovu Arheofutura); the Student Action (Studentska akcija); Solidarity for Kosovo (Solidarnost za Kosovo); Blood and Honor Serbia (Krv i čast Srbija); the National Avant-garde (Nacionalna avangarda); <https://uploads.knightlab.com/story-mapjs/052a67a1f32f0485ca11202764d2ae60/gde-spavaju-ekstremisti/index.html>

issues and improving living standards for Serbians were not the same as the realities of fulfilling the conditions of European integration, which aimed to build independent institutions, respect minority rights, and deal with Milošević's war legacy. Until 2008, the key political option for extreme nationalism in Serbia was represented through the work of the Serbian Radical Party, whose xenophobic, chauvinistic, and discriminatory views represented an "umbrella organization" for all future members of extreme nationalist groups.¹²

Neo-Nazi organizations were among the first extreme right-wing organizations to emerge in Serbia in the mid-1990s with the establishment of the Serbian branch (division) of the international neo-Nazi network Blood & Honor.¹³ The Serbian neo-Nazi organization **the National Alignment** (*Nacionalni Stroj*) was founded in 2005 due to the intention of a group of Serbian neo-Nazis to dedicate themselves more explicitly to political engagement. The program of the National Alignment combined extreme nationalist and a racist ideology, presenting its work as an "alliance of racially conscious nationalists" that sought to preserve Serbian national values and unite all Serbian countries.¹⁴

The far-right attack on the participants of an

anti-fascist march in Novi Sad in October 2007, where a large number of people were injured, led to state response and the arrest of participants in the incident, including the National Alignments's leader, Goran Davidović Führer. The proceedings before the District Court lasted for a full 11 years and ended in an acquittal in May 2019. In the meantime, in June 2011, the Constitutional Court banned the organization because of its activities that provoke religious and national hatred, and intolerance. However, many former members of the National Alignment founded new organizations which continued to propagate neo-Nazi ideas and to organize attacks on dissidents (for example, **the National Serbian Front** – *Nacionalni srpski front* – and **the Serbian Action** – *Srbska akcija*).¹⁵ Following his acquittal, Goran Davidović reappeared in the Serbian public sphere and became an unchallenged guest on television programs with a national reach (TV Happy in February 2020) and provided (and continues to provide) support to all extreme nationalist groups and parties through his social networks.¹⁶ The tactics of Serbian neo-Nazis replicated the example of similar organizations in the West in an attempt to legitimize

¹² Since emerging on the political scene in Serbia at the beginning of the 1990s, the Serbian Radical Party advocated for an expansionist attitude, as well as an attitude of extreme nationalism by actively participating in Serbia's war policy. In 2016, the party leader, Vojislav Šešelj, was convicted at the International Court of Justice in The Hague to 10 years imprisonment for crimes against humanity.

¹³ Petar Atanacković, *Igra žmurke. Strategija, propaganda i ikonografija neonacističkog pokreta*.

¹⁴ *Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji*, Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, Beograd 2020, 25.

¹⁵ https://twitter.com/nsf_srbija

¹⁶ https://twitter.com/GoranDvd?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

their activity and inject it into mainstream political currents. This meant renouncing the open representation of neo-Nazi ideas and the use of veiled iconography and the national symbols of Serbia.¹⁷ The program principles and the appearance of neo-Nazis adapted to the accepted nationalist discourse, which always enables much wider action in public engagement and connections with other extreme right-wing organizations.

The Patriotic Movement Obraz (*Otačastveni pokret Obraz*) was founded in 2001 and originated from various right-wing gatherings around the magazine of the same name in the 1990s as well as university church organizations (St. Justin). The founder of the movement was Nebojša Krstić (1994-2001), a sociologist and theologian, editor of many Orthodox publications, and an associate of the missionary school at the Church of St. Alexander Nevsky in Belgrade. The main ideological guidelines of the movement were formed with the influence of the work of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović and Dimitrije Ljotić, the Serbian collaborator with the Nazi-regime from the Second World War. The movement advocates “spiritual and state-building renewal of Serbia on the foundations of Svetosavlje.”¹⁸ The organization strongly opposes representative democracy, secularism, liberalism, and communism. For more than a

decade, Obraz has participated in numerous violent activities throughout Serbia which included threats, hate speech, and the discriminatory treatment of minorities. At the initiative of the Republic Public Prosecutor, on June 21, 2012, the Constitutional Court of Serbia banned the movement due to its activities, which aimed at “violently destroying the constitutional order, violating human and minority rights and inciting racial, national and religious hatred and intolerance.”¹⁹ However, two months after that decision, a new association with a similar name, **the Serbian Face** (*Srbski Obraz*), was founded and which continued with public activism and promoting the principles of the previously banned movement. After the death of Nebojša Krstić in 2003, the new leader of Obraz became Mladen Obradović, a history student, who was acquitted in October 2016 of charges before the Court of Appeals in Belgrade for participating in violent protests against the Pride Parade in 2010. Obradović also appeared as the legal representative of the association **the People’s Initiatives, Let’s Stand Up for Kosovo** (*Narodne inicijative ustanimo za Kosovo*), which advocates the “defense of the Constitution of Serbia, the state-building law of the Serbian people and the Covenant of Saint Lazar.”²⁰ During 2020, Obradović actively participated in prayers and litur-

¹⁷ Atanacković, *ibid*.

¹⁸ <https://www.obraz.rs/srbski-obraz/>

¹⁹ <http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/VII-U-249-2009-Zabrana->

[rada-udru%C5%BEenja-Ota%C4%8Dastveni-pokret-obraz.pdf](http://www.obraz.rs/rada-udru%C5%BEenja-Ota%C4%8Dastveni-pokret-obraz.pdf)

²⁰ *Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji*, 29.

gies in Montenegro against the “Law on Freedom of Religion” as well as in demonstrations in Belgrade against measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the *Obraz* movement never grew into an official political organization, this did not prevent Obradović from participating in the 2014 parliamentary elections on the list of the Serbian Radical Party.

The extreme right-wing organization the **Serbian National Movement 1389** (*Srpski nacionalni pokret 1389*) (SNM 1389) was founded in 2004 in Belgrade. They claim that they are an “Orthodox state-building people’s humanitarian association” that advocates for the preservation and affirmation of traditional values.²¹ In the foreground, they emphasize their support for the Serbian Orthodox Church, which gives them a blessing every year when organizing pilgrimages (the Vidovdan pilgrimage and the Crusade for the Republic of Srpska). They openly deny any possibility of political action without the support of the Church and they see the realization of their basic principles (patriotism, family values, Orthodoxy) through peaceful social engagement. However, due to their extreme nationalist affiliations, members of this organization stood out in many violent actions, such as the attack on the Queer Festival and the Pride Parade in Belgrade, and they participated in protests against the arrest of

Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić.²² The movement changed its name several times (1389, Movement 1389) and attempted a short-term unification with another extreme organization called *Ours (Naši)* from Aranđelovac. Among the program principles of the Movement, the “liberation and unification of all Serbian countries,” the fight for social justice, and for global integration with the BRIC countries particularly stand out.²³ They oppose abortion and the rights of the LGBT population.²⁴ The failure of the unification with the SPN *Naši* in 2011 contributed to a large number of members of the 1389 Movement switching to an ideologically similar organization in Aranđelovac. **The Serbian People’s Movement Ours** (*Srpski narodni pokret Naši*) was founded in 2006 as an offshoot of the extreme right-wing organization of the same name in Russia and unlike the 1389 Movement, it clearly defines its political program. The leader of the movement, Ivan Ivanović, a religious teacher from Aranđelovac, was a member of the *Obraz* movement until the death of Nebojša Krstić, and in 2014 he participated in parliamentary elections on the list of the Serbian Radical Party, together with the leader of *Obraz*, Mladen Obradović. The 16 point program of the *Naši* movement is extremely negatively anti-Western, promotes a discriminatory attitude towards minorities,

²¹ <https://www.1389.org.rs/onama.html>

²² *Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji*, 32.

²³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20111028150557/http://snp1389.r>

s/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=264&Itemid=85

²⁴ <https://www.1389.org.rs/onama.html>

and advocates for the unification of “Serbian countries”, as well as clearly supporting a pro-Russian, authoritarian undemocratic order.²⁵ The movement manifested its intolerance towards dissidents by publishing a list of undesirable non-governmental organizations, public figures, and media.²⁶ Both organizations, Naši and 1389, are connected with many church and nationalist organizations in the Russian Federation, with which they maintain contact, and organize camps and numerous other joint activities.²⁷ The Constitutional Court of Serbia rejected the call for banning of these organizations.

The political parties **the Serbian Right** (*Srpska desnica*) and the **Serbian Party Zavetnici** (*Srpska stranka Zavetnici*) are a more recent development and were founded by former members of other extreme right-wing organizations. The Serbian Right was founded in July 2018 by Miša Vacić, the former spokesman (2006-2014) for the SNM 1389. Miša Vacić was sentenced to a suspended sentence in 2013 for inciting hatred towards LGBT people on the eve of the Pride Parade in 2009, for the illegal carrying of weapons, and for preventing the police from performing their duties. Contacts

with numerous personalities from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party enabled Vacić to work in state bodies, such as the Office for Kosovo and Metohija in 2017, where he was one of the associates.²⁸ The program of the Srpska Right party is conceived with a clear anti-Western sentiment, setting “Eurasian integrations” as “core direction of foreign policy.”²⁹ The general essence of the party’s program principles fits into the basic tendencies of the far-right in Europe - identity, nativism, anti-immigrant policy, anti-globalism, anti-feminism, etc. Under the auspices of the basic principles of Serbian ethnonationalism (tradition, patriotism, conciliarity), the party defines “European values” as “anti-civilization values” whose acceptance would bring Serbia into the “darkness of the new barbarism.”³⁰ The anti-Western program agenda, although much more subtle, is also characteristic of the Serbian Party Zavetnici, which was constituted as a political party in August 2019 after seven years of activism through the ultra-right movement of the same name. The content of the political program of Zavetnici is more adapted to the ideas of the sovereignist parties of the radical right in Europe, whose political activity (in the opinion of the

²⁵ <https://nasisrbija.org/program-3/>
²⁶

<https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/78853/Pokret-Nasi-objavio-spisak-srbomrzaca.html>

²⁷ Ana Dević, “The Eurasian Wings of Serbia: Serbian Affinities of the Russian Radical Right.” In: *Extremism and violent extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge* (ed. Valery Perry), Ibidem Press 2019.

²⁸ <https://www.danas.rs/politika/djuric-vacic-radi-u-kancelariji-za-kim-ali-mi-nije-savetnik/>

²⁹ <https://www.srpskadesnica.rs/cir/program-stranke/>

³⁰ As “anti-civilization” values, the party stresses breaking up the family thought the “feminist imperative of women,” the destruction of traditional identity of the sexes by defending LGBT right, the break-up of the national biological fiber thorough gender ideology, respecting minority right that destroy the biological national fiber, complete secularization of society, the ideology of abortion and so on. Ibid.

program's authors) recognizes "that the process of global unification and suffocation of sovereign states is dangerous and destructive for the entire European civilization."³¹ Party members have made many contacts with representatives of United Russia, the Italian Northern League and the Slovenian National Party. Both of these political organizations, the Serbian Right and the Serbian Party Zavetnici, remained far on the political margins, achieving negligible results in the 2020 elections.³² However, the leaders of these parties, Miša Vacić and Milica Đurđević, are both receiving a lot of attention from the pro-government media in Serbia, where they have the opportunity to popularize their views with a wider audience. In addition, both parties actively express intolerance towards NGOs and other civil society actors in the public sphere.³³

³¹ <http://zavetnici.rs/program-stranke/>

³² In the Parliamentary election in Serbia in 2020, the Serbian Party Zavetnici won 1,43% of the votes (45.950); at the municipal election in Novi Beograd (New Belgrade), the list the Serbian Right – We Know Each Other, We Grew up Together, Miša Vacić (Srpska desnica – Znamo se, rasli smo zajedno, Miša Vacić) won 0,74% of the votes (574) and it won at all municipal elections in Serbia a total of 23.540 votes.

³³ Only during October 2020, the Serbian Right participated in a series of actions against NGOs and artists; on October 9th, Miša Vacić forcibly broke into the exhibition "Gate - and when it hurts, the truth is the cure" at the Center for Cultural Decontamination where he disputed the war crimes in Tuzla; on October 15th, the Serbian Right filed a criminal complaint against director Zlatko Paković "for desecrating the flag of Serbia" in the play "Srebrenica. When We Killed Get Up;" on a guest appearance on the Happy TV show, Miša Vacić claimed that the

Hatred towards migrants is a new phenomenon in the activities of extremist groups in Serbia. **The Leviathan Movement** (*Pokret Leviatan*) was founded in 2015 in Belgrade as an organization that deals exclusively with "animal protection", which is why they have gained great popularity in the entire region (for example, the movement's Facebook page has 200,000 followers). However, behind the "humanitarian" work of this movement and the focus on the care of animals, more and more extreme nationalist and racist attitudes have been revealed, as well as numerous actions directed against migrants, Roma and Albanians.³⁴ Members of the movement are former members of neo-Nazi groups, and the leader of the Leviathan, Pavle Bihalji, clearly supports European neo-Nazis on social networks, along with veiled Nazi iconography.³⁵ During 2020, several cases of violence by the Movement were recorded in Serbia, violence which did

comic exhibition "New Age" is "anti-Serbian" and the festival is "monstrous art;" the Serbian Right and Zavetnici took part in protests against the festival "Mirdita, Good Day" marking it as anti-Serbian activity in Belgrade.

³⁴ In May 2020, members of this movement organized a protest in front of the migrant camp in Obrenovac following the arrest of Filip Radovanović, an activist of the movement who violently broke into the camp and was sentenced to 8 months in prison. <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a599169/Skup-desnic-ara-ispred-migrantskog-kampa-u-Obrenovcu.html>

³⁵ On the Twitter account of Pavle Bihalji, Maxim Tessak, a Russian neo-cynic, who was killed in prison in September 2020, was honored, by saying that it is necessary to support his character and work. Bihalji often conveys the views of the former leader of the National Alignment, Goran Davidović, and other extreme right-wingers. <https://twitter.com/pavlebihali>

not only stop at migrants, but which was also directed at individual Serbian citizens.³⁶ In the parliamentary elections, of June 2020, the Leviathan Movement came out with a list together with the anti-vaccination organization **Living for Serbia** (*Živim za Srbiju*), which is led by Dr. Jovana Stojković; they won only 22,691 votes (0.72%).

The openly anti-migrant organization of **the People's Patrols** (*Narodne patrolne*) was formed in February 2020 by members of the organization **No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija** (*Nema predaje Kosova i Metohije*) whose leader, Damnjan Knežević, was the founder and former vice president of the Serbian Party Zavetnici. The activities of the self-proclaimed patrols, which include intercepting and intimidating migrants in Belgrade, were joined by some activists of extremist organizations such as **the Serbian Action** (*Srbska akcija*) and **Carostavnik** (*Carostavnik*).³⁷ Members of the People's Patrols use numerous manipulative anti-immigrant and xenophobic messages on social networks and invite citizens to take actions to "patrol" and "clean" places where migrants gather.³⁸

General Characteristics and Differences

Most right-wing political parties and organizations in the Western Balkans emphasize authoritarian nationalism as a key ideological concept in their program and performance. From the point of view of a single ethnic community, they present themselves as "protectors" of the values of that community and who are publicly engaged and guided by "humanitarian" and "patriotic" feelings. The main focus of their ethnocentric perspective is the tendency to defend identity as one of the main motives for action on which the question of tradition, history, and culture rests. The biggest threat to identity is interpreted as the challenge of the modern age (globalization) and the "correct" interpretation of the past (revisionism), which speaks in favor of such continuity. Contemporary economic and social trends (neoliberalism, multiculturalism) are viewed as foreign to the "ethnic being" whose vulnerability requires mobility and homogenization of the entire ethnic group. The ethnocentric content of the far-right program evokes the need for a clear demarcation between ethnic groups, creating an image of the other as an "enemy" which is based on historical experience and the heritage of war. A significant

³⁶ <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/drzava-ignorise-nastanak-srpske-zlatne-zore/>

³⁷ The Carostavnik Club presents itself as a "monarchist club of lovers of true values" which is dedicated to "monarchist counter-revolutionary socio-

political, spiritual, cultural and educational excesses (activism) in order to establish the Third Serbian Kingdom." <http://carostavnik.blogspot.com/p/blog-page.html> <https://www.facebook.com/narodnapatrola/>

³⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/narodnapatrola/>

number of political parties and organizations in the Western Balkans emphasize territorial demands among their program principles, justifying expansionism with the need to complete the ethnic space and rectify “historical injustices.”

The use of the past is a major factor in the program principles of the far-right, which adheres to the basic aspirations of ethnonationalist discourse in order to place the past in an appropriate present perspective. The countries of the Western Balkans are connected by a rich common historical heritage, which is observed by the far-right exclusively through ethnocentric selectivity. Public appearances by far-right representatives abound in historical interpretations that mimic only those examples that speak in favor of the continuity of ethnic conflicts, the justification of war violence, and the inevitability of ethnic distance. Anti-Yugoslavism and anti-communism are common features of all parties and organizations of the far-right in the Western Balkans. Yugoslavia is interpreted as a historical “mistake” and “misconception,” a wrong political project which is to be blamed for denying national identity and denying greater ethnic space. In the same vein, the period of Yugoslav communism is perceived as a period of national decline and suffering. The promotion of neo-fascist and extremely nationalist examples from the past (Ustashas, Chetniks, Ballists, Quislings) serves as a counterweight to the complex historical experience of the 20th century.

The reform character of the far-right program presents itself as an “alternative” to the currently “unjust” system. What is promoted as an alternative is the idea of a regime with strong executive power and with a strong man on top of the regime able to offer rather quick solutions to major problems and to stick to the “nationalist” narrative. The populist feature of these programs is reflected in the intention to establish a clear distinction between the neglect of the needs of ordinary citizens and the privileges of the political establishment. Depending on the political, economic, and social circumstances, the scope of radical right-wing populism is different in the countries of the region. In Serbia, political parties and far-right organizations sharply demarcate the changes of “October 5,” as a negative example of the pro-Western “velvet revolution”, which promoted a new political and intellectual establishment alienated from national interests and which is completely corrupt. Opposing such an establishment would mean renouncing Western European integration and moving closer to “Eurasian” integration which is closer to protecting Serbia’s “national interests” (on the issue of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro). Unlike Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Russian sentiment is clearly expressed, the far-right in Croatia and Slovenia mimics the examples of “Euroscepti-

cism” that are closer to the ideas of sovereignists in Western Europe.³⁹ Their revolt against Brussels does not mean the renunciation of membership in the European Union and NATO, but is instead an attempt to influence “reformist” tendencies that strive for greater economic and political “sovereignty.” Resisting the “migrant crisis” is a major driving force behind such ideas.

In organizational terms, the far-right shows no signs of the capability to sustain a long period of activism and presence. A large number of political movements are organized on the principle of respecting hierarchy but with a non-permanent membership and program. The re-organization of political parties is a constant process on the political scene, a process which has significantly influenced the far-right to remain on the political margin after all election processes are completed. On the one hand, political parties often change their names, try to integrate with other parties, or lose their “identity” as they become part of a larger coalition. On the other hand, numerous social movements and associations, with their “apolitical” content and involvement in everyday activism of a “humane” character, successfully promote their views by not wanting to engage

politically but instead by influencing the general political direction of society. Although they too are polarized, involved in criminal groups, and experience organizational restructuring and even extinction, insisting on the idea of a nationwide “movement” or youth associations rather than on political organizations makes them attractive to a large number of different categories of the population.⁴⁰

Changing tactics and downplaying extremist forms of action is becoming a new feature of far-right action, although the use of violence remains an acceptable means of social activism. Anti-migrant movements in the region call for “taking justice into their own hands” by recruiting the population for actions against migrants in the name of “defending the European civilization”, actions which are known to take the form of organized “paramilitary organizations” (such as the Styrian Guard). For a moment, migrants became the main target of organized violence, replacing the heretofore targeted groups of the extreme right, such as minorities and the LGBT population. The use of social networks and internet portals has become crucial in promoting violent actions by these organizations. It is estimated that there are over 60 internet portals in the region that

³⁹ In Serbia, the sentiment towards Russia is the main component of virtually all political program of the far-right. However, the ideas of the Western-European right are gaining in significance which are embedded in Islamophobia, ethnocracy, and anti-globalism.

⁴⁰ The Leviathan Movement as an “animal protection association” in Serbia is the most representative example. In Croatia, the organization “In the Name of the Family” used all democratic opportunities to promote discrimination against the LGBT population under the guise of respecting the will of citizens and “family values.”

support and promote ultra-right views.⁴¹ This strategy is not accidental because the younger population is one of the main target groups of the far-right because their value attitudes over the years have been presented in public opinion polls as quite conservative.⁴² Communication via video clips and direct online messages has achieved a much greater effect in mobilizing sympathizers than previous attempts.⁴³ The refugee crisis of 2015 and COVID-19 epidemic in 2020 were used as an occasion to promote conspiracy theories and false information through various far-right portals.⁴⁴

Conclusion – perspectives of the far-right in the Western Balkans

The far-right in most Western Balkan countries is not a relevant political factor, but the boundary separating its political agenda from mainstream political parties is becoming thinner. The socio-economic crisis of 2008, supported by the existence of unresolved political crises

(Serbian-Albanian relations, relations between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska, and problems of mutual borders) contributed to the radicalization of the ruling parties' political agenda and to its clear authoritarianism. The idea of the existence of "good nationalism" as a precondition for a stable representative democracy, deprived of internal diversity, influenced the relevance and pervasiveness of the ideas of the far-right.⁴⁵ Alternatively, the change in tactics of right-wing extremists, who seek to present themselves as protectors of national values and humanitarian workers, has become an acceptable image for them in mass media and a usable façade for ruling regimes in their efforts at curbing civil society and critical intellectuals.⁴⁶ The post-communist political establishment created favorable conditions in which the radicalization of political culture was carried out in parallel to the popularization of the ethno-nationalist narrative.⁴⁷ The instability of democratic institutions, which is characteristic

⁴¹ <https://detektor.ba/2017/05/05/balkanske-ultra-desnicarske-grupe-preplavile-internet/>

⁴² A large international research project on the attitudes of young people in the region, conducted in 10 countries during 2018 and 2019 (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, and Romania), as part of a study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, showed that the vast majority of young respondents cultivate a tendency towards authoritarianism, ethnonationalism, and social distance towards minority groups. <https://www.fes.de/en/youth-studies/>

⁴³ Videos of Serbian extremist groups are often posted on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook which

showcase the results of migrant violence in cities and the successful "actions" of these groups to curb their spread.

⁴⁴ The anti-immigrant organization "the People's Patrol" spread the false news on social networks that by signing the Marrakesh Agreement Serbia committed itself to settle 700.000 migrants by 2025. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/migranti-lazne-vesti/30470601.html>

⁴⁵ Olivera Milosavljević, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ <https://www.danas.rs/politika/milan-st-protic-situacija-u-srbiji-asocira-na-rane-devedesete/>

⁴⁷ Isidora Stakić, „Serbian Nationalism and Right-Wing Extremism.“ In: *Volent Extremism in The Western Balkans* (eds. Filip Ejodus and Predrag Jurković).

of all Western Balkan countries, and those institutions inability to resist right-wing extremism significantly contributes to the popularization of far-right ideas.⁴⁸

The strategy of the far-right adapts itself to socio-economic changes and strives to be included in the generally accepted dominant social trends. In an attempt to legitimize their ideas as a part of an already established conservative mainstream, far-right parties and organizations have begun to change their own political profile. The desire to change their negative image in the public sphere has influenced the representatives of the far-right to accept the democratic “rules of the game” by using rhetoric that is not extremely exclusive and radical, but which is instead aimed at creating a picture of true democratic representatives of the “will of the people” versus the alienated “establishment.” Such populist features of their political agenda have successfully detected key problems of a society in a transi-

tional phase, using them as an important argument in approaching the interests of ordinary citizens. This has contributed to the new political façade which contains elements that are not necessarily ideologically inherent to the far-right, but which are practically usable for their wider appeal.⁴⁹ Moreover, connections with conservative intellectual circles, and religious and cultural institutions contribute to the affirmation of extreme political attitudes which correspond to their aspirations for complete cultural hegemony. Church organizations that are perceived as an important center of national identity often provide tacit support for the activities of right-wing organizations, finding in their activism many common themes of importance (abortion, secularism, and same-sex marriage).⁵⁰

The internationalization of right-wing extremism has expanded the strategic possibilities of far-right action beyond national political structures thus giving it an international perspective and global meaning. The traumatic experience

⁴⁸ In her 2013 analysis of Serbia, Isidora Stakić points out the problems of court practices: “court proceedings last much longer than they should according to the standards of a fair trial; second, the courts impose minimal penalties on ultra-rightists for committing crimes; third, certain crimes qualify as those for which a lesser punishment is threatened; and fourth, the Court of Appeals often returns cases for retrial which indicates, among other things, that lower courts do not pay enough attention to these cases and which usually results in significant reduction of penalties. These tendencies show that state institutions do not want to deal with extreme right-wing organizations, that is, that they do not consider right-wing extremism a

threat.” *Odnos Srbije prema ekstremno desničarskim organizacijama*, Predlog praktične politike, Beograd 2013.

⁴⁹ The economic programs of the far-right contain proposals that are more favored by left-wing political parties (state intervention, subsidies, and nationalization). As proof of their “modernity,” far-right groups elect women as leaders of their parties and movements.

⁵⁰ In Montenegro, the opposition of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the “Law on Freedom of Religion” in 2020 contributed to the forming of a large coalition of ultra-right parties and organizations which promoted their views and gained great public support under the guise of the “protection of Serbian identity and Church.”

of the Balkans served as an inspiration to many representatives of the French, German, and Russian radical extreme right to make contacts and deepen their cooperation with some countries of the former Yugoslavia.⁵¹ Topics such as Islamophobia and the preservation of national identity as opposed to globalization have found their roots and vitality in the examples of the Balkan crises. Far-right leaders in the Western Balkans present and popularize regimes such as those of Hungary, Russia, and Turkey, as ideal examples of nationally responsible and illiberal policies which are often supported by ruling mainstream parties. The rise of “Trumpism” and “Orbanism” was met with widespread support from conservative circles in the Western Balkans and was seen as a sign of the liberal downturn and the beginning of the anti-globalization struggle.⁵² With the help of the mass media, the public was given the impression that the rise of the far-right was an

unstoppable global trend and was thus also socially acceptable. Cooperation between the representatives of the far-right across Europe contributes to strengthening the persistence of the far-right in the local Southeast European context and to the applicability of their ideas in the wider European area. The South-Eastern European far-right and the wider European and global far-right have formed a “right-wing pro-fascist International” (Boris Buden) as an intrinsic part of the “signatures of the far-right” and its threat to democracy.

⁵¹ Markus Frohniauer, an MP from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, often appears at events in Serbia and Croatia. A two-way cooperation has been established with many intellectual circles as well. German ultra-rightist Götz Kubitschek held a lecture at Matica Srpska in Novi Sad in 2017 at the invitation of Miša Đurković in front of the Institute for European Studies which caused negative reactions in the public. Russian ultra-rightist Alexandr Dugin is also a welcomed guest in Serbia. The French organization Solidarity for Kosovo and its member Arno Guyon have many ties to the right-wing Identitarian Movement. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/19/mlade-patriote-uloga-srbije-u-obnovi-evropske-ekstremne-desnice/?lang=sr>
<https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=17272>

Ana Dević, “The Eurasian Wings of Serbia: Serbian Affinities of the Russian Radical Right.” In: *Extremism and violent extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge* (ed. Valery Perry), Ibidem Press 2019

⁵² Donald Trump’s defeat in the elections in November 2020 was portrayed in all pro-government and right-wing media in Serbia as “the biggest election theft in American history.” The media promoted claims and conspiracy theories with the goal of justifying the Manichean dichotomy of the American political scene, and thus Serbia’s attitude towards the modern world in general. Trump and the Republican Party symbolized the “sovereignist,” anti-globalist political option, as opposed to the Democratic Party and Joseph Biden, which symbolized “mondialism” and the US imperial policy of the 1990s. Other conservative and right-wing portals and organizations in the region also supported Trump.