



# Countering Violent Extremism Baseline Program

## Research Findings – Bosnia & Herzegovina

December 2018

### Overview

The Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations’ Countering Violent Extremism Baselines Program is a multi-country<sup>1</sup> research initiative to identify and monitor key subnational indicators of violent extremism (VE) and community resilience. Implemented in partnership with Management Systems International, the program enables the U.S. Government (USG), partner governments, and civil society to better understand and respond to changing VE dynamics.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), local research firm GfK surveyed 2,110 individuals in 41 municipalities across five cantons within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), four municipalities within the Prijedor region of Republika Srpska (RS), and the special district of Brcko from March to April 2018. Atlantic Initiative also conducted interviews and five focus group discussions in Mostar, Prijedor, Sarajevo and Zenica.

### Toplines

**Support for fighting abroad.** There appears to be little connection between religious/ethnic identity and support for travelling to Syria/Iraq to join militant groups, given that nearly the same percentage of both (Muslim) Bosniaks and (Catholic) Croats express support for people fighting for jihadist groups in those conflict

zones. Among the Serb population, however, there is significantly more support for people traveling to fight with Russian-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine (Table 1). Interestingly, 1.6 percent of Serbs also support individuals who travel to Syria/Iraq. It is notable as well that the same percentage of Bosniaks support foreign fighters in either conflict.

**Table 1: Support for joining foreign conflicts**

Attitude	Bosniak	Serb	Croat
Support Bosnians travelling to <b>Syria/Iraq</b> to participate in the conflict	2.5%	1.6%	2.4%
Support Bosnians travelling to <b>Ukraine</b> to participate in the conflict	2.5%	12.4%	3.3%

**Travel to Syria/Iraq.**<sup>2</sup> Bosnian law enforcement and intelligence services report 241 adults (179 men, 62 women) and 80 children from BiH or the Bosnian diaspora in the West travelled to Syria/Iraq between 2012 and 2016 to join Sunni jihadist groups. An additional 77 children were born to one or more Bosnian parent in Syria/Iraq since 2012. As of December 2018, 98 adult Bosnians (49 men and 49 women) remained in Syria/Iraq. Of those remaining, 70 (31 men and 39 women) are believed to be with ISIS in isolated pockets along the Euphrates River. The rest are with

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib Province of northwestern Syria. Another nine adult BiH citizens (four men, five women) and nine children are detained in camps controlled by Kurdish forces. To date, at least 88 Bosnians have been killed or died in Syria or Iraq (81 men, four women, three children). Forty-nine adults (44 men, five women) have returned to BiH, along with seven children (two born in Syria and one in a Turkish prison). Bosnian law enforcement and intelligence services say there are no recorded incidents of returnees posing a threat.

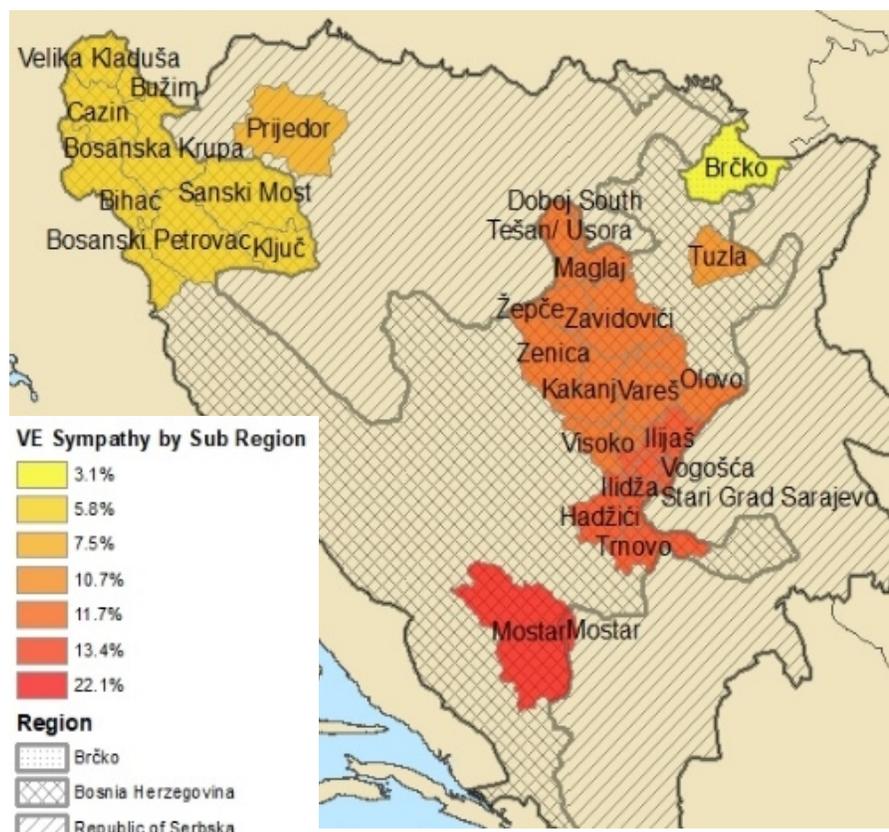
**Among Bosniaks and Serbs, sympathy for VE is driven by different dynamics.** For Bosniaks, general perceptions of marginalization were a greater driver than among Serbs, for whom ethno-nationalist VE was associated with feelings of stability, agency, and safety. Mainstream Bosniak political parties as well as the official Islamic Community have

on numerous occasions condemned and advised strongly against travel to Syria or Iraq and joining ISIL or Al-Qaeda. Political elites in the Republika Srpska and the Serbian Orthodox Church have not done the same when it comes to foreign fighters who travel to Ukraine, nor have they distanced themselves from radical ethno-nationalist groups operating in BiH or regionally. This might explain why 12.4 percent of Serbs support those who travel to Ukraine to fight as well as why ethno-nationalist VE was associated by Serbs with feelings of security. Simply, it has not been condemned on the official level. Radical views and ethno-nationalism are in some ways part of mainstream political discourse.

**Una Sana, an area of concern.** Over 16 percent of respondents in Una Sana perceive the security situation as worse than a year ago; and 40 percent report exposure to VE messaging, by far the greatest exposure in BiH. In absolute terms, however, sympathy for VE was highest among Bosniaks in Mostar (map 1).

**There is no evidence that level of education, marital status, employment status, or frequency of Internet use are associated with VE sympathy.** Support for women's empowerment is powerfully associated with resiliency to VE. Other potential resiliencies include living in an urban location and having a more active online presence. However, more research is needed to determine if these are causal relationships.<sup>3</sup>

**Witnessing or falling victim to a VE incident or act of violence more generally is a moderate to strong predictor of vulnerability to VE,** suggesting a role for the



**Map 1: Bosnia and Herzegovina VE Sympathy by Subregion**

conflict histories particularly affecting Prijedor and Mostar.

## Methodology

The research included 12 key informant interviews in November 2017 and five focus group discussions in July 2018 each with groups of between six to ten individuals, as follows: Croat football fans in Mostar; Serb men in Prijedor; Bosniak football fans in Sarajevo; Salafi women in Sarajevo; and Salafi men in Sarajevo.

The survey measured sympathy for VE sentiment, both religious and ethno-nationalist in orientation. It also explored factors considered relevant to support for violence in pursuit of social or political objectives. The central measures relating to both religious and ethno-nationalist VE outcomes include:

1. General support for violence under certain conditions (e.g., to change government policy, to punish a critic of the respondents' religion, to retaliate against another group for a violent act, and to enforce religious law on nonbelievers);
2. Support for specific violent extremist organizations (e.g., Al Qaeda, ISIS); and
3. Support for individuals who travel to participate in foreign conflicts in Syria/Iraq or eastern Ukraine.

The relationship between VE sympathy and contextual factors was mediated through a set of controls, including urban/rural locality, age, gender, marital status, online activity, and religion/ethnicity. Sampling locations were determined following a literature review, input from US Embassy-Sarajevo, and key informant interviews with BiH governmental and non-governmental officials and subject matter experts in November 2017. Note that cantons and municipalities were *not* randomly selected, and do not constitute a representative national sample. Instead, a stratified multistage sample was designed to cover a pre-defined zone of

vulnerability to VE and ethno-nationalist sentiment within BiH.

Stratified multistage sampling was constructed by taking a series of simple random samples in stages. First, explicit strata were based on administrative regions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The administrative regions included in the survey were: Una Sana Canton, Tuzla Canton, Zenica-Doboj Canton, Sarajevo Canton, Herceg-Neretva Canton, Brcko District, and Prijedor. Disproportional stratified sampling was then used, and in each of the administrative regions a uniform sampling scheme was applied to include 300 respondents.

In the next stage, each region was stratified by the level of urbanization, i.e. urban and rural strata, and within each strata sampling points were drawn with the probability proportional to estimated population size. The number of primary sampling units in each of the 14 strata (regions and urban/rural) were proportional to the size of the estimated strata population. For the unified sampling area across all seven sampling locations, the survey margin of error is approximately +/- two percent, or approximately +/- six percent within each sampling location.

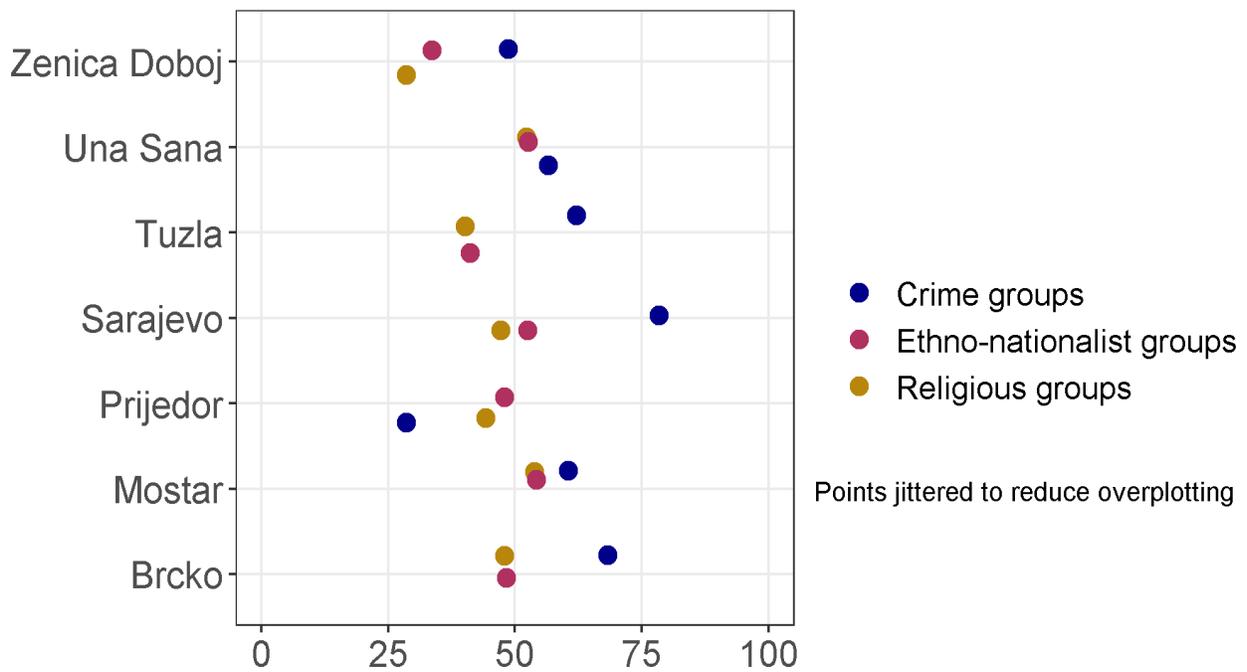
## Findings

### 1. Threat Landscape

When asked to assess the respective threats from criminal, religious, or ethno-nationalist groups, Bosnians generally rank criminality as a higher threat to their well-being than religious or ethno-nationalist groups (fig. 1). Across all sampling areas and ethnic identities, ethno-nationalist VE groups were perceived as slightly more of a threat than religious VE groups.

Notably, this pattern differed among respondents from Prijedor (in the RS), and particularly among minority Bosniaks in Prijedor, who considered religious or ethno-nationalist VE groups more of a threat than criminal groups. Mostly Serb respondents in

**Figure 1: Relative threat assessment: Percentage reporting moderate or significant threat**



Prijedor also reported the highest fear of a VE incident, relative to other sampling areas. Female respondents expressed a greater fear of a VE incident than males. Considering the lack of VE incidents in Prijedor, and the fact that the minority Bosniak community does not pose any general threat to the majority Serb population, this fear of violent extremism among Serbs could be attributed to hyped media reporting about the threat of Islamist terrorism.

Young Serbs from Prijedor see the distance between ethnicities as normal, and some admitted in focus groups that they feel incapable of having friendships with non-Serbs that are as close and unreserved as they are with their Serb friends. Still, a majority of Serb focus group respondents did say they have Bosniak and Croat friends, acquaintances, classmates, and even relatives. Their overwhelming opinion was that inter-ethnic relations in Prijedor are much better than in other parts of the RS. As a contrast, they cited poor inter-ethnic relations in East Sarajevo. Further, while the survey found a higher fear of VE incidents in Prijedor, especially among female respondents, focus group participants there made it clear that they

do not consider their Bosniak neighbors a threat.

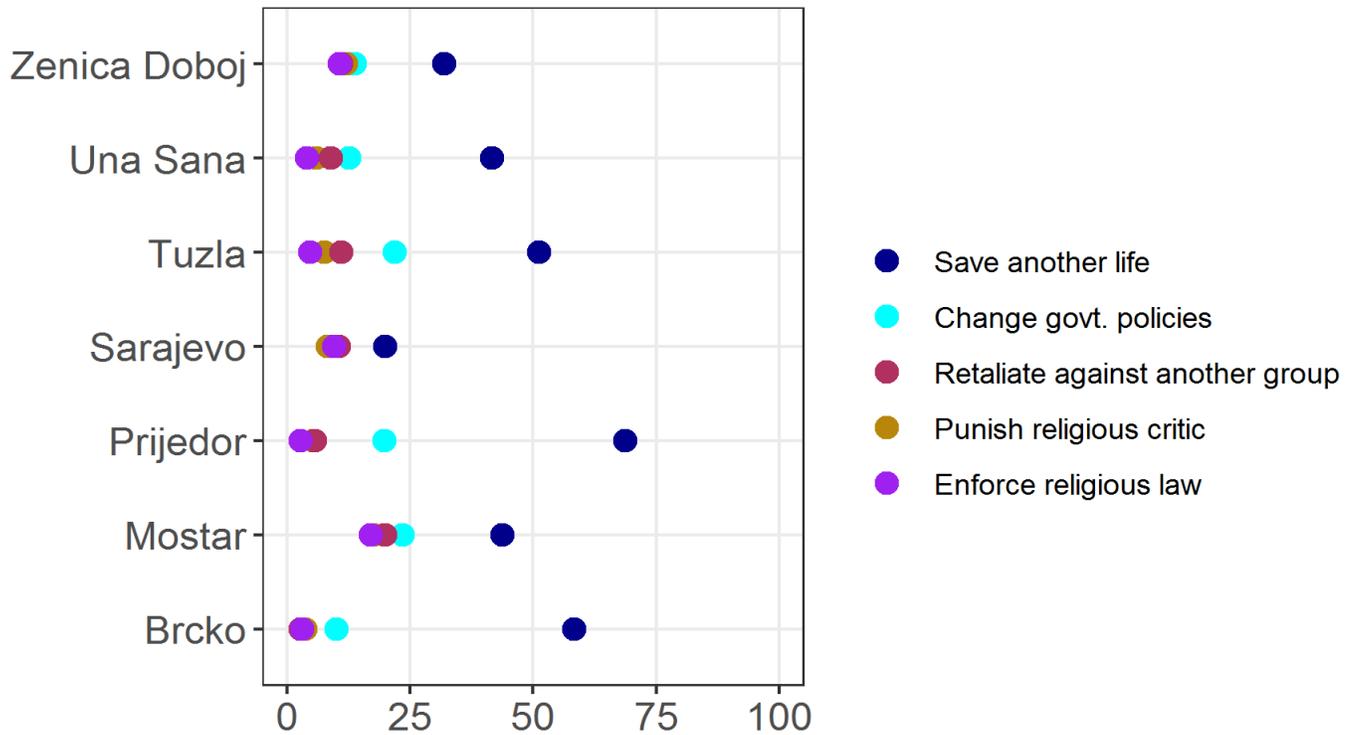
It is notable that Zenica-Dobojo has the lowest rate of concern about the threat from religious groups, given that previous research shows this Canton has among the highest rates of foreign fighter departures and known Salafi extremist strongholds. This could be linked to the fact that departures to Syria and Iraq ceased in 2016 and most of the Salafi groups in Zenica-Dobojo Canton have integrated into the Islamic Community.

## 2. Support for Violent Extremism

In response to a set of four related questions inquiring about support for violence under certain circumstances, support ranged from 7-16 percent (fig. 2). Support for violence against government targets in order to change government policy (16 percent) was twice as high as support for violence against individuals for reasons such as punishing religious critics or imposing religious law on others (7.4 and 8.7 percent).

The gap in support for violence against government targets vs. non-government targets

**Figure 2: Support for Violence: Percent Reporting Violence “Sometimes”, “Often”, or “Always” Justified**



was most pronounced in Serb-dominated Prijedor. However, Herzegovina-Neretva Canton (Mostar), driven by Bosniak sentiment, had the highest absolute levels of support for violence relative to other regions (map 1). Focus group discussions conducted with Croat football fans in Mostar offer insights into inter-ethnic relations that may be instructive on this topic. They characterized ethnic segregation as politically imposed but socially accepted, and referred to Bosniaks who live in the western, Croat part of the city as “domesticated” because they do not express national or ethnic sentiment. On the other hand, these same focus group participants stressed that they do not socialize with Bosniaks from “the other side,” meaning the eastern, Bosniak-dominated part of the city. Their descriptions of inter-ethnic dynamics were deeply rooted in “us” vs. “them” thinking, even when they did not express hostility toward the “other.”

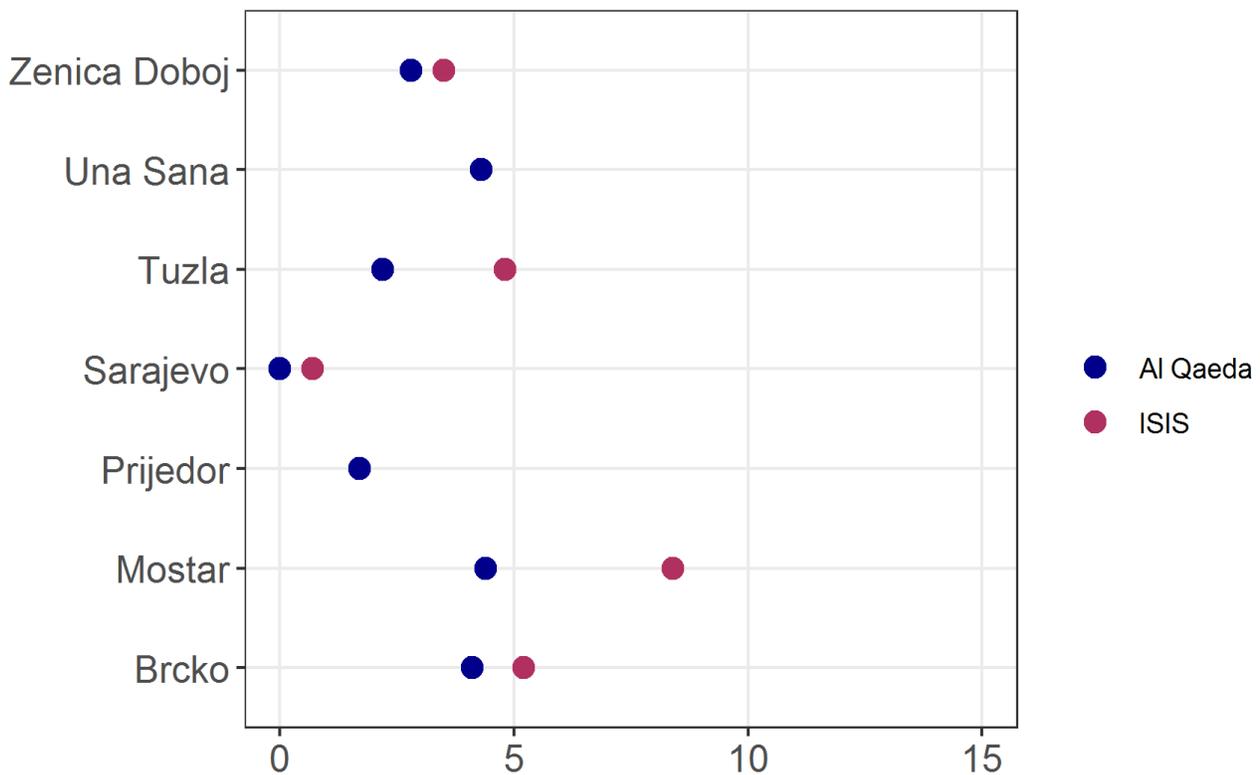
A focus group with Salafists in Zenica also revealed notable inter-ethnic dynamics. There, Salafists consider themselves a sub-group of

Bosniaks, and report experiencing discrimination on two fronts – from Serbs and Croats, but also from other Bosniaks. Younger participants especially showed no sense of patriotism to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and said they would flee the country in the case of war. Salafists in this focus group were unwilling to talk openly about the impacts of ISIS on their local Muslim community, but most expressed the belief that the radicalization of foreign fighters was caused by the parallel radicalization of Serbs and Croats.

### 3. Support for ISIS & Al Qaeda

Four percent of respondents expressed a somewhat or mostly positive opinion of ISIS. This opinion rose to five percent among Bosniaks overall, and as high as 8.4 percent overall in Mostar, driven by 16.9 percent support among Bosniaks (fig. 3).

**Figure 3: Support for Al Qaeda and ISIS: Percent Reporting Somewhat or Mostly Positive Opinion**



Fewer respondents reported positive opinions of Al Qaeda, at a rate of only 2.7 percent overall. This rose to 3.5 percent among Bosniaks but did not show the same variation across sampling areas as support for ISIS.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to explain why Mostar stands out in support for ISIS. One explanation might be the anger many people there feel toward the West for failing to intervene during and after the conflict and for letting local ethnic elites create anarchy. These grievances, and anti-Western sentiment generally, could be instrumentalized by ISIS. The extent to which this is true, requires focused research.

But Mostar also appears to be susceptible to the effects of what is referred to as “reciprocal radicalization.” In focus group discussions, Croat football fans in Mostar exhibited an extreme intolerance for Bosniaks from “the other side.” And it is clear that ethnic distance between Bosniaks and Croats in Mostar is much higher than that between Bosniaks and Serbs in Prijedor. The results of both the survey and

focus group discussions call for additional research in Mostar, specifically focused on the potential for increased reciprocal radicalization and the interplay between different types of violent extremism.

#### 4. Support for Foreign Fighting

Support for Bosnians who have travelled to Syria or Iraq as foreign fighters is low, at 2.3 percent, and is not higher among Bosniaks across regions. However, in Mostar, support for foreign fighters is as high as 5.6 percent, driven primarily by Bosniak sentiment.

Eight percent of respondents have a somewhat or very positive opinion of Russian separatist activities in Eastern Ukraine. In this case, support is dominated by respondents in Prijedor, where 36 percent have a positive opinion of these forces, almost all of whom are Serb. Similarly, five percent of all respondents expressed support for Bosnians who travel to Eastern Ukraine to fight in the conflict, and support was again concentrated in Prijedor,

where 17 percent of respondents supported fighters departing to Ukraine.

When asked how they might respond to a friend or relative who may be preparing to leave BiH to fight in either Syria/Iraq or Eastern Ukraine, the majority of respondents would attempt to dissuade them, or report them to the authorities. Yet, in the former conflict zones of Mostar and Prijedor, the highest proportion of respondents said they would not interfere; whereas respondents in Sarajevo were much more likely (at a rate of 40 percent) to report someone to the authorities, relative to other regions.

## 5. Relationships between VE sympathy, contextual factors, and demographic controls

While religious devotion or the acceptance of other religious groups typically serve as resiliencies to VE, the view that one's religion is under threat is a vulnerability. Respondents who report a sense of meaning and agency are also more resilient to VE, while those who perceive a lack of general safety in their community are more vulnerable.

Demographically, males and those with *better* living conditions appear to be more vulnerable to VE. This latter finding, though seemingly counterintuitive, builds on a strong existing body of literature that shows no empirical link between poverty and VE sympathy, and in fact shows in many cases that those most sympathetic to VE are economically comfortable.

The survey finds no evidence that level of education, marital status, employment status, or frequency of Internet use are associated with VE sympathy.

## 6. Exposure to VE Messaging

Just over twelve percent of respondents took note of messaging from ISIS in the previous year. Exposure was 18 percent in Sarajevo and 40 percent in Una Sana Canton (Bihac). This

pattern was similar for messaging from Al Qaeda, but with slightly less exposure.

The primary source of extremist messaging is television (59 percent), though this appeared to be mostly in the form of news reporting and not propaganda crafted by extremist groups, followed by the Internet (39 percent) and social media (six percent). However, this source varies by location. While Sarajevo respondents primarily reported that television was the source of exposure (81 percent), respondents in Mostar and Zenica-Doboj primarily reported exposure through the Internet (75 and 57 percent). Brcko and Zenica-Doboj also reported higher rates of exposure through social media than other regions.

Exposure to a *consistent* rate of VE messaging – meaning monthly or more frequently – is low, at 6.4 percent, but increases to eight percent among youth and young adults ages 18 to 34. Exposure is also higher among males (7.2 vs. 5.7 percent), and higher in Mostar and Prijedor (9.8 percent).

## 7. Availability of Services to Address Violent Extremism

Just 37 percent of respondents positively evaluated government efforts to deter VE, and a similar rate of 34 percent positively evaluated the availability of social services to prevent and rehabilitate VE actors. This positive sentiment is strongest in Prijedor and Mostar, in both cases.

Prevention initiatives are still being developed and are not universal in the regions sampled, and so evaluations of government efforts in this area should be understood in this context. It is notable that, despite the low rates of satisfaction many respondents reported with other government services, such as education, they report relatively high rates of satisfaction and trust in law enforcement. As long as law enforcement enjoys this positive assessment, the fact that police play a role in preventing VE may increase trust among citizens in these efforts. Still, it is important to ensure that even

individuals who are dissatisfied or distrustful in government can access services as well.

## Conclusion

Though the results of this survey are not nationally representative, the findings offer a view into at-risk communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and help clarify factors of resilience and vulnerability to VE. It is notable that, despite the at-risk designation of sampling locations, respondents expressed overall that criminal groups represented more of a threat than extremist religious or ethno-nationalist groups. Across all sampled regions, support for violence against unarmed civilians in various scenarios is low but is highest in the context of violence intended to change government policies. This likely reflects the deep dissatisfaction many Bosnians feel with government and politics, and an increasing sense among some citizens that democratic mechanisms have been ineffective.

Generally, support for ISIS and Al Qaeda is very low, and in some places, is negligible. This support is slightly higher for ISIS, which may be due to the fact that people report slightly higher exposure to ISIS messaging. Mostar is the statistical outlier in this case, with relatively high support for ISIS driven by that of Bosniaks (at a rate of 16.9 percent). This may be linked to specific inter-ethnic dynamics in Mostar, where the “us” vs. “them” divide has become a feature so embedded in the identity of the city that it may be feeding a cycle of reciprocal radicalization – a troubling development that calls for further research. Not surprisingly, respondents in Mostar also expressed higher levels of support for foreign fighting, again due to support among Bosniaks.

Outside of Mostar, support for foreign fighting is no higher among Bosniak respondents than those from other ethnic groups; and in fact, Bosniaks and Croats support foreign fighters in Syria/Iraq at the same rate. Interestingly, support for separatist fighters in Eastern Ukraine is much higher than support for those in

Syria/Iraq, driven by Serb sentiment, across sampling regions. It is notable that Bosniak respondents expressed the same level of support for foreign fighters in *either* conflict.

While respondents were asked about prevention initiatives and rehabilitation services, recent research indicates that prevention efforts are not at all universal in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that many social service agencies are under-resourced. In this context, the fact that nearly 40 percent of respondents had a positive view of government efforts to deter VE should be seen as a building block for future efforts, which should be informed by results from this survey. For example, the finding that support for women’s empowerment is among one of the strongest predictors of resilience to VE can be used to shape interventions, perhaps aimed at increasing the exposure of citizens in vulnerable communities to messaging that promotes the rights and freedoms of women.

Importantly, this research found that a number of variables still commonly assumed to be drivers of VE do not appear to be causally associated at all with VE, at least in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Being poor or poorly educated, for instance, have often been put forth as likely factors of vulnerability to VE, but neither education nor economic status were determined to be predictors of VE. In fact, in this survey, respondents who expressed sympathy for VE tended to be more well-off economically, overall, than those who exhibited resilience. This is a key finding that may alter the way prevention efforts target potential participants.

Of course, the factors that drive any given individual toward violence (in a process of radicalization) are unique in every case. And while poverty and unemployment are not on their own predictors of sympathy for VE, a sense of insecurity in one’s community *is*. Since any number of socio-economic factors play into how people perceive their safety, and sometimes how functionally safe they actually are, it is important to remember that no factor or predictor should be viewed in isolation.

Finally, findings that people who put great trust in high-level political leaders tend to be more sympathetic to VE suggest that these leaders may be encouraging or promoting extremist messaging; or at least that their supporters perceive their rhetoric in this way. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where political parties are highly aligned with ethnic identity, the echo chamber of like-mindedness may also play a significant role in reinforcing extremist beliefs even when political leaders do not explicitly express such views. This makes it even more imperative that party leadership and religious authorities explicitly condemn such rhetoric and actively distance themselves from any groups espousing violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Current CVE Baseline countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kenya, Malaysia, Niger, Philippines, and Somalia

<sup>2</sup> According to key informant interviews with BiH security services representatives; Sarajevo, November and December 2018.

<sup>3</sup> An online presence is tentatively interpreted as offering access to more varied sources of information. However, betraying the ever-potential tension between proximate ethnic groups, a contrary finding is that more homogenous social networks are a resiliency to VE, not a vulnerability.

<sup>4</sup> Incidence of nonresponse on positive impressions of ISIS or AQ ranged from zero to 13 percent. Nonresponse was higher in regions that reported higher support, suggesting that some respondents masked their support for ISIS or AQ through nonresponse.