

GENDER IDEOLOGIES:

HOW EXTREMISTS EXPLOIT BATTLES OVER WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND DRIVE RECIPROCAL RADICALIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

During a far-right gathering at the World Congress of Families in Italy in 2019, an ultra-conservative Spanish activist declared that “this culture war is a global war. Enemies have infiltrated all institutions, from political parties to the United Nations. But the tide is turning. Now, we must launch global campaigns in the ultra-conservative fight-back, collaborating across borders. We must also seize power, directly or indirectly, by “controlling the environment” in which politicians operate.”¹ That same year, addressing the United Nations General Assembly, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stressed the need to counteract the current “pushback against women’s rights”, and emphasized that everyone should be “calling out a troubling commonality in terrorist attacks, extremist ideologies and brutal crimes: the violent misogyny of the perpetrators.”²

Both speeches were powerful and frightening, but only one called out the enemy. Nationalist mobilization following the rise of right-wing and authoritarian regimes in Eastern and Western Europe - and throughout the world - has spawned new forms of extremist narratives gathered around traditional and religious arguments, in which gender plays a major role. Discussions around gender norms, issues, and policies can have a significant impact on political mobilization.³

Debates around abortion, family policies, the “nature” of women and men, sexual education in schools, gender studies in universities, and the position of sexual minorities follow political dividing lines - with the far-right occupying one end of the spectrum.⁴ We see these forces embedded in new nationalist policies and rhetoric, as well as in populist and extremist mobilization under the veil of an anti-feminist narrative. A manipulated discourse that men are under threat from efforts to establish gender equality has brought about a rise in new manifestations of the patriarchy, coloured by nationalism, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and misogyny. Gender analyses are therefore crucial if we want to conceptualize and understand extremist groups. Such analyses can help us not only understand the underexplored intersection of gender and politics within the far-right, but also think about how the dynamics of this phenomenon might shift.⁵

After the far-right gathering in Charlottesville, USA, that resulted in Heather Heyer’s death, right-wing groups targeted their reaction against the deceased, calling her a “slut” and explicitly celebrating her death.⁶ They described Heyer as the “definition of uselessness”: to them, a childless 32-year-old woman represents a “burden on society who has no value.”⁷ Such rhetoric testifies to the intertwined relationship between the far-right and misogyny. It demonstrates how right-wing groups and individuals base their beliefs on male supremacy over women – especially the supremacy of white men.

Protests in Croatia following the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention),⁸ along with Turkey’s withdrawal, and Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary’s efforts to distance

themselves from the Convention, further point to a strong correlation between the rise of far-right populism, extremism, and anti-feminism.⁹ In addition to the drive for nationalist mobilization, these examples point primarily to a deep disregard of the need to protect the physical, sexual, economic, and psychological integrity of women,¹⁰ and to a desire to further politicize women's human rights and represent them as attacks on tradition, religion and nation.

Political and security responses to cases of open misogyny, and the promotion of violence against women by right-wing or Salafi fundamentalists, indicate a lack of democratic policy mechanisms to address the misogynistic violence that these groups (in)directly initiate. This paper offers several arguments in response.

Firstly, anti-feminist right-wing movements (which include radical religious conservatism) are not an isolated phenomenon but rather are systemically connected and publicly articulated efforts to exclude women from public debates under the guise of religion, patriotism, and nationalism. All of these groups embody similar 'toxic' attitudes to women, which adhere to strict gender definitions for the nature of men and women, and their ideologies mirror one another in gendered ways.¹¹ Secondly, we argue below that misogyny, and the propagation of violence against women, constitute a form of violent extremism that creates an unsafe environment for women. We also argue that misogyny often acts as a gateway, driver, and early warning sign for violent extremism. As such, misogynistic thinking is part of dehumanisation, and misogynistic violence is exactly the kind of threat requiring a political intervention.¹²

Although the specific empirical focus of this study is on the Balkan countries (primary Bosnia and Herzegovina, then Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro), some examples include evidence from global far-right/Salafi groups. This approach was chosen because it tends to show that, independent of their geographical position, all extremist groups share similar narratives and connections – especially when it comes to gender issues. These transnational connections can be captured on many levels. Recent research findings indicate that Bosnian Croat skinheads and football hooligans from Mostar support Ukraine's far-right battalion Azov.¹³ But this study is talking about ideological connections rather than physical ones. As Joan Smith said after publishing her thought-provoking study,¹⁴ "I began to notice that the perpetrators of some of the worst terrorist attacks had something in common. A high proportion shared a history of assaulting wives, girlfriends and other female relatives, sometimes involving a whole series of victims, long before they attacked total strangers."¹⁵

Finally, it is very important to note that this paper does not argue that all violent extremism is rooted in misogyny and anti-feminism, but that misogyny is an integral part of extremist far-right anti-globalist, Islamophobic, and nationalist discourses,¹⁶ and should therefore be viewed as a risk factor of radicalisation and early warning sign of violent extremism.

METHODOLOGY

Social networks and online forums allow extremist groups to communicate directly with potential audiences. Over the past decade, far-right and Islamic fundamentalists have successfully disseminated their messages online, enabling them to recruit followers that would have been difficult to reach only two decades ago. As the former extremist Tony McAleer notes, social media takes far-right recruitment “to a whole other level”, explaining that “in my time with the movement you had to order a book and you’d have to wait three weeks for it to come. And if you wanted to hear someone speak, or hear these new ideas, you had to go to a physical meeting... [but] today you can binge watch an ideology in a weekend.”¹⁷

In order to produce this paper, the researchers used a qualitative analysis of social networks. The qualitative analysis of more than fifty Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and web portals based in the BiH and the region, established a surprising universality of language forms and constructions used when writing about women “who are not to their liking.”¹⁸ It is important to note that researchers have been gathering this data for the past couple of years, and some (with proper quotations and references) were used in previous Atlantic Initiative publications. Furthermore, the authors used previous insights gained from in-depth interviews and focus groups with Salafi fundamentalists and far-right members in BiH and they are used throughout the paper as quotes from interviews and focus groups.

Furthermore, this analysis uses feminist theories, meaning that this paper stresses the importance of how gender intersects with other forms of women’s oppression based on characteristics such as race, religion, and nationality. Feminism seeks to challenge sexism and sexist ways of thinking and living that limit both men and women – these are especially evident within extremists circles. Using it as an approach enables an analysis of different groups and profiles which promote extremist narratives, but below we focus only on the category that deals generally with women’s rights. Nonetheless, this approach has enabled us to see that “gender ideology” serves as an umbrella for right-wing groups that have different ideological views.

This analysis has shown that no matter what extremist ideology they promote, extremist groups propagate anti-feminist attitudes, misogyny, sexism, and ideas of women as subordinates who should not be “given” excessive freedom in public or private decision-making. Analysis of the ideology and activities of extremist organizations shows that their views focus on birth rates, justifying and encouraging violence against women, keeping women in the home to care for the family, and obedience towards the husband as a fundamental pillar of women’s faith.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME ANTI-FEMINIST COIN

In the Western Balkans, radicalization has occurred over the last decade primarily in the context of militant Salafism. This process of radicalisation has been accelerated by fragile internal structures, the corrupt elite, frozen conflict, unresolved identity issues, and foreign influence.¹⁹ With the departures of citizens from BiH and the region to the so called Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL), attention has primarily been focused on militant Salafism and foreign fighting – particularly now with them returning from the battlefields. Apart from these existing problems, BiH is also faced with various potential security threats that include non-violent Salafism, extreme ethnonationalism, and the far-right. They all share the same goal: to disrupt and prevent the accession of the remaining Western Balkan countries to both NATO and the EU. In some cases, they also advocate changing the borders along ethnic lines.²⁰ As GCERF and the Atlantic Initiative report noted, “in some of these countries, underlying conditions may foster ‘cumulative extremism,’ or ‘reciprocal radicalization,’ in which these radical movements feed off one another, making their potential destabilizing impact even greater.”²¹

While the issue of extremism and extremists groups in BiH - in particular religiously motivated ones - have been analysed in-depth²², only recently have researchers and the media begun conducting systematic and comprehensive data collection and analysis on right-wing extremist groups.²³ The complex political, religious, and interethnic dynamics in BiH make it an ideal environment for examining the relationships between various forms of extremism and their impacts.²⁴

Recent research on ethnonationalist extremism in BiH has shown that the commonalities among different extremist groups are far greater than their differences,²⁵ and there is indeed a “paradoxical mixture” of competition and cooperation between far-right and Islamist extremism. Both build upon conspiracies about, and victimization and demonization of, the other. The right-wing discourse also shows clear parallels with Salafist ideology, since both are against globalization, cultural diversity, and minority rights, including women's rights. As Ebner emphasizes, “they all thrive in today's environment, where rage has replaced reason and is reinforced within echo chambers.”²⁶ For right-wing groups, the solution is a return to the nation and Christianity; in Salafist discourse, the solution lies in Islam and the global ummah. They spread conspiracy theories that the other is always after them - not only to conquer their lands but to completely destroy their kind (e.g. white genocide).

This dynamic shows how, as much as they despise each other, the two forces need each other in order to survive. It can be said that they are two sides of the same coin. Extreme-right groups actively seek to overcome ideological and geographic divergences for the sake of expanding their influence.²⁷ In an interview published by an online podcast about Ukraine's far-right Azov movement in 2015, prominent figure Sergei Korotkikh fawned over the so-called Islamic State, comparing the Azov Regiment to the group and proclaiming ISIS as “heroes of our time.” commander emphasised that the same kind of heroes exists in Azov, and that “for European civilization, Azov fighters are an example of such a heroism that harks back to the Crusades and the Middle Ages. Men coming together and leaving for the unknown, to a foreign land, with only two options: to win something

for themselves or to die. That's the same as ISIS."²⁸ Individuals from the Balkans have also joined the Azov movement, and some groups still support the cause.²⁹ The Azov movement's primary international representative, Olena Semenyaka³⁰, also spoke in 2015 about ISIS as potential "strategic allies" and a "passionate force that defends its right to expansion".³¹ Pierre Conesa - a former senior official at the French Ministry of Defense – has pointed out that the similarity between the Western far-right and Salafism is reflected in their founding myth, which places the West against Islam.

As he says, "it is therefore surprising to see that the rise of the European far-right is analyzed in political debates, while the Salafist jihadist insurgency is only seen through a security lens, as if the two phenomena were not part of the same political process."³² During the WCF gathering in Italy, Brian Brown (who runs the International Organization for the Family, which coordinates the World Congress of Families network – we will talk about them in detail below) stressed that "We work very hard...to unite people that are very different around this simple idea of the natural family", and he further emphasised that despite Europe's ongoing "forgotten war" in eastern Ukraine (as Provost notes, nodding specifically to the presence of participants from both Russia and Ukraine), "We might disagree on geopolitics, but unite together for the family".³³

The discourse of the far-right, especially in online spaces, ranges from open support for fascism and Nazism to rhetoric aimed at initiating and justifying violence against women; On the other hand online Salafi fundamentalism ranges across the spectrum. Their (extremist) narratives dance back and forth between implicitly and explicitly violent rhetoric, making it challenging to categorize their content overall. But one category is constant: women and gender issues. Both accuse feminism of eroding the traditional relationship between men and women, and encouraging women to fulfil themselves outside the family in 'traditionally male roles' which include education, employment, and political activism. When women thus 'oppose nature', they disturb a delicate gender balance and take on 'unfeminine' qualities and roles. Because feminism positions women as independently politically and economically capable, it presents a powerful challenge to male superiority.³⁴

There are similarities between the narratives of Islamist extremists and the far-right online: both argue that their collective identity and dignity are under attack; both accuse the other side of lacking respect for 'their' women; both systemically and publicly articulate efforts to exclude women from public debate under the guise of religion or patriotism; both see themselves as defenders of women while portraying the other as "abusers". Salafi influencers want to show that they defend women against westernisation and progressive Islamic thought. At the same time, the far-right present themselves as guarding women's rights and tradition against islamisation and progressive feminists values. Narratives at both ends feed into one another in the phenomenon called reciprocal radicalisation.³⁵

Reciprocal radicalisation is strongly reflected in this interplay of the online narratives employed by the far-right groups and Islamists groups. The majority of indirect interactions between far-right extremists and Islamists are evident when it comes to the topic of women's rights. Also, by frequently employing the discourse of their own victimization and the demonization of the other these groups rhetorically validate each other.

STICKING TOGETHER: HOW THE GLOBAL FAR-RIGHT MOBILIZES AND UNITES AROUND IDEAS OF THE 'FAMILY'

The transnational integration of far-right organizations fighting “for life” is led by the World Congress of Families (WCF), one of the most influential organizations globally when it comes to promoting restrictions on women's and LGBTQ rights. The WCF has been active since 1997, following meetings between right-wing Christian leaders in the US and ultra-conservative Russian writers. They have hosted international meetings in Europe and promote anti-gender policies through various global events. The WCF's core mission is to spread ‘American’ views on the family, particularly from the perspective of anti-women's and LGBTQ rights.

The WCF is thought to be most active in Russia, where the organization is supported by oligarchs and extremist members of the Russian Orthodox Church, and it closely cooperates with members of the Russian Duma and Putin's regime. The WCF's collaborators include Russian officials who were sanctioned by the US Government after the annexation of Crimea. The organization has lobbied fervently in Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Albania and Australia against the adoption of same-sex partnership laws.³⁶ According to the WCF, the organization “unites and equips leaders around the world to promote the natural family”, but these “leaders” include people like Alexey Komov, who “played a role in coordinating cooperation between European far-right groups.”³⁷ Komov is close to the Italian far-right leader Matteo Salvini, as well as Russian MP Viktor Zubarev of the ruling United Russia Party, and is the founder of Tsargrad TV - a right-wing network modelled on Fox News in the United States.³⁸ Komov's view that “conservatives all around should work to counter the attacks on the natural family” is widely reflected in the far-right nowadays, and the defence of the traditional family from “globalists” has become a common denominator for far-right groups.³⁹

Considering how normalized the phenomenon of interethnic division in BiH is, especially when it comes to radical groups, the idea that elements of the far-right could connect across the country's ethnic lines may seem paradoxical. Still, the issue of women's human rights, family, and immigration, are among those that unite certain extremist groups in the country and the region.⁴⁰ Davey and Ebner point out this increasing “operational convergence” among far-right extremists worldwide, and warn that “high levels of opportunism characterise today's extreme right, as seen in the cooperation between ideologically disparate strands.” Such alliances exist in BiH and neighbouring countries, and they are limited to groups that explicitly support anti-immigrant rhetoric and the “traditional family”. Boško Obradović from Dveri, and Ruža Tomašić from the Croatian Party of Rights, were thus among the signatories of the Cape Town Declaration on Family and Marriage in 2016, written by the WCF, which states in one of its conclusions that the traditional family is “the foundation of civil society”.⁴¹

WOMEN AS THE FACE OF ANTI-FEMINISM?

Violent extremism is usually associated with a “man's world”, resulting in the normalization of male extremism, while women are stereotyped as non-violent. This bias has contributed to the insufficient analysis of extremist groups from a gender perspective. Within this context, our research shows a

rise in women positioning themselves within extremist groups, attracted by the narratives and notions of anti-feminism. They see the rejection of feminism as a key component of their “empowerment”.

As a Salafi woman said during an interview with one of the authors, “After this, you are going to the office, after work you will clean the house, windows and make lunch. In contrast, I am the queen. My husband will give me half of his paycheck, and he will go shopping for the house supplies, while my job is to lead the household, be pretty for him and make him happy. This is what empowerment looks like – not your feminism.” As Erin and Smith noted, this trend mirrors the empowerment that western women joining the Islamic State felt by embracing traditional gender roles.⁴² On the same note, the far-right coalition from Serbia “Movement Levijatan – I live for Serbia” (Pokret Levijatan – živim za Srbiju) advocates against women rights while putting women in the forefront, and on pre-election billboards portrays women as mothers and nurturers dressed in white, pregnant, or holding babies. This coalition – taking into account the history of the far-right movement Levijatan⁴³ - clearly indicates how, while men organize “street actions”, women have the task of adapting the public image and rhetoric to the standards of liberal democracy. By embracing this anti-feminist stance, individual women have found an effective mechanism to advertise their radicalism.

NATIONALISM, GENDER AND THE RISE OF THE POPULIST FAR-RIGHT

The political turmoil which emerged in response to the economic crisis in 2008 led to a strengthening of nationalist sentiment, and enhanced messages attacking democracy and human rights.⁴⁴ According to Tahir Abbas, ‘these wider transformations to local economies have led to a crisis of masculinity, where traditional practices of patriarchy were challenged by the liberalisation and casualization of labour markets compounded by questions of inter-generational disconnect.’⁴⁵

Extremist movements, which we describe here as “anti-gender or anti-feminist movements” (due to a lack of more precise terms), began to unite and mobilize against a perceived “gender ideology” across Europe and beyond, and to trivialize the importance of women’s human rights. In doing so, these far-right populist forces positioned themselves in “opposition to the progressive activism on women’s rights and LGBTQ rights, which deconstructs naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality.”⁴⁶ What is more, over the past decade, the populist discourses of the far-right have increasingly become a part of official national policies in some democracies. Many countries have accepted and promoted authoritarianism, nationalism, and traditionalist policies that glorify masculinity and misogyny.⁴⁷ This change in the political climate has enabled decades-old conservative opponents of women’s rights to expand their influence and gain access to large financial resources that have been used in advocacy processes aimed at restricting women’s rights.⁴⁸

Vinar notes that signs of radicalism, high levels of social isolation, and a lack of positive relations with women and lack of peer interaction later result in stronger misogynistic views.⁴⁹ The mere presence

of these indicators does not make someone a violent extremist, but it does point to an increased risk of radicalization.⁵⁰ Right-wing groups and their beliefs are defined as “nationalist, anti-global... they believe in conspiracy theories that involve imminent threats to national sovereignty or personal freedom and that their personal or national way of life has been attacked....They believe they must be prepared to defend themselves from attack by participating in paramilitary training or survival.”⁵¹ Such movements use gender issues as a rhetorical tool for mobilizing hatred and resentment, and framing progressive ideas about gender values, human rights and equality as a threat to those actors and institutions whose traditional position and identity (based on hegemonic masculinity and male supremacy) are being challenged by the transformative goals of feminist policy and the gender equality project.⁵² Pridemore and Freilich claim that such “resentment is intensified by traditional patriarchal and white male culture which is ultimately reflected in violence.”⁵³ To that end, Alexander Zoldstanov, the leader of the far-right organization “Night Wolves” in Russia, has publicly expressed his desire to “burn all feminism and homosexuality from our Orthodox Christian country with hot steel.”

Previous research examining the dynamics of gender equality and various forms of violence - attacks on abortion clinics⁵⁴, white supremacy⁵⁵ and far-right terrorism⁵⁶ - has highlighted the link between structural gender inequality and violence committed by men. According to Rose, men who subscribe to “ideological masculinity” believe that women’s empowerment has left men victimized and discriminated against, so they justify their anger by reclaiming what they believe to be rightfully theirs.⁵⁷ As Kate Manne has said, misogyny should be viewed as “a political phenomenon whose purpose is to police and enforce women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance”⁵⁸, and this is exactly what extremist groups want to achieve.

Right-wing groups nurture the idea of male supremacy over women,⁵⁹ and research so far shows that misogynistic attitudes constitute a clear indication that a person will be more likely to engage in violence.⁶⁰ Research conducted in Libya, Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines found that people who support violence against women are three times more likely to support violent extremism. In a survey with members of extreme ethnonationalist groups, the results showed that respondents who expressed low levels of support for gender equality had a higher level of sympathy for violent extremism. Also, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, support for gender equality is one of the strongest indicators of resilience to violent extremism.⁶¹ Furthermore, in the research on ethnonationalist extremism in BiH, women have expressed less support and sympathy than men towards violence and violent extremism, but only because they showed greater support for gender equality.⁶²

This age of extreme ethnonationalism and re-traditionalization has resulted in the treatment of the female body as an object and tool of revenge. In using rape as a military strategy, women were treated as the target of direct attacks. As Susan Brownmiller explains: “Men traditionally view the rape of “their women” as the ultimate humiliation, a sexual coup de grace. In fact, traditionally speaking, men appropriate the rape of “their women” as part of their own male anguish of defeat. Apart from a genuine, human concern for wives and daughters, rape by a conqueror is compelling evidence of the conquered’s [masculine] impotence. The defence of women has long been a hallmark of masculine pride, just as the possession of women has been a hallmark of masculine success. The act that is played out upon her is a message passed between men—vivid proof of victory for one and

loss and defeat for the other..."⁶³ The thousands of testimonies of women and girls who were brutally and systematically raped during the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region prove how brutal the consequences of extremism and nationalism can be on women's lives.

In such a context, it is important to address the fact that women's equality is threatened by the strengthening of right-wing movements precisely because feminism demystifies nationalism by questioning patriarchal norms. Here we draw upon the aforementioned argument that misogyny not only often acts as an early warning signal for violent extremism, but itself constitutes a form of violent extremism that creates an unsafe environment for women. This will be further developed in the following sections.

NARRATIVES ABOUT FAMILY AND ABORTION –

The emphasis on the family's importance for the continuity of the nation is clearly seen in the policies of extremist organizations across the spectrum. It is perfectly portrayed by journalist Claire Provost, who went undercover at the World Congress of Families in Italy and captured a variety of high-level politicians, influencers, and famous people not only talking about anti-abortion but praising the far-right. In her paper, she quotes Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis as saying that "increased migration into Europe from Africa is a good thing because Africans, by her estimation, are more conservative and could influence societies in the region which have, in her comparison, lost their way".⁶⁴ Far-right politicians and organisations regularly mix up anti-immigrant and pro-family narratives. As Provost says, "At times, it feels to me as if they're wrapping racism in a "family-friendly" blanket."

This section will further discuss the importance of the family narrative within extremist groups. As Fangen emphasizes, far-right organizations explicitly hijack feminist arguments by claiming they are 'the true feminists' - protecting women from the hordes of foreign men who threaten women's security and respecting women who take care of children and the household.⁶⁵

WOMEN AS 'NATION-BUILDERS': THE ETHNO-NATIONALIST ASSAULT ON REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Following patriarchal logic, women are responsible for the nation's renewal, and those who do not "want to sacrifice their comfort for the sake of children" are "blamed" for plummeting birth rates. Such narratives call for control over the female body in order to maintain the biological substance

of the nation. The narrative that the decline in values began when women entered the labour market en masse, and that a return to former patriarchal family values is the only way to build a healthy society and family, has become an integral part of nationalist politics.

Nationalist projects prior to the breakdown of Yugoslavia, not only have targeted the ethnic other, but also men and women within these groups. The aftermath of wars reinforced gender stereotypes and brought back the influence of religious traditionalism and nationalists views of the role of women.⁶⁶ In Kosovo, the political leadership promoted masculine ideas of 'patriotism'.⁶⁷ In Serbia, the political regime reinstated Serbian traditional 'family values'.⁶⁸ These stereotypes have persisted since the end of the conflicts, which has undermined the movement toward gender equality.⁶⁹

The wars created the figure of the ethnonationalist soldier who puts religion and nation above all, and who became the embodiment of the values of the 'Balkan man'. Analogously, women were ideologically reduced to their reproductive role of 'nation-building'. The statement made during a liturgy in the Peć Patriarchate by Amfilohije, the Metropolitan bishop of Montenegro and the Littoral, that Serbian mothers (with abortion) are inclined to infanticide because they "kill more children in their wombs in one year than Mussolini, Hitler and Broz and those who are here in Kosovo and Metohija did", is a reflection of such ideas. The fact that the late Serbian Patriarch Irinej supported Amfilohije, saying that "Serbian mothers are obliged to give birth to children with God's blessing, so that we can remain in history, even though we suffered a lot", gave the issue of birth control a higher political-state dimension.⁷⁰

Every year, an increasing number of associations are formed throughout Europe and the Balkan region that promote the protection of the family and human life from the moment of conception. Such organizations include the Centre for Babies⁷¹, Friend of the Family⁷² and the Union of Associations Za život,⁷³ which was formed in the Republic of Serbia and aims to "combat the white plague and abortion", all in order to "encourage women and their partners and empower them to choose the most wonderful task in the world - childbirth and parenthood." Most of these organizations are closely connected with the government, which supports them financially, while the mission of the Union of Associations "Za život" includes the ties with the Serbian Orthodox Church and related associations abroad, mostly from Russia.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the process of trying to restrict women's human and reproductive rights has become increasingly evident.⁷⁴ Although the right to abortion in post-Yugoslav countries is still not limited, conscientious objection is impeding access to abortion as these objections are increasingly used in medical practices in the Republic of Croatia. One example that shook the region is the case of the Dubrovnik Hospital, where all the anaesthesiologists on one shift filed a conscientious objection which resulted in an abortion being performed without anaesthesia.⁷⁵ The issue of conscientious objection is ongoing in many Western European countries, and it became a serious moral/political issue in Sweden after some hospitals stopped hiring medical workers who oppose abortions.⁷⁶

Although campaigns against freedom of choice and doctor appeals to our consciences are not as frequent as in neighbouring Croatia, examples have been registered in Mostar through the “Ne daj me majko” (“Protect me, mother”) initiative by the MladoSunce (Young Sun) Association, which launched a media campaign in 2019 to “promote the dignity of human life from conception to natural death.”⁷⁷ Demands to tighten abortion criteria are becoming more frequent and threaten to restrict freedom of choice; this will not prevent abortions per se, but will open the door to an increase in the number of illegal and amateur abortions. The right to abortion enters the very core of state control over the body and freedom of choice as regards family planning. The main discourse of right-wing narratives is reflected in the interpretation that abortion is the murder of a living person, which violates the laws of heaven. This discourse is also present in the far-right groups that advocate that abortions affect birth rates, reducing the number of people belonging to a particular religious or ethnic group.

These views turn women into “child delivery machines”, which renders meaningless all other roles that a woman, as a human being with guaranteed freedoms, could play. For these reasons, radical and right-wing groups are dedicated to the glorification of a woman's role as a mother, particularly focusing on women who give birth to sons. An example can also be found in Salafist groups which often cite religious sources related to childbirth: “marry and have children; I will be proud of your number compared to other communities”.

WOMEN, NATIONALISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

Nationalist gendered narratives portray women's bodies as territory to be ‘protected’ by men on their ‘own side’, and attacked and conquered by the ‘enemy’.⁷⁸ Opportunism likewise abounds in how the far-right exploits discourses around women's rights, with gender being brought in as an ideological tool with which to further construct boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in relation to the other.

The intersection between extreme nationalism, religion, islamophobia, and gender became visible throughout the 1990s. In Serbia, women were perceived as biological reproductive material.⁷⁹ In Kosovo, Serbian nationalist propaganda portrayed Albanian men as sexual aggressors, preying on Serbian women.⁸⁰ These media campaigns were instrumental for national mobilisation.⁸¹ Furthermore, Albanian women were presented as “baby factories”, representing a danger to the Serbian nation.⁸² In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the intersection between ethnicity and gender was further exploited. By using patriarchal traditions and violent militarist tactics, nationalist Bosnian Serbs targeted Bosnian Muslim women.⁸³ Women became a specific target for sexual violence by enemy forces. The widespread use of mass rape against Bosnian Muslim women was one of the tactics deployed by Serb forces to intimidate and terrorise the Muslim population.⁸⁴ From an ethnicist patriarchal perspective, the rape of Bosnian Muslim women took on symbolic meaning as a site of ‘ethnic cleansing’.⁸⁵

Today, in a global racial system, Muslim bodies are not just racialized as a “biological body but also as a cultural and social entity constructed within a number of discursive regimes, including those of terrorism, fundamentalism, patriarchy, sexism and labour migration.”⁸⁶ Far-right groups rely heavily on traditional narratives about gender and the family, whilst simultaneously weaponizing women's rights and gender equality in the pursuit of an anti-immigration and anti-Islam political agenda. Members of the far-right present themselves on social media as defenders of ‘women's rights’ in their opposition to Islam - especially when it comes to protecting “their” women from “violent migrants”.

Meanwhile, Salafi influencers exploit experiences of racism and discrimination faced by Muslims in the West to foster the narrative that “Muslims are victims of a Western war against Islam”. Bosnia Salafi influencers criticised the outright ban on the niqab in Switzerland and the ban on students wearing the hijab and niqab in France and Germany and have built their narrative around the gendered nature of radicalization. As such, they justify their account of victimization by pointing to these real examples of Islamophobia around the world and calling for Muslims to unite in order to protect their women, whom the West wants to desecrate. This also allows them to criticize democracy as being “clearly against Muslims - especially Muslim women - all under the guise of freedom”.

The rhetoric of populist right-wing groups and politicians has been that women's rights are threatened by the influx of Islam.⁸⁷ The concept of “femonationalism” was developed to describe this outlook, and it is increasingly prevalent in Western Europe among far-right politicians.⁸⁸ Thus, many political parties and right-wing organizations have included the concept of “women's human rights protection” in their anti-immigrant programs, with Muslims and Islam framed as a threat to Western society and women's emancipation.⁸⁹ While deploying arguments about women's rights, many far-right parties remain very conservative, and their commitment to gender equality can be deemed purely instrumental,⁹⁰ with such claims mostly used in order to legitimize their arguments against migrants and Muslims in general.

NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL CONTROL ---

Although the assumption is that ideas glorifying violent extremism and the intolerance of other ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina will be the most propagated in online spaces used by extremist groups (e.g. in public and private Facebook groups), research has shown that such narratives are marginal.⁹¹ In fact, the ideas most commonly promoted in such spaces are that women should be obedient and available to men, men should provide for their wives, and children must be disciplined.

Issues around marriage and marital relations, child-rearing, gender differences, intimacy, the “suppression of passion”, and dress codes are often used by extremist groups to promote religious conservatism. These extremist discourses include micro-regulations for almost every aspect of life, involving everything from sexual intercourse between spouses to resolving the psychological difficulties of followers. Salafist influencers tend to build religious arguments around these seemingly

irrelevant human behaviours, alternately labelling them as obligatory, sinful, or 'Western-like'.

"If a woman turns away from her husband's bed, the angels curse her until she returns to him. When a husband calls his wife to bed and she refuses, the angels curse her until the sun rises. When a man calls his wife to bed and she rejects him, God gets angry with her." ⁹²

The analysis of right-wing groups from BiH and the region shows that, in addition to sexual violence, they imply and promote that psychological violence against women is allowed. By imposing certain gender roles and selectively interpreting Catholic or Islamic religion, these right-wing groups describe women in stereotypical terms and present husbands as family leaders who are permitted to do anything they want. For this kind of research, it is important to note that even where men are not physically violent, the right-wing rhetoric establishing men's full control over women - allowing men to control women's finances, movement, clothing, and much more - fits the description of so-called "intimate terrorism." According to Johnson, intimate terrorism displays different patterns of dominating behaviour and almost always involves men terrorizing women, often combining violence with other tactics such as threats and intimidation, economic manipulation, psychological abuse, and isolation.⁹³ It leads to an increase in violence against women and pushes women to the margins by trying to take away their voice, whether in online or political spaces.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ANTI-IMMIGRANT XENOPHOBIA AS A NARRATIVE OF CONTROL _

As we have discussed, the far-right's anti-feminist, patriarchal narrative is strongly connected to an anti-migrant and Islamophobic narrative.⁹⁴ Far-right groups in the region have taken rhetorical advantage of the migrant crisis, warning about a "foreign invasion" and presenting the far-right as the "gatekeepers" of Europe and protectors of their countries and their women, both in the context of Islamophobia and a stated desire to free women from repressive religion. In conversations on social media uncovered by the authors, Islam is described as fundamentally damaging to women. Islam, as followed by migrants from the MENA region, is framed as incompatible with democracy and with what the far-right designates as "our" values and way of life. Child sexual exploitation and rape are also cited as key mobilizing narratives. In her interviews with far-right influencers, Pearson noted that "the three far-right influencers share the assertion of Islam as an unassimilable ideology, and in gendered terms, citing perceived unequal gender relations, patriarchal abuses, and the oppression of women including, as Fransen suggests, "taking child brides and sex slaves". They frame Islam not as a valid religion, but as an 'ideology' seeking to subvert and threaten democracy."⁹⁵ This happens in conjunction with blaming liberal feminism for the failure of the traditional family; as in the case of the regional far-right, their narrative is based on the notion that "a woman's place is at home", usually justified through reference to tradition.

The threat of sexual violence is used in xenophobic right-wing narratives to spread fear, with white men positioned as the only defenders of (white) women against the “rape culture” of Muslims - one of the narratives used by groups like the “Identitarians” to recruit women. Migrants and members of other religions and nations - particularly those coming from Muslim countries - are described as rapists, bullies, and generally prone to abusing women who do not belong to a similar group as their own, and as having a total lack of respect for women who were born and live in the West.

It is the intersection of anti-globalism and Islamophobia combined with anti-feminist attitudes that act as a multiplier of radicalization in the region; this has been the case in other places as well.

One of the most famous examples of the intersectionality of Islamophobia and anti-feminism can be seen in Anders Breivik’s Manifesto, which reads: “every kitchen smelled of homemade food and cake... our mothers were home and took care of us. Fathers went to work. Women started going to work, houses were cold and empty... neighbours were leaving, some other people settled there... a different and foreign smell was spreading from their kitchens, soon everything will change, we will regain control... ” These views of Andres Brevik largely coincide with the views of the Scandinavian Neo-Nazis. Kimmel states that, with a few exceptions, the young Neo-Nazis involved in the Swedish EXIT project believe that women belong in the home and family.⁹⁶

Other right-wing groups promote the view that only women and men who are married are moral. Marriage is thus shaped as an assurance of a woman’s dignity, and a guarantee that the woman has someone to protect her from “the others” - with the others being mostly migrants. In BiH, the rhetoric and attitudes of far-right groups about migrants also unite extremists from all three ethnic groups, each of whom presents migrants as “attackers.” An example of these dynamics can be seen in a member of the far-right group Leviathan who recently crashed his car into a migrant centre in Serbia, with the excuse that a migrant had attacked his girlfriend the night before. Leviathan openly supported the attacker, claiming that “they can no longer put up with the harassment of women by migrants” and then held protests on the same site – in front of the migrant center.

On the other hand, when women belonging to far-right members’ own religious and ethnic group - but do not fit into the right-wing mould of the traditional woman - are raped, it is viewed as their punishment for inappropriate behaviour, promiscuity, and disrespect of religious rules of conduct. Right-wing organizations create a narrative of “victim-blaming” around rape: if the perpetrator is a member of their own religious/ethnic group, he is positioned as a victim, someone charged with an offence he did not commit. Campaigns to undermine the integrity of a raped woman are not uncommon in right-wing circles, where an excuse for perpetrators is always sought, especially if the person enjoys a certain reputation in the community.

Indeed, it is important to note that, when it comes to domestic violence and sexual violence committed by the ideological allies of the far-right, extremists reject demands to address this, and indeed claim that any efforts to do so by governments are diverting attention from more important matters, or engaging in what far-right groups refer to as “gender ideology”.⁹⁷ Such a discourse is

based on the concept that violence committed by 'our' men is not an act of violence but is, in fact, a form of "re-education".

The idea that domestic or sexual violence is a form of re-education, rather than a desire to establish control and power, is a deeply rooted form of patriarchal thinking that serves as a trigger for radicalization.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS —

This paper clearly shows that the anti-feminist ideology of the contemporary far-right has its roots in deeply ingrained misogyny, and a culture of hegemonic masculinity which is also effective in the recruitment of women to extremist causes. The exploitation of gender issues is increasingly essential to global extremist movements, as well as, and especially, the recruitment of women as effective figureheads who are being used to smooth out their image. On the other hand, all extremist groups regard feminism as a retrograde phenomenon that has led to the collapse of social, political and religious values in Western Christian society.

The migration crisis, and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic, have sparked new anxieties and grievances that extremist movements have skilfully leveraged to recruit people into their circles. By fuelling fears of sexual crimes committed by migrants and speaking about the "oppression of the hijab", far-right organizations frame themselves as the protectors of women's rights. In addition, traditionally male-oriented programs in extremist movements have been redesigned to reconcile with women's interests, attracting women who seek clear gender roles and daily tasks.

Meanwhile, the violent misogyny of these groups, as Guterres stresses, intersects with extremist ideology and actions. The correlation between anti-feminism in the digital space, and the actualisation of physical violence in the real world against women, should be treated as a warning sign that extremists are in constant search of an enemy. They could take the form of democratic institutions and pose a threat to every empowered woman who is working tirelessly to build alternatives to gender injustice, and every person who fights against extremism and ethnonationalism. As journalist Claire Provost recounted of one research experience during the far-right gathering at the World Congress of Families, "during his speech I sink into my chair, in case anyone notices the "enemy" among them."

Although these issues require further study, policymakers and practitioners can make use of this information to further develop measures to prevent and counter-extremism with strategic communications and counter-radicalization intervention programming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** The new Strategy for preventing and combating terrorism in BiH should incorporate gender analyses and the impact of radicalisation and extremist groups on women and girls. The Strategy should also set concrete measures to address and combat cases of open misogyny and the promotion of different forms of violence against women by all extremist groups in BiH; as this paper shows, misogyny and the propagation of violence against women constitute a form of violent extremism that creates an unsafe environment for women.
- 2** Misogynistic thinking is part of the dehumanisation of women and should be considered an early warning sign of radicalisation. Furthermore, misogyny should be treated as a hate crime.
- 3** Misogynistic violence is a threat requiring political intervention. Gender-based violence advocated by these groups should be seen as a security issue; thus it is highly important to educate security officials on the importance of reacting when it comes to these cases (online or offline).
- 4** More education to support community workers, police, politicians and teachers to deal with the threat of misogyny, which would also add to the work being done on prevention and education in the field of gender-based violence. This should also include education to better understand what misogyny actually is, what it encompasses, and why it matters.
- 5** Support NGOs that promote feminist narratives and advocate for policies that promote women's human rights and freedom of choice.
- 6** Create counter-narratives with an emphasis on the protection of women, especially those from marginalised groups such as Roma, refugees and migrants, and the LGBT community.
- 7** This paper has shown that misogyny often acts as a gateway, driver, and early warning sign for violent extremism. Thus it is important to educate young people on topics related to gender issues, women's rights, and human rights in general.
- 8** Educate the public and experts about the danger of "victim-blaming", which normalizes and rationalizes violence against women instead of attributing the blame to the perpetrators.

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