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Gender and Nonviolent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

A policy paper

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About the author

Majda Halilović is a sociologist and psychotherapist. After studying psychology, she obtained her master's degree in sociology of education at the University of Cambridge, and then a doctorate in sociology and social policy at the Open University in Great Britain. She specializes in family systems psychotherapy. Since 2012, she has worked at the Atlantic Initiative as head of the research department. From the multidisciplinary approach of family systems psychotherapy and sociology she conducts research and education on violence against women, extremism and radicalization, gender and security, and prejudices in the application of law. She is a consultant and educator at the programs for the prevention of violence against women and the prevention of extremism and radicalization led by international organizations and domestic non-governmental organizations and institutions.

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1. Background: Why the gendered nature of extremism must be examined

This policy paper examines the gendered nature of extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), with some comparative reflections from Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro. Through the lens of gender and gender analysis, it exposes how religious, political, and ideological influencers are attempting to reshape societies in the Western Balkans region and roll back years of progress made towards achieving gender equality. Research for this paper was undertaken on the premise that there remain underexplored connections among anti-feminist rhetoric, anti-gender narratives, conservative religious doctrines, and far-right extremism; despite numerous regional and international studies that have confirmed the existence of these connections in recent years.¹ To that end, this research examined both groups with an online presence that espouse anti-feminist and far-right ideals as well as groups that are active on the ground in local communities, with a focus on how these groups are emboldened and legitimized by the actions and rhetoric of mainstream political figures who derogate women and promote anti-gender narratives.

This paper is grounded in gender analysis, which is a useful tool for understanding gender inequality because it considers the roles, relationships, and power dynamics between women and men in specific social, economic, or political contexts. It involves identifying how gender norms and expectations shape the experiences of people and their opportunities in society, and how these gendered patterns differ due to other intersecting factors like race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, and age. Gender analysis is thus crucial to deconstructing and challenging gender-based discrimination, and to promoting gender equality.²

The research presented here is based on open-source analysis that followed ethical guidelines to avoid harm and to prevent labelling and stigmatization. It was not the goal of researchers to situate the organizations and individuals discussed in this text on a spectrum of extremist thought or to label their specific far-right ideologies, but to capture the ideas and narratives they shared in online spaces that linked them to far-right and extremist discourses. These discourses are not unique to BiH, but some are specific to the regional context. Thus, it was valuable for researchers to explore similar dynamics in several neighbouring countries as well, where some extremist actors are working earnestly to influence the political, economic, social, and cultural nature of BiH from the outside.³ Across contexts, the narratives driving these groups are situated in wider social contexts and messaging of an anti-democratic character – such as rhetoric decrying “gender ideology” as an invention of liberalism and feminism – and are commonly echoed by both religious leaders and political figures.⁴

1 For just one example, see: Pablo Castillo Díaz and Nahla Valji, “Symbiosis of mysogyny and violent extremism,” *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2 (2019): 37–56.

2 European Institute for Gender Equality, “Gender Mainstreaming: Gender Analysis,” 2019.

3 Nejra Veljan and Maida Čampara-Čehajić, *Gender Ideologies: How Extremists Exploit Battles over Women's Rights and Drive Reciprocal Radicalization* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2022).

4 Ibid.

Thus, researchers also analyzed the rhetoric of ethnonationalist politicians, some of whom are key influencers for regional groups that sympathize with the use of extremist violence. A database maintained by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), of hateful or potentially inciteful statements made by Bosnian politicians, shows that the current president of the entity of Republika Srpska (RS), Milorad Dodik, employed this kind of speech most prolificly in BiH last year; yet, only one investigation of his speech has been opened and no indictment has been brought.⁵

To deepen their understanding of this problem from all angles, researchers incorporated the views of various stakeholders, captured in interviews, to complement findings from online research. Interviewees included some people who espouse far-right ideals, but also individuals working to advance gender equality and combat violence against women, and their perspectives added nuance to the analysis of online content posted by notable far-right and extremist groups. The narratives, messaging, and ideals expressed by these groups were analyzed, as well as how they manipulate, negotiate, instrumentalize, and shape understandings of gender in the region. This paper presents these findings and specifically examines some of the strategies, methods, and conceptualizations put forward by *women* on the far right, who are becoming essential actors in populist and ethnonationalist movements and play an increasingly central role in publicly renegotiating gender roles and the gender equality agenda.

5 Azra Husarić Omerović, "Milorad Dodik najveći pojedinačni izvor mrzilačkih narativa u BiH," *Detektor*, 10 February 2023, <https://detektor.ba/2023/02/10/milorad-dodik-najveci-pojedinacni-izvor-mrzilackih-narativa-u-bih/> (accessed 25 May 2023).

2. Gender and extremism in the Bosnian context

Given that this paper examines relationships between gender and extremism, both concepts should be defined, and contextualized for BiH and the region, as a starting point. The concept of gender has been developing over years and is increasingly recognized as a social construct and lived reality that influences individual and collective life, rights, and practices. In other words, the roles, rights, duties, and needs associated with gender are not just biologically determined but socially and culturally constructed. Gender also conceptualizes perceptions and notions about men and women, and sexual minorities, in a way that encompasses a much broader view than that offered by conventional explanations of sex differences.⁶ People get clues from their environment, society, education, and culture about which behaviours are considered appropriate for which sex. In this way, society shapes beliefs about gender but also what kind of knowledge about gender is valid.⁷

Where rigid ideas of gender are imposed, both men and women are likely to suffer, because this can perpetuate stereotypes, discrimination, sexism, and interpersonal violence.⁸ Debates in the field of gender studies therefore consider how prevailing concepts of masculinity and femininity can be changed, and how society can reconceive gender roles within the family, as well as in politics, religion, and other aspects of social life. This is a rich debate that generates few easy answers because gender is such a complex and multifaceted identity, and one that intersects with other aspects of identity – including race, class, sexuality, and ability – in ways that are specific to every individual.

After more than two decades of policy and practice aimed towards progress in gender equality in BiH, women's rights organizations are sounding the alarm that, since the years of war from 1992 to 1995, the rights of Bosnian women have never been more threatened than they are today. This is despite decades of context-specific efforts in this area, stimulated in part by an obligation to face the cruel legacy of sexual violence that was perpetrated during that conflict. In fact, wartime crimes against women that included brutal mass rapes finally prompted international legal mechanisms to recognize that rape and sexual violence can be used as weapons of war, and largely due to the testimonies and tireless activism of women victims themselves.⁹ Over 20,000 women were raped and subjected to other forms of sexual violence in BiH between 1992 and 1995.¹⁰

Coupled with the transition from socialism and communism to liberal democracy, the post-war recovery thus changed the gender equality landscape in BiH as international instruments were adopted, state and entity laws on domestic violence and sexual violence were updated, and initiatives to empower women economically and politically started closing a number of gender gaps. As civil society grew and BiH implemented reforms supported by the international community, advances for women at both the social and

6 Amy M. Blackstone, "Gender Roles and Society" in *Human Ecology: An Encyclopedia of Children, Families, Communities, and Environments*, edited by Julia R. Miller, Richard M. Lerner, and Lawrence B. Schiamberg, pp 335–338 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003).

7 Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004).

8 Majda Halilović, "Wartime Sexual Violence and Post-War Gender-Based Violence" in *What is the Gender of Security?*, edited by Amila Ždralović, Saša Gavrić, and Mirela Rožajac-Zulčić, pp 235–256 (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2020).

9 Ibid.

10 This number has been estimated to be as high as 50,000. For more on the experiences of women who were raped during the war in BiH, see: Inger Skjelsbæk, "Victim and Survivor: Narrated Social Identities of Women Who Experienced Rape During the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Feminism & Psychology* 16, no. 4 (2006): 373–403. Note 1 offers a discussion of the various estimates of how many women were subject to rape or other wartime sexual violence.

individual levels resulted.¹¹ And while it is beyond scope of this paper to dwell in-depth on the historical context, it is worth noting that these advances found fertile soil in BiH because of the region's earlier socialist tradition, which was walled off from religious doctrine and which prioritized the education of women, valued their labour, and treated now-contested issues like abortion relatively liberally.

The other concept we must unpack, nonviolent extremism, is also rather complex. Extremism is not new to this region, and we need look only to the recent past to see its destructive potential when its worst (violent) forms are unleashed. But violent extremism does not mysteriously emerge from the ether; the criminal disregard for life on display during the war in BiH grew out of years of extremist rhetoric and micro-cultural indoctrination. Still, in many people, this never leads them towards outright violence, even if it may lead them into exclusionary belief systems that rationalize violence or put them in the service of figures who advocate or commit violence. This can make the line between nonviolent and violent extremism rather hazy, and because movement over this line is motivated by a variety of intersecting drivers in every individual, it can be hard to determine when someone with extremist views may translate those into action.

Violent extremism and radicalization in BiH today is largely motivated by narratives of the recent war, the consequences of which are ever present in public life and in the collective memories of Bosnians, as well as the revival of unresolved grievances from earlier conflicts. That said, extremist groups in BiH are increasingly drawing from far-right discourse arising in Europe, and combining this with unique regional features; meaning that international far-right narratives tend to incorporate racism, xenophobia, and nationalism and are hateful towards migrants and minorities, whereas these narratives in BiH contain additional aspects rooted in the specific ethno-cleric-nationalism of the region.¹² According to Carter, extremism emerging from the right in all contexts consists of two “anti-constitutional and anti-democratic elements: (1) a rejection of the fundamental values, procedures and institutions of the democratic constitutional state... and (2) a rejection of the principle of fundamental human equality...”¹³

In BiH, and across the region, these anti-democratic discourses normalize hate speech (online and in public), dehumanize other groups, and promote anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives, but also converge with notions of religious superiority, the celebration of war criminals, and the denial of wartime atrocities. Far-right figures in the region speak aspirationally of states where political, cultural, and religious domination by their ethnic group is guaranteed, and of ideologies that are divisive, discriminatory, and detrimental to social cohesion. Though these individuals, and far-right groups, are not a monolith, they generally view ethnic relations through a simplistic lens, wherein certain groups are always “victims” and others are always “perpetrators”; a positioning that advances in-group narratives of grievance and threat. Far-right groups in the Western Balkans also tend to advocate for traditional patriarchal family structures, oppose LGBTQ+ rights and feminism, disparage ethnic and religious groups other than their own, and promote distrust of migrants and the West.¹⁴

11 Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), *GREVIO (polazni) postupak procjene: Izvještaj o zakonodavnim i drugim mjerama za provedbu odredbi Konvencije Vijeća Evrope o sprečavanju i borbi protiv nasilja nad ženama i nasilja u porodici (Istanbulska konvencija): Bosna i Hercegovina* [GREVIO (initial) assessment procedure: Report on legislative and other measures to implement provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention): Bosnia and Herzegovina] (Council of Europe, 2022).

12 Radicalsiation Awareness Network (2022) *Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE*. Publications Office of the European Union, 2022.

13 Elisabeth Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure?* (Manchester University Press, 2004), 17.

14 See (in local language): Izabela Kisić, ed., *Desni Ekstremizam u Srbiji [Right-wing extremism in Serbia]* (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, 2020).

3. Controlling women: the theme of extremism in public and in private

Rhetoric that centres women as both subjects of male control and agents of social chaos is common on the far right. This has been a theme in the Salafi movement in BiH, which openly rejects feminist advances and prescribes traditional roles to women in both society and the family, and gained a foothold in the country as a result of wartime and postwar factors.¹⁵ Salafist leaders have always understood the value of modern communication technologies in engaging with their followers, leaving more traditional imams of the official Islamic Community (IC) in BiH behind the pace in utilizing these technologies, which have of course become essential to reaching a wide audience, and particularly young people. In 2018, the Atlantic Initiative conducted research to determine the nature of Salafist content in online spaces, and found it often focused on the regulation of daily life and human interactions, such as by providing lifestyle and mental health advice, which proved quite effective in driving engagement.¹⁶ Content discussing Salafist parameters for sexual relations, including guidelines on practicing sex within religious bounds, were especially popular. While the ideas expressed in this content reflect a conservatism that is shared across fundamentalist interpretations of all religions, influential Salafist figures in BiH tend to place an exaggerated emphasis on the need to regulate women, which stands in contradiction to longstanding secular values of equality rooted in the Yugoslav era. To justify the notion that women must be controlled, Salafist influencers frequently portray women's sexuality itself as a threat. Wives are instructed to obey their husbands and fulfill his every sexual desire, but also to maintain their modesty at all times. And, though these are illegal in BiH, many of these influencers normalize polygamy and rationalize that violence against women is acceptable in various scenarios.¹⁷

For years, it is fair to say that Salafists were seen as the “obvious” culprits when it came to the purveyors of anti-feminist and anti-democratic rhetoric in BiH. They are a convenient “other” for a majority of Bosnians, including those who practice traditional Bosnian Islam and prefer to have no affiliation with more fundamentalist interpretations of the religion. But BiH is now seeing the strongest opposition to the expansion of human rights, including gender rights and freedom of expression and association, from the Bosnian Serb political establishment in the RS, where political elites are trying to use entity-level liability laws to silence critique and undermine independent media and civil society. New laws in the making will further handcuff civil society in the RS by redesignating many organizations as foreign agents (and implying they are working against domestic interests), and could impact many organizations working towards gender equality. Meanwhile, hateful rhetoric about LGBTQ+ individuals and groups, delivered from the highest echelons of the RS political establishment, has been connected to a recent attack on activists and journalists by football hooligans; which occurred after police banned a public gathering in support of gay rights in Banja Luka.

15 Salafism is a revivalist interpretation of Islam that first emerged in the late 19th century. Its adherents advocate the fundamentalist teachings and lifestyle prescriptions of the Salaf – the first three generations of Muslims.

16 Majda Halilović, Aner Zuković, and Nejra Veljan, *Mapping online extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: findings and reflections* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2018).

17 Ibid.

Police justified the ban on the premise that the demonstration could trigger violence, but then left activists and fellow citizens who did gather completely unprotected from the violence that ensued. According to activists involved, narratives coming from the RS President Milorad Dodik and Banja Luka Mayor Draško Stanivuković encouraged and incited the violence perpetrated by the hooligans.¹⁸

There are also signs of a newly emboldened ethno-cleric far-right in Croatia, where a group known as *Vigilare* has inspired men of different generations to gather in a main square in the capital of Zagreb to kneel together in collective prayer. As they prostrate on the concrete ground, among shops, passing trams, and mostly disinterested onlookers, they pray:

For the homeland, peace, and the conversion of the Croatian people.
 For men to become spiritual authorities in the family who will bravely witness
 and transmit the Catholic faith.
 For the cessation of premarital relations, for chastity in dress and behaviour, and for
 the renewal of Catholic marriages.
 For the end of abortion and the openness of married couples to life.
 For uncompromising church pastors and new spiritual vocations.
 For souls in purgatory.¹⁹

These prayers clearly aspire to a world in which women obey (it is surely they who must be chaste in dress and behaviour) and men set the rules (by becoming spiritual authorities), echoing the anti-gender narratives that are a common theme of extremisms across contexts. In recent months, feminist civil society and liberal Croatian journalists have criticized the rhetoric of *Vigilare*, but at the same time, similar groups are becoming more active in BiH. In the Bosnian city of Mostar, for example, activists claim that the *Muževni budite* (Be Manly) movement has been growing for some time, with its members also appearing repeatedly in public places to conduct group prayers, yet this has received only limited reporting in Bosnian media outlets.

Another shared theme of far-right extremists is some form of a “great replacement” theory, which holds that non-white people are “replacing” white people in white-majority countries and regions. This is blamed on the active migration of non-white people to Western societies (which is framed as part of a large-scale conspiracy) and is also laid at the feet of white women who do not reproduce at high enough rates. The theory was first put forth in 2011 by French writer Renaud Camus, who proposed in an essay entitled “Le Grand Remplacement” that a “replacist” global elite was colluding to dramatically reverse Europe’s racial demographics, as well as its economic, social, and cultural legacies.²⁰ But some experts argue that this is just a new term for an old allegation, “a ‘dressed-up version’ of older ideas that white nationalists have peddled about supposed conspiracies to destroy the white race” for years.²¹

18 Dejan Kožul, “Vanja Stokić: ovo je organizovan linč,” *Novosti*, 23 March 2023, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/vanja-stokic-ovo-je-organizovan-linc> (accessed 26 March 2023).

19 “Peović: Desnica koja kleči na Trgu je symbol HDZ-ove eutanazije javnog prostora,” *Index*, 6 November 2022, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/peovic-oni-koji-klece-mole-za-onozemaljski-zivot-dok-hdz-zagorcava-ovozemaljski/2409578.aspx> (accessed 12 April 2023).

20 The essence of the essay was captured in a 2019 English language publication of the 2012 text by Camus, *You Will Not Replace Us!*.

21 Josh Kovensky, “How the Great Replacement Theory Went from Extremist Fringe to GOP Mainstream,” *Talking Points Memo*, 7 August 2019, <https://talkingpointsmemo.com/muckraker/how-the-great-replacement-theory-went-from-extremist-fringe-to-gop-mainstream> (accessed 11 April 2023). Also see: Jason Wilson and Aaron Flanagan, “The Racist ‘Great Replacement’ Conspiracy Theory Explained,” *Hatewatch*, Southern Poverty Law Center, 17 May 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2022/05/17/racist-great-replacement-conspiracy-theory-explained> (accessed 11 April 2023).

Whatever one calls this theory, however, its implications for women and their sexuality are considerable. Far-right narratives position reproduction by white women as a crucial line of defence against replacement by non-whites, and reproduction by non-white women as a threat to white civilization. This puts the freedom and sexuality of all women at risk by placing women's reproduction – either too much by one group, or not enough by another – at the centre of “white survival”. Moreover, anti-feminist and misogynistic rhetoric of this kind is known to be a potent entryway to violent extremism; as it was for Anders Breivik, who wrote that the “feminization of European culture... continues to intensify” before killing 77 people in Norway in 2011, and for “incel hero” Elliot Rodger, who pledged to “punish all females for the crime of depriving me of sex” before he shot and killed six people in California in 2014.²²

Even some mainstream voices have implicitly and gradually moved towards rhetoric that promotes a return to “traditional values,” without couching this call in the same rationale as “great replacement” theorists. This may sound quite reasonable, especially compared to the extremes of the far right, but it is important to unpack what this really means for women. Tradition in this sense implies a life that revolves around the family, and a family that is defined through a patriarchal lens. In the traditional family of the patriarchy, women prioritize their home life over a work life or career, parents are always heterosexual, children are raised with religious values, and socializing is restricted to other traditional families who won't challenge these values or stir up questions about the benefit of social progress.

For women, “tradition” can thus become a trap from which it is very hard to get free, as it limits their full potential and ambition by design, forcing them into a highly gendered and specific role while delegating authority and control over their life to men. After years of progress towards gender equality, an expansion of rights, increased educational attainment, and many climbs up the so-called corporate ladder, women must be clear-eyed about the intent behind calls to “return to traditional values”, as it would be a mistake to believe they suggest any real concern for the rights and progress of women. Yet, in BiH and across the region, there is a growing trend among young people to live a more “traditional” life by deepening their practice of religion, marrying in religious ceremonies, and seeking to have as many children as possible. For many, this is tightly tied to a concept of ethnic purity and a perceived duty to increase the population of their in-group.

This question of “purity” surfaced recently in Serbia, in a somewhat unexpected way, when the government changed its in vitro fertilization (IVF) policies in November 2022 to allow the donation of reproductive material from abroad, provoking an outcry from *Dveri* – an explicitly ultranationalist party that opposes abortion, gay rights, and immigration, and holds a handful of seats in the National Assembly – on the premise that the use of this material for IVF in Serbian women would alter the genetic makeup of future generations of Serbs. The statement issued by *Dveri* was strongly criticized by mainstream politicians in Serbia, but served as a reminder that these ideas are being normalized in the public psyche and are becoming rooted because they have been sowed for years by the relentlessly aggressive nationalist politics of the Serbian political establishment; which has not only had a dubious relationship with figures who oversaw ethnic cleansing and genocide in the 1990s, but has welcomed some of them back into politics. Indeed, the overt supremacy of *Dveri* should not come as a surprise, as far-right groups do not emerge in a vacuum but are born out of the kind of revisionist narratives that have made their way into mainstream social and political spaces in Serbia.²³

22 See: Robert Marquand, “Norway attacks: Was Breivik a Christian terrorist?”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1 August 2011, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2011/0801/Norway-attacks-Was-Breivik-a-Christian-terrorist> (accessed 12 April 2023); Amanda Hess, “If I Can't Have Them, No One Will’: How Misogyny Kills Men,” *Slate*, 29 March 2014, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/05/elliott-rodger-hated-men-because-he-hated-women.html> (accessed 12 April 2023); and Nejra Veljan, “Extreme Entitlement: Misogyny, Anti-Feminism in Far-Right Recruitment,” *Balkan Insight*, 10 May 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/10/extreme-entitlement-misogyny-anti-feminism-in-far-right-recruitment/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

23 Srđan Mladenov Jovanović, “The *Dveri* Movement Through a Discursive Lens. Serbia's Contemporary Right-Wing Nationalism,” *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 66, no. 4 (2018): 481–502.

In BiH, where similar and competing narratives also abound, mainstream political voices have been similarly shameless in expressing views that are not only blatantly offensive but run contrary to laws on gender equality. For instance, when women MPs in the Federation of BiH (Bosnian entity) organized an informal women's club in 2013, Semir Efendić, then mayor of the largest municipality in BiH, Novi Grad Sarajevo, asserted that: "Gender identity is a completely false basis for political organizing and can only cause harm, especially to women who are brainwashed through such organizing to the point that they are no longer capable of normal socialization with the rest of society."²⁴ Interviews conducted for this research confirmed that this kind of conservatism is becoming mainstream thinking in BiH, and is moving entire systems towards the idea that women should "return" to a focus on family and religion, to such a degree that some women victims of domestic violence have been encouraged to seek refuge not in safe houses but in churches or monasteries.

There were also interviewees, including women, who claimed a husband should be the head of his family, that modern men have lost touch with their masculinity, that the family is under threat ("especially from foreign lobbies [and] the gays"), and that "fringe lifestyles" are "presented today as something that is normal." Reflecting on these responses, especially in light of the intransigent political dysfunction of BiH, the words of Zilka Spahić-Šiljak ring especially resonant. As she wrote: "Workers and the disenfranchised are able through right-wing populist discourses to articulate themselves in the public space, but by focusing their attention on issues of identity, values, and religion, and not on the essential issues of dispossession and impoverishment."²⁵

3.1. The rise of anti-abortion narratives in the post-Yugoslav space

This shift to the conservative gender discourse and practices has of course been global, and in the US, has reversed abortion laws that many believed were settled. There, the right to an abortion was established by a decision of the Supreme Court in the famous 1973 case of *Roe v. Wade*, which determined that this right could be inferred from the US Constitution and was valid up to the point of fetal viability, typically between 20 to 24 weeks of pregnancy. That is, until June 2022, when the current Supreme Court overturned this decision in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson*, which made the question of the legality of abortion a matter decided by the states rather than the Constitution. This essentially deconstitutionalized abortion in the US. Citizens in several former Yugoslav states experienced a similar reversal of the right to abortion after these states declared independence. The right had been enshrined in the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution which meant that abortions were carried out in medical facilities and resulted in almost no patient deaths;²⁶ but in modern day Serbia, Slovenia, and Northern Macedonia, no such right to an abortion exists.²⁷

24 See (in local language): "Semir Efendić: Političko udruživanje žena i pranje mozga," *Radio Sarajevo*, 4 February 2013, <https://radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala teme/semir-efendic-politicko-udruzivanje-zena-i-pranje-mozga/102090> (accessed 12 April 2023). Also see (in English): Sarajevski Otvoreni Centar [Sarajevo Open Centre], "Public Reaction of Women's Network of Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding unprofessional and sexist statements of the Mayor of Novi Grad Municipality Sarajevo Semir Efendić," 6 February 2013, <https://soc.ba/en/public-reaction-of-womens-network-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina-regarding-unprofessional-and-sexist-statements-of-the-mayor-of-novi-grad-municipality-sarajevo-semir-efendic/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

25 Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, "Discipliniranje zenskih tjela i seksualnosti u desnicarskim populistickim diskursima" [Disciplining Female Bodies and Sexuality in Right-Wing Populist Discourse], *Sarajevo Social Science Review* IX, no. 1 (2020): 55–70.

26 Mirjana Rašević, "Yugoslavia: Abortion as a Preferred Method of Birth Control," *Reproductive Health Matters* 2, no. 3 (1994): 68–74.

27 Nicolas Bauer, "No state, other than the former Yugoslavia, has ever written a right to abortion into its constitution," European Centre for Law and Justice, 2022, <https://eclj.org/abortion/un/no-state-has-written-a-right-to-abortion-into-its-constitution-except-the-former-yugoslavia> (accessed 10 April 2023).

In recent years, there has been a rise in the amount of anti-abortion sentiment conveyed online by regional users, particularly from Croatia. Abortion is governed in Croatia by a 1978 law that stipulates the procedure must be carried out in a hospital, within the first ten weeks of pregnancy. After this point, termination is possible only in exceptional cases, such as a fetal abnormality, and requires approval from a special committee. However, an increasing number of doctors in Croatia are simply refusing to perform abortions at all, citing conscientious objections. This right of medical practitioners to refuse care is supported by the 2003 National Law on Medical Practice, which permits physicians in Croatia to decline to diagnose, treat, or rehabilitate a patient based on ethical, religious, or moral beliefs as long as it does not violate professional standards and does not pose a permanent risk to the health or life of the patient.

This has made it almost impossible to undergo an abortion in some parts of Croatia. Moreover, this resistance from the medical community has been matched by the campaigns of groups such as *Hrvatska za Život* (Croatia for Life), which explicitly tie their message to Catholicism, such as in the image shown below (Figure 1), which promotes their Freed by Forgiveness initiative. It reads, “Lenten spiritual exercises for women wounded by abortion,” and quotes Jeremiah 30:17, “I will heal thee of thy wounds.”



Figure 1. Hrvatska za Život promotional image

In BiH, as in Croatia, abortion is legal up to ten weeks of pregnancy, but requires the approval of a committee after this point. Yet, while the termination of a pregnancy for medical reasons is covered by mandatory health insurance funds in BiH, abortions requested by the patient (referred to as intentional termination of pregnancy) must be paid for by the patient.²⁸ The Ombuds office of BiH has also found that intentional termination services are not available in all parts of the country, including in Canton 10 and some areas of Mostar, and that women report receiving little information or counseling on abortion.²⁹

Among the Facebook group comments and blog posts that researchers identified as strongly opposed to abortion, most were interwoven with distinctly religious narratives, much like the messaging in Figure 1. One example is a post on the *Ljupka ženstvenost* (Sweet femininity) blog, which reads:

Abortion is evil in itself. No social indications, no scientific reasons can justify abortion or make it something other than what it really is, and what it remains before God, namely the murder of an innocent. And the willful killing of an innocent cries out to heaven for revenge. It is abominable and sinful always, and especially when its source is personal interest.

28 Emina Bošnjak, ed., *Orange Report 6: Report on the State of Human Rights of Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2020* (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2021).

29 Human Rights Ombudsman of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Ljudska Prava u Oblasti Seksualnog i Reproductivnog Zdravlja u Bosni i Hercegovini* [Human Rights in the Field of Sexual and Reproductive Health in Bosnia and Herzegovina] (Sarajevo, 2021), 10–11.

Some of the other groups that posted anti-abortion content analysed by researchers include *Vigilare* and *Be Manly*, mentioned above, as well as *U ime obitelji* (In the name of the family), *Stop Abortusu* (Stop Abortion), and *Mlado sunce* (Young sun), the latter of which is made up of young people from Široki Brijeg in BiH who vigorously promote anti-abortion narratives, appealing to the emotions of women and attempting to shame them by presenting abortion as a sin equal to murder. Pictures posted by *Mlado sunce* on Facebook (see Figure 2) indicate that the group is connected to similar groups in Croatia. This reflects a trend observed in groups across the Bosnian far right, which have regional ties between and among them, and are often linked to wider global networks as well.

Figure 2. Picture posted on Facebook by *Mlado sunce*



4. Men on the far right and the pull of clero-conservativism

In January 2023, RS president Milorad Dodik, made a controversial comment in response to criticism by Bosnian Foreign Minister Bisera Turković of an award Dodik gave to Russian President Vladimir Putin, declaring that: “*her every statement deserves a slap in the face.*”³⁰ This misogynist saying was once common in the region and reflects a mentality that many have worked for years to overcome, and which enables a culture of public and private violence against women. When a man asserts that a woman deserves a slap in the face because she has voiced an opinion he dislikes or she dares to criticize his actions, he is attempting to demonstrate his superiority, exert his male dominance, and silence that woman. The threat of a slap in the face is especially humiliating and even infantilizing because it is frequently associated with adult discipline of a child. In the context of gender-based violence, men may similarly claim the need to “slap some sense” into their victim and this is violence many women in BiH experience.³¹ Given this fact, and considering that a slap is violence which risks prosecution according to Bosnian law,³² one wonders how Dodik dared speak those words about Turković so freely. They clearly fall outside any local norms of civility, or legality, implying that Dodik feels a considerable sense of impunity and the license to express his uncontrolled frustration, disdain, and anger, lacking any political or other decorum. Moreover, he apparently feels no obligation to model good behaviour, despite studies showing time and again that verbal threats to women are frequently a precursor to physical violence.³³

Problematically, Dodik faced no institutional punishment for his remarks. Only a few isolated voices of opposition spoke up, before politics as usual continued apace. Unfortunately, this is why and how political actors in BiH tend to have a significant degree of influence in setting harmful ideological trends and promoting hateful behaviours. The shameful statement made by Dodik gave symbolic permission to men in BiH to humiliate and assault women who voice disagreement, and by allowing it to stand, Bosnian institutions have sent a message to women that this gendered violence is tolerated.

For some men on the far right, a fight against an imagined enemy offers them an outlet for unresolved rage and feelings of inadequacy. A hate crime committed in January against the parents of Serbian youth football players who were in Sarajevo for a tournament is a good example of this.

Hooligans armed with torches and knives found an easy target, expressing their toxic masculinity as nationalist hate. Importantly, the Mayor of Sarajevo, various ministers, and the media all strongly criticized the perpetrators and offered support to the victims.³⁴ Several other recent incidents have also been illustrative of how hate, in these cases manifested as Islamophobia, is so often laced with toxic masculinity.

30 See: “Dodik suggests a saying about getting slapped was made for Foreign Minister,” 13 January 2023, <https://n1info.ba/english/news/dodik-suggests-a-saying-about-getting-slapped-was-made-for-bih-foreign-minister/>

31 OSCE, *Well-being and Safety of Women: Bosnia and Herzegovina Results Report* (OSCE, 2019).

32 Laws on domestic violence were adopted in both Bosnian entities as special pieces of legislation focused solely and comprehensively on the protection of victims of domestic violence. The Law on Protection from Domestic Violence in the RS was adopted in 2012, with the last amendments introduced in 2019. In the Federation of BiH (FBiH), the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence was adopted in 2013. BiH also has a third sub-federal administrative unit, the Brčko District, and its Law on Protection from Domestic Violence was also adopted in 2013.

33 Melissa Johnston and Jacqui True, “Mysogyny and Violent Extremism: Implications for Preventing Violent Extremism,” Monash University and UN Women, October 2019.

34 See: “Hooligans spark incident at junior tournament, man from Serbia injured,” *N1*, 15 January 2023, <https://n1info.ba/english/news/hooligans-spark-incident-at-junior-tournament-man-from-serbia-injured/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

In Bijeljina, two men urinated on the walls of a mosque, and in Čapljina, murals appeared on a bridge reading, “We will slaughter Muslim women and children.”³⁵

Men are also pulled to the far right by religion; and historically, influential nationalists in the Balkans have never shied away from religion. Quite the opposite, as religion has not only filled ideologic gaps in the regional ethnonationalist framework but has been instrumentalized to deepen ethnic divisions. The Serbian Orthodox Church has especially exercised its broad power in a way that has been pivotal to Serb ethnonationalism, taking on the role of nation builder, identity shaper, and social and cultural influencer.³⁶ To that end, the Church has been no stranger to prominent figures within who have disseminated notions of ethno-racial purity and have opposed mixing with “others” so as to avoid “degrading” Serbs as a race. This has also driven the commitment of the Church to unite Serbs across the Balkans.³⁷ As Ognjenović and Jozelić note, this politicization of religion can be viewed as a systematic deleting of the distinction between ethnicity and religion. Each religion presents itself as the only legitimate moral institution for a particular ethnic or national group, and therefore as the only judge of the morality of acts of individuals within that group. Moreover, these ethnoreligious ideologies regulate the roles of women, while also understanding them as existential; women are not only expected to bear the next generation, but to indoctrinate it.³⁸ Indeed, research on women who accompanied foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq and have since returned home reveals that women do play a significant role in passing ideology down to their children.³⁹

Yet, for some men, an attraction to far-right narratives and misogynistic language has little to do with ideology. Research by Perliger, Stevens, and Leidig offers a view into various forms of online misogyny and identifies a number of online communities and groups that legitimize violence towards women. These groups form around a range of interests and ideologies, from a shared identity as incels (involuntary celibates), to men’s rights, to gaming. The toxic ideas their members promote extend from a deep contempt for women, and a profound frustration with their inability to form intimate relationships with women. They claim that men face discrimination, and further that they are being explicitly oppressed and marginalized as a result of liberatory movements in societies that are now shaped by the interests of feminism and female perspectives.⁴⁰ Some men in the groups studied by Perliger, Stevens, and Leidig identify as pick-up artists, and view this “skill” through an unambiguously gendered lens. They teach it to other men with the goal of increasing their popularity among women and their prospect of having sexual relations, and promote the idea that it is appropriate or even preferable to manipulate women into having sex in ways that are derogatory and humiliating. This kind of misogyny was also a characteristic of Gamergate, the networked harassment of women in online spaces by members of the gamer/geek community in 2014.⁴¹

35 See: Mustafa Talha Öztürk, “Islamophobic graffiti triggers backlash from Bosnians,” *Andalou*, 5 February 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/islamophobic-graffiti-trigger-backlash-from-bosnians/2806428> (accessed 12 April 2023); and “Bosnians slam vandals’ attack on mosque in northeast,” *Daily Sabah*, 14 January 2023, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/europe/bosnians-slam-vandals-attack-on-a-mosque-in-northeast> (accessed 12 April 2023).

36 Kenneth Morrison and Vesko Garčević, “The Orthodox Church, Montenegro, and the ‘Serbian World,’” Atlantic Initiative, 2023.

37 Gorana Ognjenović, “Quo Vadis Vlachs? Project Čarnojević into the Twenty-First Century” in *Politicization of Religion, the Power of Symbolism: The Case of Former Yugoslavia and its Successor States*, edited by Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

38 Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić, “Introduction: the Power of Symbolism” in *Politicization of Religion, the Power of Symbolism: The Case of Former Yugoslavia and its Successor States*, edited by Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

39 See, for example: Anita Perešin, “The Role of Women in Post-IS Jihadist Transformation and in Countering Extremism,” in *Militant Jihadism: Today and Tomorrow*, edited by Serafettin Pektas and Johan Leman (Leuven University Press, 2019).

40 Arie Perliger, Catherine Stevens, and Eviane Leidig, “Mapping the Ideological Landscape of Extreme Misogyny,” ICCT Research Paper, January 2023, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

41 Ibid.

It is important to understand that emotional triggers, so often associated with women, are central to the involvement of many men in far-right movements. A perceived or actual loss of power or control, such as in custody negotiations after a divorce for instance, can make men more susceptible to far-right rhetoric that wraps anti-gender concepts in the promise of their lost masculinity restored.⁴² In this way, anti-gender ideologies can be used to foster a feeling of belonging and identity in men struggling with negative emotions like anger and inadequacy. To compensate for this, some men on the far right actualize their conservative ideology largely through efforts and aspirations to be protectors of their in-group. In this context, a compelling storyline has emerged from far-right organizations in the Western Balkans region that immigrants are sexual predators seeking to harm “our” women, and that members of these organizations – by opposing immigration and advocating pre-emptive violence against immigrants – are champions of women’s rights.⁴³

To develop effective strategies for countering and preventing far-right extremism, the role that emotional triggers play in attracting many men to far-right environments must be recognized. Further, it is important to understand how anti-gender ideologies specifically are used to play to the emotional vulnerabilities of these men; often by giving voice to or offering a rationale for their own most resentful and loathsome thoughts. Content from social media users that was analysed by researchers (beginning in October 2022) offers a sample of the kind of misogyny that is commonly expressed in these groups. In just one relatively mild example, a comment in reply to a photo in *Dnevni Avaz* that accompanied an article about a man making pie complained: “We live in a country where trash women with no culture or style howl behind the microphone, bearded men in dresses [make] pies, and women in trousers order [food] through [delivery apps].”

4.1. Anti-gender and anti-feminist movements

In Serbia, journalist Vladislav Đorđević is among the leading figures of the anti-gender movement and has especially developed anti-feminist thought in the region. Founder of the conservative online magazine *Geopolitika*, he has written extensively on topics related to gender, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights, and has taken a critical stance on the promotion of progressive values in Serbia. His anti-feminist writing is very popular in Serbian far-right circles, including his books *The Feminization of Serbia*, *The Myth of Patriarchy*, *The Struggle for Faith*, and *A Christian response to feminist theology*. Đorđević also posts videos to YouTube in which he discusses feminism, domestic violence, women in politics, and other related issues, presenting disinformation as fact, wrapped in brazenly misogynist language. He asserts, for instance, that the “concept” of domestic violence was developed by “lesbians to destroy men” and that laws on domestic violence are directed only against men; that it is feminists who are hateful, of men, because they are envious of men; and, curiously, that the Serbian government is a radical feminist government. He also claims that feminists wish to return to the times of the Inquisition and calls feminism (or “femi-nazism”) worse than Stalinism, fascism, or actual Nazism. In his view, any true patriot aims to end feminist projects, which are inevitably funded by “foreign colonizers to undermine the Serbian people.”⁴⁴

Notably, in January 2023, Đorđević was invited to promote his new book, *Feminism and Theology: The Creeping Heresy of Feminist Theology*, at the Archive of Vojvodina – which is also the host of the European Women’s Memory - REWOMEN Project, marking the 20th anniversary of the EU Charter on Basic Human Rights and featuring an international documentary exhibit dedicated to the history of the Movement for the Liberation of Women in Europe. In response to strong criticisms, the event was cancelled, and

42 Catherine Lutz, “Engendered Emotion: Gender, power, and the rhetoric of emotion control in American discourse” in *Emotions: A Social Science Reader*, edited by Monica Greco and Paul Stenner (London: Routledge, 2009).

43 Veljan, “Extreme Entitlement: Misogyny, Anti-Feminism in Far-Right Recruitment.”

44 For example, see the video, “Skandal: Feministkinje otimaju decu po Srbiji” [Scandal: Feminists kidnap children in Serbia], available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ml43YE3a3al>

Đorđević spoke instead at a round table.⁴⁵ Still, his ideas have clearly made their way into the mainstream in the region, and in BiH. His writing simplifies feminism to the point of banality, reducing it to nothing more than women hating men and seeking to destroy “normal” life as we know it, and researchers heard these ideas from both men and women in interviews. The view that feminism is problematic is also heard in public spaces, and in conversations among professionals. For the most part, discussions of the achievements brought about by feminist activists are reserved for civil society and academia. In these spaces, feminism is understood as a collection of theories seeking to explain and critique the social, economic, and political systems that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination against women; but it is crucial that this understanding of feminism does not remain contained within these spaces.

The excerpt shown in Box 1 (below) is illustrative of the content generated by anti-feminist ideologues in the region, who echo Đorđević. This content, from an article titled, “Feminism as a movement of ugly women”, prompted the Croatian Council for Electronic Media (VEM) to issue a misdemeanour fine of 100,000 HRK to an association known as *Sloboda*, which posted the article on its website, for inciting misogyny and violence against women.⁴⁶ The VEM responded to a complaint filed by the country’s ombuds for gender equality, which requested a determination as to whether the *Sloboda.hr* portal met the criteria for the status of an electronic publication, but the issue was dropped when the group ceased to exist at the end of October 2018 and was deleted from the Register of Associations. Yet, the website still exists, and the article is still accessible; and worse, the same article also appears on another website (*Poskok.info*).⁴⁷

Box 1. English translation of an excerpt from “Feminism as a movement of ugly women”

Every time you read an article that contains terms like women’s rights, patriarchy, pay gap, glass ceiling, rape culture, etc., copy the author’s name into Google image search and indulge in waves of horror and disgust. Sometimes it’s a truly monstrous creature, sometimes it’s just a restless eye that betrays the constant panic of avoiding reconciliation with one’s own biological role in this world, and more often, pit bull jaws that signal excess testosterone. In 9 out of 10 cases, you will witness some form of severe ugliness, obesity or hormonal imbalance.

Why feminists are ugly is a simple, yet complex question. First of all, feminists are not ugly women, but ugly women are feminists. Feminism is the pain of jealousy and envy, which is rationalized through a contradictory and vague idiocy and announced through the media as a simple truth. What is clearly visible in feminist and lesbian fashion and aesthetic expression is that ugliness should by no means be hidden and masked. There are a lot of women who don’t look very attractive in pictures, but whose cheerful spirit, smile, short skirt, flirtatiousness, or kindness can arouse much more than sympathy. Here, the goal is the opposite – to become a Medusa – to accentuate the ugliness so much that it arouses the deepest horror in every man with healthy eyes, that his testicles wither from the greasy braids and short hair that further emphasizes the facial asymmetry, and that his whole body, except for one part, is petrified by the poisonous snakes that live on her head.

45 See: “Nakon pisanja 021 otkazana sporna promocija knjige u Arhivu Vojvodine, umesto nje - okrugli sto,” *Portal 21*, 16 January 2023, <https://www.021.rs/story/Novi-Sad/Vesti/328913/Nakon-pisanja-021-otkazana-sporna-promocija-knjige-u-Arhivu-Vojvodine-umesto-nje-okrugli-sto.html> (accessed 12 April 2023).

46 See: <https://www.sloboda.hr/feminizam-kao-pokret-ruznih-zena/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

47 See: <https://poskok.info/feminizam-kao-pokret-ruznih-zena/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

5. Violent extremism directed against the LGBTQ+ community

One thing most extremists have in common, no matter their particular ideological, political, or religious orientation, is an animosity for the LGBTQ+ community. Pride parades held around major cities in the Balkans frequently activate extremist groups against LGBTQ+ people, such as in September 2022 in Belgrade, when Pride was marked by far-right violence against police and journalists. This was more of the same in Belgrade, which has a history of violence at Pride. In fact, at the first Belgrade Pride in 2001, far-right extremists hurled petrol bombs and stones at police and briefly set the office of the ruling Democratic Party on fire, so that another Pride was not held until 2010, when the far-right again instigated violent clashes that evolved into an “anti-gay riot”.⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, the Serbian Orthodox Church had voiced strong criticism of the event, calling Pride a disgrace and a threat to traditional family values.

The first Montenegro Pride in 2014 also faced violent opposition, mainly from football hooligans, but has since taken place without further incident. To some extent, this is in spite of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. In 2022, for example, the Church organized significant opposition to Pride, including by encouraging adherents to gather in the capital city of Podgorica to pray for the preservation of the sanctity of marriage and the family. And in 2016, influential Orthodox Priest Jovan Plamenac gave a public speech that was openly hateful against members of the LGBTQ+ community and then continued on this theme in an interview he gave to the Montenegrin daily, *Pobjeda*, prompting a complaint to the Ombudsman by the association Queer Montenegro. The Ombudsman concluded that Plamenac’s statements did indeed constitute hate speech, and called on Plamenac to apologize publicly to the LGBTQ+ community within 15 days and refrain from any further hate speech, emphasizing that religious beliefs cannot be used as a justification for hate speech and that hate speech cannot be a part of any religious doctrine.⁴⁹

Pride events in BiH have only commenced more recently and have faced similar opposition, though they have not been marked by the violence seen in neighbouring states. Years of human rights advancements and progress made on gender equality have not moved Bosnian society away from a general conservatism regarding LGBTQ+ rights, however, so the first Sarajevo Pride held in September 2019 received considerable attention from the international community and was protected by a major security operation. This meant that extremist protesters were outnumbered by police and participants and, despite online hate speech that preceded the event and counter-rallies on the day of the event, this inaugural Pride ended without any problems. After a two-year break due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Pride was held in Sarajevo in 2021 and 2022, and while violence was again avoided, the voices of those opposed to the event were certainly heard – whether in homophobic graffiti scrawled in the city centre or from protesters in counter-marches. In 2021 and 2022, a counter-protest was organized by a former Salafi preacher who now serves as president of the obscure Religion, People and State political party, under the slogan “give us back the rainbow”.

These protesters claimed LGBTQ+ people are undermining family values and turning people against God; and their cause was unfortunately bolstered by political figures such as Minister Adnan Delić, who

48 See: “Scores arrested in Belgrade after anti-gay riot,” *BBC News*, 10 October 2010. Also see: EuroPride 2022, “History of Prides in Serbia,” <https://europride2022.com/history> (accessed 12 April 2023).

49 LGBTI Equal Rights Association for Western Balkans and Turkey, “Montenegrin Ombudsman Decides on Hate Speech from Orthodox Priest,” 22 May 2016, <https://www.lgbti-era.org/news/montenegrin-ombudsman-decides-hate-speech-orthodox-priest> (accessed 12 April 2023).

offered his negative opinion of Pride on the official Facebook page of the Ministry of Economy of Sarajevo Canton.⁵⁰ This kind of rhetoric from government authorities only makes LGBTQ+ people in BiH feel more invisible and isolated, even as they already face a widespread lack of acceptance and potential violence, both in public and private. Fearing misunderstanding, rejection, or worse, most choose not to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity, including to family members, forcing them to hide parts of their lives from the people they love.

In other words, Bosnian society prevents LGBTQ+ people from openly living as their true selves. And while Pride events have so far ended without incidents of outright violence, that has not always been the case at past events organized by the LGBTQ+ community. In 2014, for instance, two people suffered head injuries when several masked assailants stormed Sarajevo's Kriterion Cinema during the International Queer Film Festival Merlinka.⁵¹ Why the event did not have continuous police protection was unclear, but the Constitutional Court found that the competent institutions had failed to ensure the safety of festival goers, thereby violating the right of LGBTQ+ persons to the freedom of assembly and the prohibition of torture and humiliating treatment. It took years for criminal charges to be filed against any of the attackers, but in May 2017, two attackers were identified and charged – one of whom died during the proceedings and the other of whom eventually pled guilty. Yet, in the case against this remaining attacker, the testimony of witnesses who stated they had suffered physical injuries and insults directed at them based on their sexual orientation did not convince the court that the injured parties had in fact been attacked for that reason, and did not find that aggravating circumstances applied; that is, it did not establish that the attack was carried out with the aim of intimidating and injuring a specific group of people because of their sexual orientation or gender identities.⁵²

More recently, threats of violence against the LGBTQ+ community were recently recorded after activists from the Sarajevo Open Center, a feminist organization that fights for the rights of LGBTQ+ people, announced it was hosting an iftar dinner during Ramadan. These threats included menacing comments that “anything can happen” if the event carried on as scheduled. Indeed, extremists made clear in Banja Luka that “anything can happen”, when hooligans attacked a group of activists at a meeting of the coordinating board for the local Pride parade in March of this year, leading officials to cancel two Pride events in the city.⁵³ This animosity towards LGBTQ+ rights is also prevalent in Bosnian political spaces, and when politicians use extremist rhetoric, this naturally encourages groups that espouse extremist views. Thus, it was promising that in 2019, Samra Čosović Hajdaravić, a politician from Sarajevo, was prosecuted for hate speech for statements she made in opposition to Pride on her Facebook page in 2019. About the LGBTQ+ community, she wrote: “I want people like these to be isolated and put away from our children and society. Let them go somewhere else and make a city, a state, and a law for themselves....”

50 See: “Third Sarajevo LGBTI pride march kicks off,” *N1*, 25 June 2022, <https://n1info.hr/english/news/third-sarajevo-lgbti-pride-march-kicks-off/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

51 The Merlinka Festival is named for a transgender Serbian actress who was open about being transgender and was brutally killed in March 2003 in a Belgrade suburb. To this day, the case remains unsolved, and no one has been held accountable for this horrific crime. See: “Merlinka Puts LGBT Life in Spotlight,” *Balkan Insight*, 16 December 2013, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/12/16/merlinka-puts-lgbt-life-in-spotlight/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

52 In 2019 in Tuzla Selafi protestors also tried to prevent Merlinka festival organized by Tuzla open centre, but they were stopped by the police. Sarajevo Open Centre, 13 May 2019. Donesena presuda protiv napadača na queer festival Merlinka. Accessed on April 7, 2023. <https://soc.ba/donesena-presuda-protiv-napadaca-na-queer-festival-merlinka/>

53 See: “The Police in Banja Luka forbade the holding of the LGBT Pride Event,” *Sarajevo Times*, 18 March 2023, <https://sarajevotimes.com/the-police-in-banja-luka-forbade-the-holding-of-the-lgbt-pride-event/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

But NOT here!” In April 2022, the Municipal Court in Sarajevo issued a first-instance verdict of guilt hailed as “a landmark legal victory” because it was “the first [judgement] by a Bosnian court to protect LGBTQ+ people from hate speech”.⁵⁴

It is yet to be seen whether Bosnian Serb leaders Milorad Dodik and Draško Stanivuković will also be prosecuted for making hateful statements in public against LGBTQ+ people in recent months, which activists in Banja Luka believe incited the violent attack against them.⁵⁵ Dodik has vowed to pass a law that would “ban LGBT content from school textbooks and LGBT activists from entering schools, citing a responsibility to protect the ‘traditional family values’ of Bosnian Serbs.”⁵⁶ And Stanivuković has suggested that he must “protect the people and Republika Srpska” from LGBTQ+ individuals, who are clearly unwelcome by him in Banja Luka. He has also claimed the city will “remain a bastion of traditionally patriarchal family values.”⁵⁷ Sanctioning this speech would send a strong and powerful message in support of the rule of law and human rights, and would reiterate that it is unacceptable to incite violence against LGBTQ+ people.

54 See: Ana Curic, “Bosnian politician who wanted to LGBTIQ people ‘isolated’ loses landmark case,” *Open Democracy*, 29 April 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/bosnia-herzegovina-discrimination-lgbtq-samra-cosovic-hajdarevic/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

55 See: Azem Kurtic, “Bosnian Pride Activists Blame Top Politicians for Violent Attack,” *Balkan Insight*, 20 March 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/20/bosnian-pride-activists-blame-top-politicians-for-violent-attack/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

56 Azem Kurtic, “With Anti-LGBT Law, Bosnia’s Dodik Borrows from Orban’s Playbook,” *Balkan Insight*, 5 April 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/05/with-anti-lgbt-law-bosnias-dodik-borrows-from-orbans-playbook/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

57 Kurtic, “Bosnian Pride Activists Blame Top Politicians for Violent Attack.”

6. Why some women are attracted to extremism

While extremist organizations continue to be dominated by male membership, the far-right is increasingly incorporating more women. It is worth noting, too, that researchers found some individuals in online spaces who espoused both nationalism and feminism, such as the Facebook page “National feminists of Serbia”, which appears to be run by women. The memes and posts made by administrators of the page are clearly nationalistic and in line with far-right rhetoric. In reply to comments on their page that such a group should not use the term “feminist”, they argue that there are many forms of feminism; but their posts suggest they are engaged in the concerning practice of attempting to misuse feminist ideas to bolster far-right narratives. Women are also playing an ever more significant role in the far-right media universe, helping to boost propaganda from a wide range of far-right ideologies to very large audiences.⁵⁸ Some of these women have been radicalized by the same anti-feminist, patriarchal discourse that attracts many men to the far right.

In BiH, where there has been considerable research on Salafist extremism – which came into focus over a decade ago in a climate of heightened alarm over the potential for terrorist attacks on Western soil – findings from research with women show that the dynamics of extremism are complex and it is not uncommon for women who have been radicalized to later moderate their views. This has been clear in studies examining women who have returned from Syria and Iraq after traveling there to join the “Islamic State”, for example, many of whom were convinced to travel to these battle zones in the first place by figures in unofficial congregations known as *parajamaats*, which promoted a hyper-conservative form of Islam.⁵⁹ Unlike many more prosperous Western states, BiH has successfully repatriated several groups of Bosnian citizens from refugee camps in the conflict zone, and the gendered nature of the foreign fighter phenomenon has been examined in studies involving some women returnees. Among other things, this research has revealed that women may rationalize raising their children in harmful and violent environments, but it is often their own histories of trauma and personal loss that attracted them to what they perceived as a simple rules-based life under Sharia law, as promised by influential Salafist figures.⁶⁰ This turned out to be a very consequential misperception, but it is one grounded in the idea that by playing her proper role, a woman will enjoy the protection of religion and will be rewarded with some degree of ease in her life; which is a narrative promoted by far-right extremists more generally.

It is often discounted that women have historically played important roles in far-right movements, but their ownership over one vital function – the ability to carry the in-group forward into the future – has always afforded them value to the far right, and this has served as an entry point to other activities. In recent years, especially since the lockdowns associated with COVID-19, which increased the time many women spent online and in isolation, there has been a growth of the involvement of women in far-right groups, especially those that form around extremist conspiracy theories like Qanon. Among women who reject feminism and are attracted to the idea of playing more traditional gender roles, there has also been an emergence of “Tradwife” movements, which advocate increased birth rates for white women (to counter the “great replacement”) and encourage the total subservience of women to their husbands. Whilst not the rule for all tradwives, some popular tradwife influencers are explicit in their connection to far-right ideals, using their platforms to disseminate White supremacist propaganda. The movement relies strongly on social media, where tradwife influencers tend to post about their domestic life, cooking,

58 Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey, “How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right,” 2019.

59 See: Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, *The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters’ Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2016).

60 Halilović, Zuković, and Veljan, *Mapping online extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

fashion, and pleasing their husbands, while advocating anti-feminist views, such as by celebrating the idea that a woman should not be a part of the labour market but should invest her energy in ensuring a happy family and husband.⁶¹

It must be stated that plenty of women who embrace traditional roles are not extremists. Still, women who feel a sense of exclusion in the context of modern feminism may be particularly susceptible to finding affinity with groups that promote these traditional views alongside extremist rhetoric. In exploring why women have always been an important part of American hate movements, Darby discovered that her subjects had been drawn to far-right ideology and white supremacy for a variety of reasons, with some finding a sense of belonging, some following their faith, and some driven by power.⁶² There can be a tendency to oversimplify the motivations of women who join far-right movements, and moreover to assume that they are motivated by different factors than men; but it is clear that the reasons women are attracted to extremism vary and that their capacity to fully embrace extremism is real.

This is something Russia has long recognized and has taken into consideration in designing its persistent and malicious influence operations in BiH. Russia views the ethno-nation and frozen conflict as a geopolitical tool over which it can exert the most control if it triggers internal unrest and political turmoil, especially in multi-ethnic states, and it understands the important role women in media can play by serving as trusted sources of information in their communities. Moscow's current strategy to encourage Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat nationalism in BiH is meant to undermine the country's democratic advances and the legitimacy of the Bosnian state, and to impede its incorporation into Euro-Atlantic structures, and some women are becoming prominent in this effort. These women are often used to deliver a soft introduction to more extreme ideological narratives, facilitating the so-called "redpilling" of individuals vulnerable to radicalization. They include influential public figures such as Ljubinka Milinčić, an editor at the Serbian branch of Russia's *Sputnik*, and her daughter Jelena Milinčić, editor of *Russia Today Balkan*.

The rather sharp increase in women who openly espouse far-right ideologies is a worrying trend, and one that has inspired a growing body of research on women who promote these ideologies. These studies show that some women can be quite easily swayed by narratives that identify an in-group and out-group and which espouse xenophobia and racism or reject a certain religious viewpoint. In fact, a 2016 survey in Germany found that women were somewhat more likely than men to sympathize with "new right attitudes" and had a much larger predisposition to favour the rights of native Europeans.⁶³ Women's sympathy and participation in far-right movements in BiH and the region, much like in other contexts, is informed by the durability of patriarchal structures, negative social constructions of feminism and gender equality, and the increasingly mainstream idea that modern progressivism and feminism pose a threat to certain ways of life, and to values that uphold femininity, motherhood, and family. Many of the women who join far-right groups feel empowered by doing so, as they gain recognition and status through the role they play within them. This can satisfy a woman's search for significance, and when combined with the belief that her religion, identity, or livelihood is threatened, can become a recipe for mobilizing her further participation in an extremist movement.

Spahić-Šiljak has reflected on Bosnian Muslim women who gathered in women's organizations based on religious and ethnic belonging after the 1992–1995 war. Women who had embraced religion and accepted religious teachings, rules, and obligations were still not treated as equals to men by religious institutions, and so they organized various groups aimed at strengthening ethnonational ideals, and were thus distanced from feminism. These groups claimed to work towards advancing the position of women in their social and ethnic spaces but in fact tightened the strictures on women's empowerment by engaging

61 Mariel Cooksey, "Why Are Gen Z Girls Attracted to the Tradwife Lifestyle?" *The Public Eye* (Spring/Summer 2021): 10–14.

62 Seyward Darby, *Sisters in Hate* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2020).

63 See: Elisa Gutsche, ed., *Triumph of the Women? The Female Face of the Populist Far Right in Europe* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2018), 31.

in nationalist discourse, in which “women are usually portrayed... as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectives, reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, participants in the ideological reproduction of the collective, transmitters of culture, signifiers of ethnic/national groups, and as participants in national, economic, political, and military struggles.”⁶⁴

Deconstructing this discourse falls largely to feminist activists in the region, and researchers therefore benefited from insights gained at the Regional Network Meeting for Activists of the Movement in the Western Balkans Region, held on 8 November 2022 in Sarajevo and organized by the CURE Foundation. Activists and leaders from seven regional countries discussed key issues within thematic working groups, to determine how feminist activists are connected regionally, and what topics unite and divide them. Participants agreed that anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives are gaining ground in all Western Balkan countries, sometimes as a recycled version of deeply harmful rhetoric from the 1990s. The ever more overt role of religious leaders in the anti-gender movement was also raised by some activists, who especially noted the visibility and power of the Serbian Orthodox Church in this regard, which has become inseparable from some strains of Serb populist and ethnonationalist politics. Participants also emphasized that a considerable obstacle to gender equality, across regional contexts, is the institutionalization of the extreme right, which has infiltrated every level of administration and society. This influence is impacting the US, Europe, and beyond, and is accompanied by media overrun with false information that directly impacts women’s rights. Anti-feminist arguments in these media spaces are often reductionist, populist, and easy to engage with, and find support among both men and women.

In interviews for this study, researchers found some women were quite transparent about their ultra-nationalist and anti-feminist positions. For instance, two women made a point of defending the Bosnian Serb wartime military leader Ratko Mladić during their interview and expressed scepticism about the notion of gender equality in politics. They reiterated far-right rhetoric that a husband should be the head of his family, that men have lost their masculinity, that families are somehow harmed by the LGBTQ+ community, and that compulsory military service should be reinstated. They also framed the Law on Gender Equality and quotas in political representation not as tools of empowerment for women, but as “another noose around their necks” that allows men to dictate to women. These women were conflicted because they felt dismissed in political spaces but disliked the feminist thinking that has enabled women to participate more fully in those spaces. They characterized feminist groups as almost cult-like and described them as biased, arguing that women can fight independently for their own rights with no need for the feminist movement.

The implication by these women that feminist activism is itself a sort of religion is notable, given the complex ties between and among religion, ethnic identity, and the far right in the region. Political figures in BiH feel free to evoke “faith and family” alongside “people and country” in their official messaging, often combined with images featuring women. In fact, the founders of the Bosnian People’s Party sought to register it as “the Bosnian People’s Party-Faith, People, and State” (*Bosanska Narodna Stranka-Vjera, Narod, Država*), and though this longer name was rejected by the Municipal Court in Sarajevo for explicitly mentioning faith, the party continues to use it on social media (see Figure 3).

64 Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, “Nation, religion and gender” in *Politicization of Religion, the Power of Symbolism: The Case of Former Yugoslavia and its Successor States*, edited by Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).



Figure 3. Facebook post of the Bosnian People's Party

As discussed earlier, some women hold deeply nationalistic views and sympathize with or join far-right groups because they find like-minded people, and some make their way to these groups as part of a search for political or personal significance, but in any case, certain psychologies come into play in this kind of social process. For one, humans tend to perceive interactions with like-minded people as beneficial. Hampton, Boyd, and Sprecher have proposed that this is because these interactions make us feel more confident in our own attitudes about the world.⁶⁵ Beyond this, people make assumptions based on sameness, such as that people who think like them will also share other positive characteristics they see in themselves, and will generally have more in common with them, meaning they pose less of a challenge than people who are less similar. And while theories of self-expansion assert that

people are likely to gain more valuable knowledge and experience by spending time with those who are dissimilar to them, people are more inclined to see opportunities for self-expansion in the context of their in-group.⁶⁶ It is important that policymakers appreciate the degree to which social processes, not ideology per se, drive the group formation that underpins many extremist movements.

65 Adam J. Hampton, Amanda N. Fisher Boyd, and Susan Sprecher, "You're like me and I like you: Mediators of the similarity-liking link assessed before and after a getting-acquainted social interaction," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36, no. 7 (2019): 2221–2244.

66 Ibid.

7. Countering extremism through a gendered lens

The online groups observed for this research promote narratives that centre the need to control women, and often portray men as justifiably aggrieved; by the evils of feminism, or materialism, or critical theory, or “gender ideology”, or the West (i.e., NATO). This entitlement of men that lies at the heart of so much far-right rhetoric reflects an increasingly widespread toxic masculinity in the mainstream. Yet, efforts to achieve gender equality and counter misogyny often neglect to deconstruct toxic masculinity, and also fail to appreciate the impact of emotional triggers for men who adopt extremist beliefs. Emotions of any kind are stereotypically associated with women, but they are actually a key driver for many men who find their way into extremism, and far-right groups are savvy about offering up an imaginary enemy that provides susceptible men an outlet and target for unresolved anger and feelings of inadequacy. Prevention efforts that address men’s emotions, frustrations, and grievances have not been adequately explored, and may represent a potential area for further work and development.

The (re-)mainstreaming of sexism and misogyny, especially in online spaces, means that women are frequently identified in media monitoring reports as the targets of harassment and hate speech. In a number of cases in the region, women’s rejection of social norms has been used as a pretext to target them based on their gender. Narratives have also been created around highly publicized cases of gender-based violence, to justify this violence, which has led to expressions of hate speech against victims.⁶⁷ Weak responses by political and security actors to cases in which misogyny is openly promoted or violence against women is publicly rationalized indicate a failure of democratic mechanisms.⁶⁸

Having said that, there are hopeful signs that policymakers and researchers alike are paying more attention to far-right extremism these days, and specifically to the way gender is weaponized by far-right groups. In BiH, key policy documents like the Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism (2021–2026), which is developed through joint consultations with experts from across the country, now acknowledge the intersection of gender and extremism. The previous Strategy, formulated when efforts to combat the foreign fighter phenomenon were paramount, was largely shaped by that focus and thus prescribed activities primarily aimed at preventing ISIL-inspired terrorism from gaining a foothold in BiH. Other forms of violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism were discussed, if less urgently, but the importance of addressing gender was not recognized. Hence, it is a clear indicator of progress that the new Strategy captures the threat of far-right extremism and incorporates gender analysis, and does more to encourage the establishment of lasting relationships between governmental and non-governmental institutions, including women’s rights organizations. It also offers an opening to civil society to partner with media in an effort to combat misogynistic narratives that undermine the rights and freedom of women and the LGBTQ+ community.

As a country, BiH must engage in a critical review of what far-right narratives mean for women, for equality, and for society as a whole. Silencing, undermining, and forcing women back into “traditional” roles will have lasting economic and cultural repercussions, among others. Programming designed to combat violence against women, or to advance gender equality and the political participation of women,

67 See: “MEDIA MONITORING REPORTS: Hate speech in the Balkans mainly targets ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation,” South East European Network for Professionalization of Media, <https://seenpm.org/media-monitoring-reports-hate-speech-in-the-balkans-mainly-targets-ethnicity-gender-identity-and-sexual-orientation/> (accessed 13 April 2023).

68 Nejra Veljan and Maida Čampara-Čehajić, *Gender Ideologies: How Extremists Exploit Battles over Women’s Rights and Drive Reciprocal Radicalization* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2022).

must begin to mainstream activities and discussions that bring a focus to the impact of far-right rhetoric, on men and women. Dialogue that unpacks tradition and the patriarchy in public forums is needed to deconstruct years of women's oppression, threats of violence and femicide, and disproportionate rates of poverty. Such dialogue must also revisit and contextualize basic rights for women, such as abortion, which has only recently become a hotly contested issue in the region.

It is vital that more activities and measures are directed against hate speech as well, including by strengthening prosecutorial tools. For instance, criminal codes in the country that adjudicate incitement of hate do not protect characteristics that are often the reason a victim is targeted for these crimes, such as gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability; they apply only in cases where someone is targeted for their nationality, religion, or race. The resolution of these legal issues is crucial due to the significant impact of hate speech by public figures targeting the LGBTQ+ community, as discussed earlier in this paper. This kind of speech, particularly when coming from prominent politicians, poses a serious risk of inciting physical violence driven by hatred.

Much of the burden will still fall on feminist organizations and civil society actors working towards the gender equality agenda to begin and sustain conversations about how radicalization rooted in anti-gender ideology can be countered in the real world. It may be useful for regional feminist activists to reassert the core values of feminism – inclusivity, solidarity, anti-nationalism, antiracism, and the protection of sexual minorities – and to engage with women in politics who reject concepts of feminism in order to remind them of the significant contributions feminist movements have made in challenging and transforming political systems and institutions in ways that promote women's participation, not only in politics but in all areas of life. It may also be effective to draw on regional feminist legacies from the not-so-distant past to inspire a new way forward. For example, Mladjenovic and Hughes have explored the impact of the feminist movement in Serbia during and after the wars of the 1990s, finding that feminist activists were at the centre of resistance to these wars, including by documenting and exposing war crimes committed against women, organizing mass protests, providing support to survivors of wartime sexual violence, and advocating for the legal and political rights of women. Open dialogue among women of different ethnicities played a significant role in challenging the gendered dimensions of the war and violence and in advocating for gender equality and women's rights.⁶⁹ This kind of dialogue is needed in the region now among women, to resist the gendered narratives and actions of the far right.

It is also important that claims to morality from the far right are challenged. To that end, discussions that compel women to consider what they really gain from "tradition" can be impactful. For instance, engagement on the question of whether those who espouse traditional values are actually more ethical or inclined to protect their family and loved ones may raise the point that domestic violence occurs even in "traditional" homes and families, and that every third woman in BiH is a victim of violence. Societies in the region are still silent on the sexual abuse of children in religious settings as well, despite very public controversies over the apparently systemic enabling of this behaviour by Catholic Church structures. Meanwhile, far-right narratives perpetuate the idea that houses of religion offer safe sanctuary to all. In the context of capacity building initiatives aimed at mainstreaming gender in the prevention of extremist violence (with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders), one way to address violent misogyny is to empower practitioners and first responders to respond to misogynistic behaviour. It is crucial to avoid framing this issue solely as a legal or security concern, but to recognize also it as a matter of gender.

69 Lepa Mladjenovic and Donna M. Hughes, "Feminist Resistance to War and Violence in Serbia" in *Frontline Feminisms: Women, War, and Resistance*, edited by Marguerite Waller and Jennifer Rycenga (London: Routledge, 2001). Also see: Orli Fridman, *Memory Activism and Digital Practices After Conflict: Unwanted Memories* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

Women's rights organizations possess valuable insights into extremism that should not be disregarded, and bring relevant expertise from other gendered problems to the table, such as important parallels to typologies and theories of domestic violence.⁷⁰

Part of the challenge of addressing the intersection of far-right and anti-feminist narratives with extremist violence is the fact that this connection often goes unacknowledged in current prevention strategies for countering and preventing extremism. However, we know that violent extremism – which can reasonably be viewed as a point farther along the radicalization continuum than nonviolent extremism – is typically built on feelings of marginalization and a search for identity, making simple explanations for a complex world attractive, so that reductive narratives can be instrumentalized to activate certain individuals to take violent action to cement their belonging in a group. If we assume that preventing violent extremism and preventing *nonviolent* extremism go hand-in-hand (and they do), the complicated and non-linear ways in which multiple factors intersect in processes of radicalization must be acknowledged. A security-oriented approach alone cannot effectively counter extremism.⁷¹ Indeed, it is increasingly clear for example that better understanding extremism requires more research into the role of toxic masculinity as both a product and driver of radicalization.

On the other side of prevention is disengagement, and there is also much to learn from the experiences of practitioners doing this work. In BiH, the repatriation of some women from foreign battlefields has demanded that frontline practitioners develop their knowledge and skill in this area. Women returnees have received psychotherapy support to facilitate their reintegration into secular society, and no longer express sympathy for extremist violence. Some are even cooperating with security institutions. This is a promising sign that disengagement work can be successful even with women who have explicitly supported ideologically motivated violence in the past. Still, this requires that practitioners understand not only the factors that influence a woman's radicalization but also how they can help her deconstruct the ideological framework within which she is operating. In other words, to support the disengagement of women from far-right groups, these practitioners must have a reasonable grasp of the underlying dynamics of far-right extremism and the many disparate sources from which far-right narratives are drawn.

⁷⁰ UNESCO, *Preventing violent extremism through education: a guide for policy-makers* (Paris: UNESCO, 2017).

⁷¹ Christine Agius, et al., *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria: Applying a gender lens to develop prevention and deradicalisation approaches* (Melbourne: Victorian Government, Department of Justice and Community Safety, 2020).

Reviews

This is a deeply-researched, well-written and insightful policy paper that should be required reading for anyone interested in the intertwined issues of gender and extremism not just in BiH or the Western Balkans, but around the world. The authors situate the misogynistic actions, including hate speech, of actors both on the fringes and the mainstreams in BiH and the Western Balkans, and highlights why extremism needs to increasingly be understood, analyzed and addressed through the lens of gender. Importantly, the authors situate the ongoing threats against the rights of women and LGBT+ individuals in the broader global context, underscoring that what we are seeing in BiH and the Western Balkans is part of a worldwide phenomenon. This includes discussing ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy theories, whether explicit or couched in polite language, to normalized abusive, misogynistic language in the public space. It’s often very challenging to simultaneously provide deep insights into a specific national or regional context while also ‘zooming out’ to place said context into part of a bigger picture, but in this the authors have succeeded.

Michael Colborn
Bellingcat

This study provides a series of arguments that indicate that anti-feminism grows and draws power from the synergy of ethno-nationalist politicians, clergy, and ultra-right organizations. Radicalization is deeply rooted in anti-feminist ideology, and women have become an easy target of “toxic masculinity” which is also expressed as “nationalist hatred”. It warns us that the legacy of brutal violence against women during the wars of the 1990s has not been overcome. The central place of research is Bosnia and Herzegovina in its internal complexity and dynamics. However, the study would be incomplete if it did not provide an insight into Serbia and Croatia, whose anti-feminist campaigns are substantially reflected in BiH as well. It also includes topics common to extremist organizations in local and regional contexts, such as the “great replacement” theory, abortion, traditional values and attacks on LGBTQ+, as well as answers to the question of why ultra-conservative and ultra-right groups attract women as well. There is much that connects Salafist ultra-conservatives and ultra-right and ultra-conservative groups from Serbia and Croatia, regardless of their particular ideologies, political and religious orientations. The study is important both for theorists and for practitioners, for those who want to reaffirm the basic values of feminism: inclusiveness, solidarity, anti-nationalism, anti-racism, and protection of sexual minorities. And finally, but most importantly, its importance is that it points to the necessity of returning to the principles of secular organization of the post-Yugoslav states.

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