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Digital Dynamics of Radicalization: Tracing Far-Right Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Southeast Europe

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About the author

Dr. Nejra Veljan is a researcher with expertise in security and justice studies. She earned her PhD from De Montfort University and holds both an MA in Security Studies and an LLM from the University of Sarajevo. Specializing in the analysis of radicalization, violent extremism, and gender-based crimes, she adeptly employs quantitative and qualitative methodologies, utilizing tools such as SPSS, Crowd Tangle and NVivo. In her role at the Atlantic Initiative, Dr. Veljan has overseen projects addressing all forms of violent extremism and supported the work of institutions in reintegration of individuals returning from conflict zones. Additionally, she has worked with international and local organizations in the region and has collaborated with think tanks across Europe, aimed at countering violent extremism. Her work reflects a strong synergy between academic research and practical engagement with a broad range of stakeholders.

Executive Summary

The paper presents a thorough examination of the digital proliferation of far-right extremism, a phenomenon that gained global attention following the tragic Christchurch attack in March 2019. The attack underscored the role of social media in broadcasting violent extremist content, prompting international responses such as the Christchurch Call to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online. Despite these efforts, the paper argues that far-right content remains resilient, often migrating and re-emerging across various platforms, including mainstream social media. The paper's methodology involves a comprehensive mapping of the far-right digital ecosystem in the South-eastern Europe, with an emphasis on seven mainstream social media platforms. The analysis identifies prominent themes and narratives used by far-right groups to recruit and radicalize individuals, noting the regional specificity of these movements which often leverage historical grievances and ethno-nationalism to mobilize support. Significant in the findings is the adaptability of far-right groups, which strategically shape discourse to serve their aims. These groups engage in historical revisionism, promote ethno-nationalism, and invoke victimization narratives to resonate with individuals' sense of injustice or grievance. Moreover, the paper reveals a concerning trend: some of these online communities are not just isolated echo chambers but are linked to real-world violence, demonstrating the tangible impact of online radicalization.

Introduction

The terrorist attack that unfolded in March 2019 in a Christchurch reverberated worldwide and drew immense public outcry, in part because the perpetrator had broadcast his actions live on Facebook. The *New York Times* aptly characterized it as 'A Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet.'[1] Indeed, the perpetrator not only teased his plans on X (former Twitter) and shared a manifesto on both Twitter and 8chan (an online message board) prior to the attack, but live-streamed the crime as he committed it. In response, Jacinda Ardern, then Prime Minister of New Zealand, and President Emmanuel Macron of France, jointly initiated the Christchurch Call – an international initiative to eradicate terrorist and violent content from online spaces, which seeks to garner support and collaboration from governments, tech companies, and other stakeholders to address the issue of online extremism and ensure safety in the digital realm.[2]

The Christchurch Call and similar initiatives are important, but efforts to remove extremist content from online spaces are challenged by the fact that this content often migrates through the darkest parts of the internet and even re-appears in the mainstream platforms from time to time. For instance, when 8chan was shut down in August 2019, many viewed it as a positive development until it became apparent that this had merely prompted a migration of 8chan users to similar alternative platforms. The disturbing trend that had emerged in the wake of the Christchurch shooting, of far-right groups praising the act and subsequent attackers adopting a similar approach, had not been stopped; this content had simply moved to new online spaces.

In other words, 8chan had been just one node within a much larger and ever-evolving global network of far-right platforms, where far-right online subcultures are thriving.[3] Indeed, some researchers have described this as a space where an increasingly cohesive subculture of extremism is forming, often under the guise of 'counterculture' or anti-establishment-ism.[4] Complementing the social media platforms that form the core of this network is a collection of 'media' outlets that claim to offer an alternative to mainstream news while amplifying far-right, anti-(im)migrant, and anti-democratic narratives in sensationalist click-bait stories posted without attribution. Many of these outlets are local and translate international narratives into local languages and through the lens of local culture and context.

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1   Kevin Roose, 'A Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet,' *New York Times*, 15 March 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/technology/facebook-youtube-christchurch-shooting.html.

2   See: https://www.christchurchcall.com.

3   Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, Travis G. Coan, 'Variations on a Theme? Comparing 4chan, 8kun, and Other chans' Far-Right "/pol" Boards,' *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (2021): 65–80.

4   See: Richard Smirke, 'Jihadi Rap: Understanding the Subculture,' *Billboard*, 10 October 2014, http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6273809/jihadi-rap-l-jinny-abdel-majed-abdel-bary; and Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (I.B. Tauris & Co., 2017).

In this way, far-right groups have created a sense of 'local community' online and have generated 'cultural' bonds among individuals as they interact and share ideas and practices. These bonds are constructed around distinct notions of identity that define an ingroup and outgroup, and are reinforced through various means, including the adoption of unique group labels and the glorification or vilification of individuals who embody the values of the ingroup or outgroup.[5] This has created a enabling environment that not only encourages the celebration of far-right terrorists and war criminals, but makes the social media platforms on which the far-right operates a breeding ground for the spread of disinformation (especially conspiracy narratives demonizing outgroup),[6] coordinated harassment against politicians (usually women and liberals),[7] and meme campaigns meant to influence elections and political discourse.[8]

Visual content specifically wields considerable power and can foster greater trust in messaging by forging 'a relationship between the spectator, the image and the sender.'[9] Moreover, visual material persists longer in memory, and thus in salience.[10] And this continuous exposure to images, videos, and emotionally charged language, coupled with the opaque choice-making of algorithms designed to perpetually select content that evokes an increasingly emotional response, has profound implications in processes of radicalization. In fact, emotional drivers are a crucial element in most journeys to radicalization.[11] This makes it especially concerning that social media platforms not only harness but manipulate emotions, by design. These platforms have thus become, and are likely to continue to be, fundamental and enduring contributors to radicalization, and forums where violent extremist content is widely disseminated.[12] This clearly represents a critical challenge to societies around the world, and yet the accessibility and anonymity offered by online platforms make it relatively easy for far-right groups to distribute propaganda, recruit new members, and incite real-world violence. Given the significant rise in far-right motivated terrorism over the past several years, which has more than tripled (320 percent) in that time, it is evident that this online far-right ecosystem has manifested offline action.[13] Hence, social media platforms go beyond merely offering new avenues for extremist actors to disseminate their message, they provide exploitable structures that amplify the impact of extremist content.

If the internet is ever going to become a safe space for all users, it cannot include sanctuaries for people actively seeking to undermine democracy and human. However, as policymakers in the Southeastern Europe increasingly grapple with how to address the migration and replication of security issues into the digital sphere, a knowledge gap remains regarding far-right online subcultures, which are growing ever more cohesive and ever more dangerous. For that reason, this policy paper analyses the main themes and recruitment strategies

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5   The online "incel" subculture idolizes attackers such as Elliot Rodger or Alek Minassian, for example, and has pseudo-canonized them within the community. See: Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan, 'From "Incel" to "Saint": Analyzing the violent worldview behind the 2018 Toronto attack,' *Terrorism & Political Violence* 33, no. 8 (2021): 1167–1691; and Taisto Witt, '"If i cannot have it, i will do everything i can to destroy it." the canonization of Elliot Rodger: "Incel" masculinities, secular sainthood, and justifications of ideological violence,' *Social Identities* 26, no. 5 (2020): 675–689.

6   Christina Schori Liang and Matthew John Cross, 'White Crusade: How to Prevent Right-Wing Extremists from Exploiting the Internet,' Strategic Security Analysis, no. 11, July 2020.

7   A trend has emerged, predominantly impacting female journalists, activists, and politicians, of targeted harassment from far-right trolls in online spaces. This is meant to intimidate their political adversaries and ultimately stifle or silence their voices. See: Nina Jankowicz, *How to Be a Woman Online: Surviving Abuse and Harassment, and How to Fight Back* (Bloomsbury, 2022).

8   Research conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) during national, Bavarian, and European Parliamentary elections in Germany revealed that far-right groups had engaged in coordinated online efforts to support the right-wing populist party. See: Jakob Guhl, Julia Ebner, and Jan Rau, *The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020).

9   Ibid., 14.

10 Hélène Joffe, 'The Power of Visual Material: Persuasion, Emotion and Identification,' *Diogenes* 55, no. 1 (2008): 84-93.

11 See: Hilary Pilkington, 'Radicalization as and in Process: Tracing Journeys through an "Extreme-Right" Milieu,' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2023.2169896; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, 'Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model,' *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 205–2016.

12 Stuart Macdonald, Elizabeth Pearson, Ryan Scrivens, and Joe Whittaker, 'Using Online Data in Terorrism Research,' VOX-Pol, 10 May 2023, https://www.voxpol.eu/using-online-data-in-terrorism-research/.

13 Guhl, Ebner, and Rau, *The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right*, 7.

used in online spaces by far-right groups in BiH, Serbia and Montenegro, to trigger an emotional response in users, as well as the underlying factors that contribute to radicalization within the local far-right online milieu. The aim is to provide policymakers with insights and recommendations that will inform more effective policy responses and will shape collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders in the region, to mitigate the risks associated with online radicalization and promote a safer digital environment.

Context and methodology

Because this paper explores the strategies and narratives used by far-right actors in online spaces, and how these narratives are linked to radicalization, it is important to define several key terms. First, *radicalization* refers to the process by which individuals or groups adopt behaviours, beliefs, and ideologies, or are motivated to take actions, that fall well outside the contextual norm. This process involves a cognitive reframing that often leads an individual to advocate for significant social or political change and may or may not lead to their acceptance or engagement in violence.[14] Similarly, *extremism* is the belief that an in-group's success or survival is inseparable from the need for hostile action against an out-group.[15] *Violent extremism*, however, is specific to ideologies and actions that embrace or promote violence per se.[16] This includes terrorist groups and armed militias, among others. However, radicalization does not always culminate in the violent extremism associated with foreign fighting, of course, but the discourses that radicalize people even into non-violent extremism (meaning, they hold extreme beliefs but do not engage in or espouse violence) are characterized by threats against an array of minorities, and the ideologies underlying this rhetoric are inherently anti-democratic. In the process of online radicalization, individuals adopt extremist beliefs and ideologies through technology-mediated means in digital spaces.[17] Given the amount of time most people around the world, spend online every day, it is safe to assume that few radicalization processes occur entirely offline anymore, if at all. Hence, there is a clear need to map the online far-right ecosystem, understand the narratives and strategies used by far-right groups within it and how they influence offline behaviour.

In BiH, radicalization processes and the far-right extremist milieu must be understood in the context of wider regional far-right movements.[18] Among other things, these movements embrace authoritarianism, fascism, and exclusionary nationalism. Functionally, this produces narratives promoting chauvinism, xenophobia, racism, and populism, but most prominently, ethno-nationalism – the differences of religion, language and history and fuels irredentism, and explicitly rejects an inclusive and multi-ethnic regional culture.[19]

In BiH, this dynamic has generated subtle distinctions among the far-right narratives of Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats. Perhaps most notable is the fact that Bosniak ethno-nationalism centres BiH as the motherland, in contrast to Serb and Croat ethno-nationalism focuses on allegiances with Croatian and Serbia proper, and even includes territorial aspirations to different parts of BiH. In other words, Serb and Croat nationalists view these neighbouring states not only as ancestral homelands but also as sources of ethno-national identity and view the state of BiH as unsettled or artificial. Still, one thing all far-right groups in the Southeastern Europe have in common is a proven adeptness at utilizing an array of digital platforms to disseminate their narratives and mobilize their audiences. The specificity of these narratives allows local far-

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14 Alex P. Schmid, 'Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?, ICCT Research Paper, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2014.

15 JM Berger, Extremism, The MIT Press, 2018, 105.

16 Alex P. Schmid, 'Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?, ICCT Research Paper, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2014.

17 Jens F. Binder and Jonathan Kenyon, 'Terrorism and the internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?' *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022), DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.997390.

18 See: Majda Halilović and Nejra Veljan, *Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Atlantic Initiative, 2021); Mirza Buljubašić, 'Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE,' European Commission and RAN, 2022; Sead Turčalo and Hikmet Karčić, *The Far Right In Bosnia And Herzegovina: Historical Revisionism And Genocide Denial* (Balkan Insight, 2021).

19 Buljubasic, 'Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans.'

right actors to strategically shape and guide discourse to serve their aims, intertwining history with revisionism, and emphasizing ingroup victimization as a means of activating underlying feelings of injustice or grievance. Indeed, the operations of these groups on social media platforms employ diverse content formats to amplify messages in multiple ways and engage a wide range of followers by appealing to emotions.

Some of the regulatory issues that surround privately-owned social media platforms present substantial challenges to policymakers and other stakeholders seeking to address the growth of far-right subcultures in online spaces. A reliance on the internal resources of social media companies may be limiting, and may even result in discriminatory outcomes, as human content moderation is known to be impacted by bias.[20] Nonetheless, devising effective countermeasures requires a clearer sense of the primary themes and recruitment strategies used by far-right groups in online spaces. *Thus, the Atlantic Initiative conducted an extensive mapping exercise to shed more light on the online far-right extremist milieu in BiH, including its links in Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia.*

This mapping project represents one of the most comprehensive analyses of the regional online far-right ecosystem to date, though it relied exclusively on openly available data, meaning that no closed groups were accessed and no content was scraped from private profiles.[21] In this report, the seven social media platforms used most extensively by far-right extremists in BiH, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro to disseminate their messaging and propaganda (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, TikTok, YouTube, and Viber) are analysed, along with in-depth case studies of far-right groups from the region, which promote ideologies ranging from (and sometimes combining) ethno-nationalism to populism to Neo-Nazism. While acknowledging that other social media platforms, such as Reddit and VK, may also be used by far-right actors in the region, this analysis was focused primarily on the platforms that are mainstream, most popular and most influential among far-right extremists in the Southeastern Europe.

A goal of this research was to determine which thematic discourses and narratives are most prominent in the online far-right milieu of BiH (and the region). To do so, researchers utilized manual coding, which involved the systematic categorization of posts from a spectrum of communities, groups, and platforms. This allowed for the identification of prevailing thematic trends. The methodology also steered clear of imposing preconceived categories, so that the analytical framework evolved inductively. Significantly, this mapping (that was done manually) identified 176 platforms and groups coded as pro-Serb, 78 as pro-Bosniak, 60 as pro-Croat, and 26 as pro-Montenegrin; a substantial number of which are explicitly ethno-nationalist, and approximately one-third of which promote neo-Nazism. A significant majority of these groups and platforms are strongly inclined towards preserving what they purport to be the authentic memory and historical narrative of the wars of the 1990s and World War II, while glorifying war criminals from their ingroup and denying the crimes they committed. This gives far-right groups in BiH and neighbouring states a uniquely regional character. Yet, a considerable number of these groups espouse universal far-right 'values' as well, opposing immigration, refugees, feminism, LGBTI+, NATO and the EU. And, nearly a quarter of the groups and platforms mapped in this research defied easy categorization, usually because content they posted or shared revealed an ambiguity in their ideology or presented conflicting viewpoints – such as groups that self-identify as 'antifascist' but glorify fascism, or one group which claims to espouse both feminism and neo-Nazism.

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20 Research has shown that content moderation is highly gendered, for example, resulting in the removal of extremist content published by men at a much higher rate than the same content published by women. See: Eviane Leidig, *The Women of the Far Right: Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

21 See: Jasper Muis, Ofra Klein, and Guido Dijkstra, 'Challenges and opportunities of social media research: Using Twitter and Facebook to investigate far right discourses,' in *Researching the Far Right: Theory, Method and Practice,* edited by Stephen D. Ashe, et al. (Routledge, 2021); and Antonia Vaughan, 'Lurking with the Radical Right: The ethics of online covert research,' Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, 28 October 2021, https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2021/10/28/lurking-with-the-radical-right-the-ethics-of-online-covert-research/.

Several methodological approaches were employed to identify the groups analysed in this paper. A starting point for researchers were groups already known to the Atlantic Initiative team, then more were identified through a snowball technique[22] that involved an analysis of social media activity to discover links to other groups or entities. Additionally, a keyword search was used to find online content from groups or actors that met the criteria put forth by Cas Mudde to distinguish the 'far-right', which he proposes can be identified by the presence of at least three of five attributes: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democratic sentiment, and advocacy for a strong state.[23] Beyond content that fit Mudde's parameters, this analysis also included posts deemed hate speech by the Facebook community standards, which prohibit direct attacks based on protected characteristics such as race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

This content was further classified by the degree to which it could be considered violent, in the following categories: *Non-violent content* did not suggest any volition or willingness to engage in violence, and encompassed material devoid of any explicit endorsement or encouragement of violence; *not-yet-violent content* did suggest a volition or inclination to commit violence, but this was mediated by the absence of any means to do so, whether physical or temporal;[24] and *violent content* comprised material which not only expressed a clear willingness to engage in violence but also actively promoted, encouraged, glorified, or justified acts of violence. The distinction between these categories is significant. For example, non-violent content and not-yet-violent content are differentiated by the important question of intent, as the abstention from violence in not-yet-violent content is driven predominantly by pragmatic or tactical considerations rather than a principled rejection of violence as such.[25] It must be noted, too, that content classified as violent did not necessarily include visual images which graphically depicted violence, as this classification was also applied to content that explicitly endorsed or advocated violence.

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22 The snowballing method, also known as snowball sampling, is a research technique often used in situations where potential subjects are hard to locate. It is particularly useful when studying populations with a rare attribute, behavior, or characteristic. See more: Julia Simkus, Snowball Sampling Method: Definition, Techniques & Examples, Https://www.simplypsychology.org/Snowball-Sampling.html

23 Cas Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

24 Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, *Extremism Research Forum: Macedonia Report* (British Council, 2018).

25 Schmid, 'Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?'

Online Radicalization Dynamics and Far-Right Narratives

Online radicalization processes have sparked growing transnational concern in part because the nature of the internet means that potentially radicalizing content now transcends state borders. The emergence and growth of online radicalization is a direct consequence of the widespread availability and accessibility of the internet, and especially social media platforms. Many online spaces are designed to provide users with opportunities to connect, share information, and engage in dialogue, which makes them ideal for recruiters who share and discuss extremist content to attract new followers to far-right movements. Tony McAleer, a former extremist recruiter, and co-founder of the US-based non-profit organization Life After Hate, has explained that:

> [S]ocial media takes [recruitment] to a whole other level. …in my time in the movement you had to order a book and you'd have to wait three weeks for it to come. And if you wanted to hear someone speak, or hear these new ideas, you had to go to a physical meeting where you had to worry, "Are the police going to identify me? Will I be under surveillance?" …today you can binge watch an entire ideology in a weekend.[26]

On top of the instant accessibility of information, and the ability to reach such large audiences so quickly, online spaces also offer an anonymity that allows far-right groups to operate in the shadows of a cyberworld that is far harder to regulate and surveil than the meetings McAleer attended during his own recruitment. That said, online and offline recruitment and radicalization are hardly distinct phenomena, in a process that moves between cyber and real-world spaces. Radicalization pathways now involve a combination of online and offline influences, to varying degrees.[27]

The debate around the internet's influence on radicalization is multifaceted, with some researchers viewing it as merely facilitative, while others consider it a significant accelerant or even the primary driver. A RAND Europe study in 2013 evaluated 15 cases of extremism, testing the hypotheses that the internet can create more radicalization opportunities, act as an echo chamber, accelerate radicalization, enable radicalization without physical contact, and facilitate self-radicalization. The study confirmed the internet's role in providing radicalization opportunities and functioning as an echo chamber. Further, a 2021 study by the UK's Ministry of Justice revealed the growing influence of the internet in radicalizing individuals convicted for extremist offenses in England and Wales from 2005 to 2017, showing a shift towards online radicalization, particularly among younger individuals with prior offenses. However, online radicalization often occurs alongside offline influences, highlighting that both realms are interconnected rather than distinct in the radicalization process. The pandemic's impact on reducing physical interactions is expected to further increase the internet's role in radicalization, though it does not negate the crucial role of offline dynamics.[28]

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26 "Turning Fear into Compassion: A conversation with Life After Hate," *Life After Hate* (blog), 5 March 2018, https://www.lifeafterhate.org/blog/2018/3/5/turning-fear-into-compassion-a-conversation-with-life-after-hate/.

27 See: Chamin Herath and Joe Whittaker, 'Online Radicalisation: Moving beyond a Simple Dichotomy,' *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 5 (2021): 1–22; and Joe Whittaker, 'Rethinking Online Radicalization,' *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 4 (2022): 27–40.

28 Simeon Dukić, Online Radicalisation in the Western Balkans: Trends and Responses, Radicalisation Awareness Network, European Commission, 2023, 6.

Several studies have also explored the relationship and interplay between online and offline influences and radicalization processes.[29] In the US, data indicates that around 2010, there was a notable uptick in the significance of social media as a facilitator of radicalization, though rarely as the main instigator of radicalization; findings which emphasize the degree to which online and offline factors in this process have become intertwined. The database of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) shows that from 2005 to 2010, social media played a primary or secondary role in about a quarter (27 percent) of all recorded cases, but that this surged to nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of cases during the period from 2011 to 2016.[30] Scholars have embraced a comparative approach to uncover parallels among perpetrators of extremist violence, and have found that some actors, especially 'lone wolves', are likely to have been radicalized to a significant degree in online spaces. Research has identified patterns in the cognitive and behavioural profiles of lone-wolf terrorists before they carry out violent attacks, for instance, which consistently include searches for online propaganda and the adoption of ideologies of extremism. These patterns reveal important insights as to the changing dynamics of lone-wolf terrorism and the radicalization processes that precede it.[31] Wolfowicz, Hasisi, and Weisburd, who also discovered a strong correlation between active online information seeking and radicalization, made an important analytical distinction between active and passive online exposure in their research; finding a greater susceptibility to radicalization associated with both, compared to television consumption.[32]

Insights like these are especially valuable given that one of the ways the internet and social media platforms have restructured radicalization processes is by serving as an echo chamber, not only because the choice-making of users tends to place them in silos of like-minded people, but because specific narratives are amplified by online platforms in order to reinforce a user's previously expressed beliefs through algorithms that present personalized content. These algorithms prioritize engagement, which means they are meant to facilitate and encourage the 'social contagion' of ideas, even if those ideas are untrue or dangerous. In fact, a number of studies have determined that online users engage at higher rates with content that uses emotionally triggering language, expresses anger, or shares false information.[33] These dynamics make online spaces almost purpose-built for the proliferation of extremist content and the formation of online far-right subcultures and communities.[34]

The automated algorithmic content selection on social media platforms narrows a user's echo chamber even further, into 'filter bubbles' that feature increasingly homogeneous content and limit any exposure to alternative viewpoints.[35] Precisely how these mechanisms impact radicalization remains the subject of ongoing research, but it is clear they play a role in facilitating if not feeding this process, as various studies have problematized

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29 Daniele Valentini, Anna Maria Lorusso, and Achim Stephan, '*Onlife* Extremism: Dynamic Integration of Digital and Physical Spaces in Radicalization,' *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020), DOI: https://doi.org/10.3389/ fpsyg.2020.00524.

30 See: Michael Jensen, et al., 'The Use of Social Media by United States Extremists," Research Brief, START, 2018.

31 See: Caitlin Clemmow, et al. 'Disaggregating Lone-actor Grievance-fuelled Violence: Comparing Lone-actor Terrorists and Mass Murderers,' *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 3 (2022): 558–584; Joel A. Capellan, 'Lone wolf terrorist or deranged shooter? A study of ideological active shooter events in the United States, 1970–2014,' *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 6 (2015): 395–413; and Ryan Matthew Parada, 'Lone-wolf Terrorism: An Overlooked Threat' (master's thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 2021).

32 Michael Wolfowicz, Badi Hasisi, and David Weisburd, 'What are the effects of different elements of media on radicalization outcomes? A systematic review,' *Campbell Systematic Review* 18, no. 2 (2022).

33 See: William J. Brady, et al., 'Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks,' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 28 (2017): 7313–7318; Rui Fan, et al., 'Anger Is More Influential than Joy: Sentiment Correlation in Weibo,' *PLOS ONE* 9, no. 10 (2014), DOI: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0110184; and Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, 'The spread of true and false news online,' *Science*, 9 March 2018.

34 See: Ines Von Behr, et al., *Radicalization in the digital era: the use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism* (RAND Corporation, 2013).

35 Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You* (London: Penguin Books, 2011).

internet usage across a number of platforms and a spectrum of extremist ideologies.[36] In the Southeastern Europe, some far-right groups regularly question the legitimacy of the Bosnian state, and many oppose the liberal values of 'the West'. The emergence of online echo chambers and filter bubbles may take on a particular power in the context of the complicated ethno-religious and territorial claims of the region.

While the specific way these mechanisms shape radicalization processes continues to be studied by researchers, it is important to note that scholars widely view the internet as a facilitator or catalyst in these processes, not a direct cause of radicalization.[37] In other words, the puzzle that needs to be solved is not how social media and online spaces radicalize users, but how they effectively support and amplify the actors and content that radicalize users. The engagement imperative of online platforms is linked to reiterative exposure to content that evokes reaction and response, and when that content is extremist, there is evidence that this exposure plays a significant role in the process of radicalization. For instance, an in-depth study in 2020, which examined the Twitter activity of self-proclaimed ISIL supporters, found that the linguistic and stylistic conformity of group members increased over time, leading to more interactions aimed at mobilizing.[38] Similarly, research on 'incel' groups in online forums found that their interactions fostered grievances that correlated to a heightened advocacy for violence in some group members.[39] One systematic review also tentatively linked exposure to online extremist content with radicalization leading to violent extremism.[40] According to Mølmen and Ravndal, echoing is unique to online spaces, allowing for a legitimization of violence and validation of extremist narratives that has no real offline counterpart. Still, their 'findings also suggest that offline mechanisms such as pre-existing vulnerabilities and offline isolation remain important preconditions for online radicalization to occur.'[41]

> This linkage between the online and offline is ever more obvious as the digital and real worlds increasingly merge, and extremist discourse frequently reflects radicalized iterations of mainstream perspectives, rather than emerging on its own. In the Southeastern Europe, the research that underlies this paper found that the dominant narratives of far-right groups are replicated with notable consistency across diverse social media platforms, whether they reflect non-violent, not-yet-violent, or violent themes, and are reinforced in the real world. This coherence is likely to amplify the power of these narratives.

The implications of this seamless integration of extremist narratives across both online platforms and the real world are profound for policymakers. They highlight the necessity for a holistic approach to counteract such ideologies. Traditional methods of monitoring and intervention, which often operate in silos and are reactive, may not be sufficient. Policymakers need to consider strategies that encompass the digital continuum and real-world contexts simultaneously.

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36 For example, see: Derek O'Callaghan, et al., 'Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems,' *Social Science Computer Review* 33, no. 4 (2015): 459–478; Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell, *Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram* (Washington, DC: George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2019); and Anne Speckhard, et al., 'Involuntary Celibates' Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum,' *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 2 (2021): 89–121.

37 Alistair Reed, et al., 'Radical Filter Bubbles: Social Media Personalisation Algorithms and Extremist Content,' Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology Paper No. 8, 26 July 2019; and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A Literature Review, 2006–2016* (VOX-Pol, 2017).

38 Laura G. E. Smith, et al., 'Detecting psychological change through mobilizing interactions and changes in extremist linguistic style,' *Computers in Human Behavior* 108 (2020).

39 Speckhard, et al., 'Involuntary Celibates' Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum.'

40 Ghayda Hassan, et al., 'Exposure to Extremist Online Content Could Lead to Violent Radicalization: A Systematic Review of Empirical Evidence,' *International Journal of Developmental Science* 12, no. 1-2 (2018): 71–88.

41 Ibid., 2.

This includes fostering cross-platform cooperation for monitoring and information sharing, and developing counter-narratives that are as coherent and pervasive as those they seek to combat. Moreover, there should be an emphasis on education and community engagement initiatives that strengthen societal resilience against such radicalization. In essence, policies must evolve to tackle the full spectrum of the issue, recognizing the fluidity with which these narratives move from online chatter to offline action.
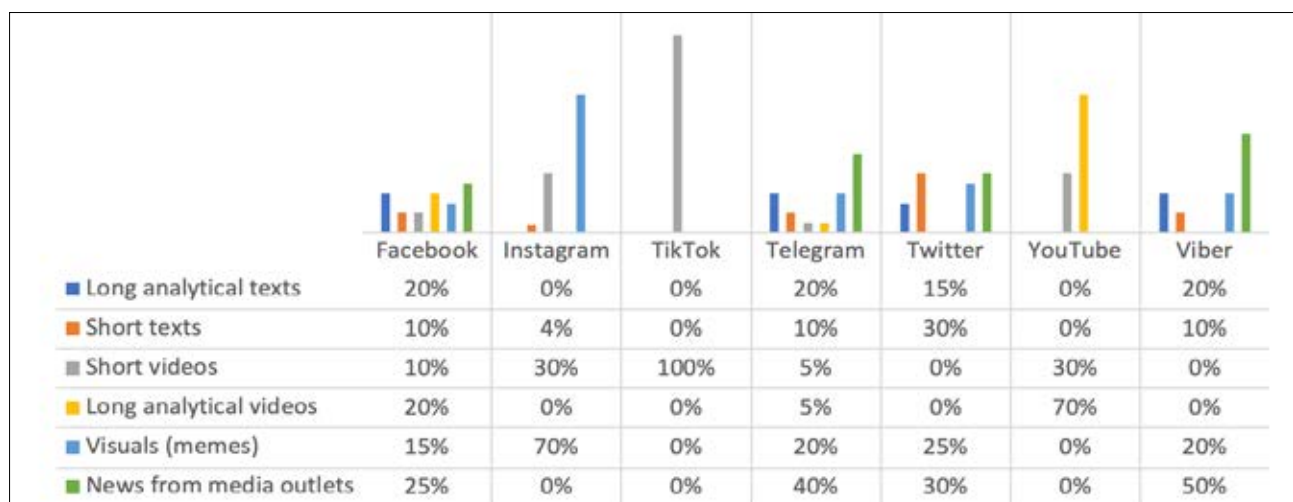
How far-right groups engage on different social media platforms

The potency of far-right narratives depends in part on the online platform by which they are disseminated. Far-right groups in the region have adopted certain social media platforms as their primary means of sharing their ideologies and engaging with audiences, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, Twitter, and YouTube, and Viber, each of which provides a distinct virtual space that caters to different forms of communication, engagement, and mobilization. The features, user demographics, and modes of interaction on these platforms thus informs how far-right content is presented, promoted, and received by users. For example, this research also uncovered an interesting trend, wherein some users exhibit 'multiple personalities' on different platforms. The case of Arno Gouillon, longtime director of the French non-governmental organization *Solidarité Kosovo* - known for his far-right views and humanitarian activities among Kosovo's Serbian minority - former member of the *Generation Identitaire* and current acting director of the Serbian Foreign Ministry's Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region, is a good example. His formal affiliations with the government of Serbia mean he must entertain a requisite measure of prudence when articulating personal viewpoints, and his presence on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter appropriately reflect his role as a Serbian official. His engagement on Telegram, however, exposes his proclivity for extreme Serbian nationalism. And on YouTube, he has advocated for his followers to migrate to Telegram, which he implies is free of censorship and allows unfettered freedom of expression. Hence, this analysis captured subtle differences in how far-right groups operate on these platforms, and how they exploit the interplay between visual content, textual narratives, and engagement mechanisms to gain, retain, and influence followers.

The content disseminated by these groups fell into six distinct categories: i) extensive analytical texts; ii) succinct texts (i.e., statuses or tweets); iii) protracted analytical videos spanning 8 to 20 minutes; iv) short videos spanning 10 seconds to 2 minutes; v) visual elements including memes; and vi) news items sourced from media outlets (see Figure 1, below). Where content was shared was a function not only of the specific design of each platform, but their policies as well. For instance, Facebook enjoys significant popularity across the region, but its content moderation policies have compelled many far-right actors who share explicitly violent and not-yet-violent content to post on other platforms. This has made Facebook a space that is dominated by relatively mainstream actors in the region.

Figure 1. Content posted by far-right groups on social media platforms, by type

	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	Telegram	Twitter	YouTube	Viber
Long analytical texts	20%	0%	0%	20%	15%	0%	20%
Short texts	10%	4%	0%	10%	30%	0%	10%
Short videos	10%	30%	100%	5%	0%	30%	0%
Long analytical videos	20%	0%	0%	5%	0%	70%	0%
Visuals (memes)	15%	70%	0%	20%	25%	0%	20%
News from media outlets	25%	0%	0%	40%	30%	0%	50%

Facebook

That said, this research identified a spectrum of far-right groups that continue to disseminate disinformation on Facebook, most notably most of the Serbian extremists' groups act as clearinghouses for pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, which fit into a broader matrix of Russian hybrid activities in the region, aimed at undermining Western influence. Russia has long highlighted its historical and religious affinity with Serbs, and in turn, most of the Serb ethno-nationalists in BiH and across the Southeastern Europe have adopted a strong pro-Russian stance and have become reliable agents of Moscow by disseminating propaganda meant to amplify its rhetoric. Therefore, Serb ethno-nationalists often endorse Russian influence in the region while challenging the legitimacy of NATO and the European Union. Many of the groups affiliated with far-right ideologies identified as pro-Serb in this research also engaged in online activities that promoted Orthodox theocracy. For the most part, these groups repost from 'media' outlets to Facebook, with the intent to shine a favorable light on Russia's presence in the Southeastern Europe.

Image 1: To our Srebrenica brother Nikita Rus and his company, we congratulate [you on] Navy Day.

An examination of one of the Serbian extremist Facebook pages reveals a clear pattern of content that supports Putin and Russia, emphasizes the Serb-Russian connection, and showcases involvement in pro-Russian events. The page memorializes a procession dubbed the "Russian-Serbian Godfathers," linking present-day solidarity to shared historical experiences. The celebration of Russia's veto at the UN over a resolution concerning Srebrenica frames it as a protective gesture towards Serb identity. A post comparing Putin to Christ exemplifies the blending of political and spiritual leadership, while Zaharova's statements reiterate a blood-bound commitment to the Serbs. The narrative is further entrenched by a shared statement from Patriarch Kiril, which casts the Ukraine conflict as a civilizational and religious struggle, resonating with the page's audience who are predisposed to view the conflict through the lens of Orthodox Christian fraternity. This confluence of political, religious, and cultural symbols and statements on the page is indicative of a deliberate strategy to forge a strong in-group identity and worldview among its followers.

In much the same way, the far-right Croatian organization *U ime obitelji* (In the name of the family) utilizes Facebook to promote heteronormative family structures, often by posting images and text alongside links to far-right 'news' sources. The group shares content that criticizes or insults members of the political left and vulnerable communities like the LGBTQ+ population in posts that frequently cite unsourced 'proof' of stigmatizing and discriminatory claims, such as that LGBTQ+ people are 'abnormal'. This aligns with a common strategy employed by anti-LGBTQ+ extremists worldwide that aims to evoke feelings of aversion and fear.

Notably, in their engagement on Facebook, these groups adeptly straddle the line between non-violent and not-yet-violent content. Their discourse is tailored to the platform and overt extremist references or direct calls for violence. But far-right groups have also responded to the constraints of these platforms by finding new ways to navigate virtual landscapes through the strategic use of subtle and coded messaging intended to sustain divisive and polarizing narratives. This was evident in our analysis, which revealed how artfully some groups manipulate the tools of online spaces and the reactivity of users to engender resentment, distrust, and hostility. An illustrative example of this phenomenon can be seen in the use of seemingly innocuous cultural memes by extremist groups, which act as Trojan horses for their ideologies. These memes are crafted to avoid immediate detection by platform moderation tools, embedding extremist sentiments within symbols or slogans that are culturally resonant but not overtly violent. For instance, a meme could use historical figures or events revered within a particular community to subtly endorse exclusionary or nationalist ideologies.
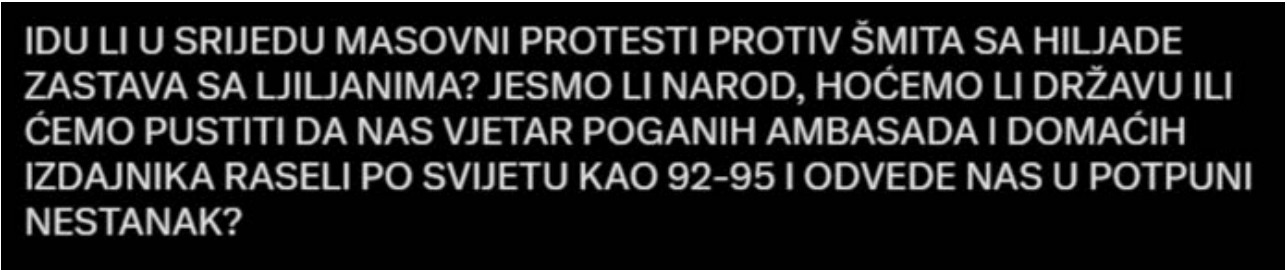
Take the use of the "Pepe the Frog" character, which was co-opted by far-right groups. Originally a harmless internet meme, Pepe was transformed into a symbol of hate, recognized by the Anti-Defamation League.[42] While not directly advocating violence, the meme was used in ways that subtly conveyed far-right ideologies and was shared widely across social media platforms. Such coded communication allows these groups to build a shared sense of identity and purpose among their followers, fomenting an "us vs. them" mentality while skirting platform rules against direct incitement to violence. This means they convey messages in a manner that will be understood only by those who are already familiar with the ideology or the specific context of the symbols.

Image 2: "Pepe the Frog" adorned with symbols and attire that suggest an association wtith the Ustaše, a Croatian fascist organization active during World War II.

Generating these emotions in users and activating their sense of grievance is a key goal of far-right messaging in online spaces, because it is designed to resonate with their notion of marginalization and provide them with a sense of identity, belonging, and purpose (and sometimes empowerment, justice, or retribution). The online narratives that target these users are crafted to seamlessly align with their deeply entrenched frustrations in a way that intensifies their perception that drastic and transformative action is required in the real world. We observed this kind of calculated manipulation of emotion and grievance throughout our research and discovered that it gives even non-violent content an insidiously powerful influence within the online ecosystem.

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42 https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbol/pepe-frog

> IDU LI U SRIJEDU MASOVNI PROTESTI PROTIV ŠMITA SA HILJADE ZASTAVA SA LJILJANIMA? JESMO LI NAROD, HOĆEMO LI DRŽAVU ILI ĆEMO PUSTITI DA NAS VJETAR POGANIH AMBASADA I DOMAĆIH IZDAJNIKA RASELI PO SVIJETU KAO 92–95 I ODVEDE NAS U POTPUNI NESTANAK?

Image 3: Are there going to be mass protests against Schmidt on Wednesday with thousands of flags with lilies? Are we a nation, do we want a state, or will we let the wind of filthy embassies and domestic traitors disperse us across the world like in 1992-1995 and lead us into complete disappearance?

These strategies are effective because they connect with the audience on an emotional level, leveraging their existing perceptions. By affirming the audience's grievances and offering a sense of community and purpose, such content can have a radicalizing effect, even if it does not explicitly advocate violence. For those already feeling disconnected or disenfranchised, the validation and clear narrative provided by these messages can be deeply compelling, fostering a climate in which more extremist views can take root and flourish.

Despite efforts by Facebook to improve content moderation, we also found that hate speech remains prevalent on the platform in local languages. Comments made in response to news stories are rife with hate speech that is not being removed at an adequate rate. This may be due to the fact that the company's moderation policies and algorithms appear to be less effective in handling non-English languages.[43] But practically speaking, poor local language moderation means that Facebook's widespread popularity in the region is likely to expose a considerable segment of the Southeastern Europe population to hate speech, including remarks targeting all ethnic groups, but especially Romani people and Albanians, the LGBTQ+ population, women, and others. It is worth noting that the hate speech identified by researchers on Facebook was generally less overt and non-violent when compared to content posted by far-right groups on other platforms, but exposure to this speech on a 'mainstream' platform such as Facebook has the potential to normalize it, leading to real world consequences, such as psychological harm to targeted individuals, emboldening those with extremist views to act on their prejudices, and exacerbating societal divisions. This normalization of hostile discourse can lead to increased discrimination and acts of violence, including hate crimes, which in turn may undermine democratic processes and contribute to a culture of intolerance.

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43 Delia Marinescu, 'Facebook's Content Moderation Language Barrier,' *New America*, 8 September 2021, https://www.newamerica.org/the-thread/facebooks-content-moderation-language-barrier/.

Instagram

Instagram, which caters to a younger audience by centring pictures and short videos, also has content guidelines that compel many far-right actors to use coded language or images. Research has demonstrated that the far-right strategically deploys memes and other visual content to repackage concepts related to fascism and racism, transforming them into new renderings that a wider audience finds amenable and relatable. In the context of social media and online communities, "memes" refer to a broad category of viral content, which typically includes images, videos, texts, or even just phrases that spread rapidly among users.[44] Memes have the power to shape public discourse because they can encapsulate complex ideas in a simple and relatable way. Due to their often ambiguous and layered nature, they can also be used to spread coded messages that may only be fully understood by specific in-groups. This has made them a significant tool for various online communities, including those with extremist ideologies, to spread their messages covertly.

Image 4: Journalist: Sir you will go the jail if you support Ustashe and Independent State of Croatia (Nazzi puppet state) Me: (symbol of Ustashe on my mind – meaning that he supports it)

Often, far-right groups worldwide spread similar pictures and videos, each localized to their country through the inclusion of certain symbols of references. These memes are *frequently humorous*, and many portray historical grievances experienced by a specific in-group or speak to contemporaneous political issues. The strategic use of humor in the dissemination of extremist content on social media platforms serves not only to expand the reach of such posts but also to insidiously normalize the ideologies they carry. Humorous memes often escape moderation due to their coded language and cultural references, which are decipherable only to those within the in-group.

This subtlety ensures that the content remains seemingly innocuous to outsiders and, therefore, often avoids detection by content moderators who rely on explicit markers of hate speech. They may also be aspirational, as we observed in the content shared by some far-right groups in BiH, with Bosniak groups posting maps on Instagram that show an expanded Bosnian territory incorporating portions of Serbia, Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia, and Serb and Croat groups posting very similar images depicting expanded Serbian and Croatian states. This reflects the significance of notions of territorial integrity and historical entitlement in the 'visual narrative' that inspires regional far-right actors.

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44 Alice Marwick, Memes, Volume 12, Issue 4, Fall 2013, Pages 12-13 © 2013 American Sociological Association, Article Reuse Guidelines, https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504213511210

Some far-right actors in the Southeastern Europe have embraced and exploited the visual nature of Instagram with a particular zeal. The platform is very popular with far-right football hooligans, for example, who use it to disseminate ethno-nationalist imagery and symbols. Given the distinct emphasis placed by football fans on aesthetics and symbolism, Instagram is uniquely suited to hooligan subcultures, some of which have historically been associated with the use of hate speech and acts of violence. In fact, many ultras promote far-right ideologies predominantly through visual language, like memes.[45]

Image 5: The text on the banner "DOMOLJUBI, NACIONALISTI, NISTE SAMI" translates from Croatian to English as "Patriots, Nationalists, You Are Not Alone."

These memes typically appear quite innocuous and even humorous, but this is intentional, as it desensitizes users to violent content and ideas like neo-Nazism by attaching them to modern aesthetics and cultural references. Thus, understanding far-right extremism and its ideological nuances in the digital age requires a systematic analysis of how mobilization and persuasion are moderated by visual media strategies. Instagram profiles associated with the Bad Blue Boys, the main hooligan club of supporters of Dinamo Zagreb, offer a useful illustration of how some far-right actors avoid explicit references to violence while still communicating a readiness or desire for violence. As a collective, the Bad Blue Boys have long espoused far-right ideologies, but on Instagram – where the club's account boasts some 6,400 followers and their 'fan shop' has some 8,700 followers – they limit posts to images that depict strength and aggression in more implicit ways, such as by showing individuals who are exhibiting a clear hostility, suggesting their willingness to take violent action without indicating this outright. Along with posts that normalize or celebrate aggression and hint (sometimes not so subtly) at violence, hooligans also make frequent use of symbols. These foster a sense of belonging to a shared identity, and in the case of the Bad Blue Boys, that identity is rooted in a fictitious historical European homeland where ethno-religious groups were 'pure' and undiluted. But these symbols also serve as a gatekeeper and are meant to keep people who are *not* like-minded out of certain spaces. In the Southeastern Europe, the source of modern far-right symbolism is often hyper-localized, which can make this language of symbols difficult for people from outside the region to translate and interpret; meaning, the Ustaše symbols shared by the Skripari, Bad Blue Boys, their use of the *za dom spremni* slogan, and their veneration of figures like Aloysius Stepinac, act as gatekeepers against very specific regional groups and communities.[46]

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45 To read more about the in-depth study of ultra sin BiH, read: Alberto Testa, Waves of Extremism: An Applied Ethnographic Analysis of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Football Terraces, Front. Sports Act. Living, 29 March 2022, Sec. Sport, Leisure, Tourism, and Events, Volume 4 - 2022 | https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.770441

46 The Ustaše, a Croatian fascist and ultranationalist movement, operated during the pre-war and World War II era, was brought to power by the Nazis from 1941 to 1945 to rule the puppet Independent State of Croatia, and used the phrase *za dom spremni* (for the homeland, ready) as a salute. Stepinac was a Catholic Cardinal who was convicted after World War II by the Yugoslav government of treason for collaborating with the Ustaše regime.

Bosnian Serb hooligans in the far-right milieu, such as *Lešinari* (the Vultures) associated with Borac Banja Luka, also use Instagram to propagate Serb nationalism. The group is known to engage in violence, and some members have been linked by police to 'organized crime groups that are involved in drug trafficking and arms smuggling.'[47] On Instagram, the Lešinari account has a following of approximately 6,200 and consistently shares content that is not only steeped in the symbolism of Serb nationalism but makes derogatory references to Albanians. Just as the Bad Blue Boys, Lešinari often posts references or endorsements that would not appear to people outside the region as controversial, such as by advocating for the celebration of the 'Day of Republika Srpska' on January 9; a holiday adopted by the Serb-dominated entity-level Assembly but declared illegal and discriminatory by the state-level Constitutional Court of BiH.

Lešinari also clearly refrain from making explicit threats of violence on Instagram. Still, its posts prominently showcase the archetypal visual elements of football hooliganism, including depictions of collective power and aggression, such as images showing brawny male figures dressed in black, their identities obscured by masks, parading through streets brandishing banners and flares. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, an American sociologist who specializes in far-right youth subcultures, has linked photographs and videos of similar gatherings to an apparent willingness among members of these groups to engage in violence.[48]

Image 6: From upper left, remove kebab meme, lover left: shows Srebrenica victims in coffins; lower right: The famous picture where Serbian soldier hits a dead woman in Bijeljina.

Among the most widely shared and modified memes circulating in Serb-specific far-right spaces, however, is the "remove kebab" meme, which originated in 2011 and has become popular globally among international far-right actors who hold anti-Muslim sentiments. In its current iterations, the phrase 'remove kebab' remains a central element, so that it maintains its core message promoting the physical expulsion of Muslims. This is part of a visual genre for far-right Serb actors, who found that graphic representations of the suffering of Bosniaks during the Yugoslav wars gained currency on the 4chan platform after the Christchurch terrorist attack. For instance, popular memes include images of a soldier's face superimposed over mass burial sites in Srebrenica, or a picture of a Serbian soldier kicking the dead body of a Bosniak woman in Bijeljina.

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47 Saša Đorđević and Ruggero Scaturro, *Dangerous Games: Football Hooliganism, Politics and Organized Crime in the Western Balkans* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022), 28. Also see: 'Napad Huligana u Banjaluci: Vanja Stokić: Policajci nam nisu željeli pomoći,' *Interview*, 18 March 2023, https://interview.ba/2023/03/18/napad-huligana-u-banjaluci-vanja-stokic-policajci-nam-nisu-zeljeli-pomoci/.

48 Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

Notably, these memes – which show Serb soldiers as the aggressor – are part of a far-right narrative that simultaneously portrays the Serb population as victims of a purported 'white genocide' or the so-called 'great replacement'. This is a global construct but is localized to emphasize the loss of 'Serb territories' in BiH and Kosovo to Muslims. Within this narrative, the tragic and genocidal events that occurred in Srebrenica are strategically reframed and are transformed into a defensive struggle by Serbs on behalf of white, Christian Europe. Interestingly, even though this meme is mostly used by the international far-right, this research captured that some of the Serbian far-right groups are creating more content in English so they attract international followers.

Some of the symbols used by Serb nationalist groups in the region are also transnational, linking various far-right communities. The letter 'Z', for example, is now associated with support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and researchers found it was used by far-right actors across the region, especially by Serbian groups. The degree to which the Z has been integrated by the Serbian far right is evident in the case of a niche fashion brand associated with Serbian pro-Russian foreign fighter Dejan Berić, which features the symbol on its apparel and also promotes the paramilitary Wagner Group.

Noticeably, Berić's brand obscures the Wagner logo on merchandise in its promotional posts on Instagram, probably because the platform has tried to implement measures to curtail the visibility of explicitly neo-Nazi content and symbols (such as the swastika and other overt Nazi iconography). But hate speech and hate symbols can nonetheless be readily encountered on Instagram, especially in content associated with more obscure corners of the international far-right milieu, which for all practical purposes, includes many of the online far-right subcultures that communicate in Southeastern Europe languages. Simply put, content moderation tools and human moderators are more skilled at assessing the subtleties of communications and content in globally prevalent languages like English but are unlikely to have the capacity to carry out informed discourse analysis of content posted in the languages of the region.

This means that more nuanced messaging by local far-right actors, including the glorification of Ustaše or Chetnik forces or of war criminals and genocidaires from the wars of the 1990s, may be missed my online moderators; and in fact, this is the goal, because far-right groups in the Southeastern Europe have learned that they can influence a local audience by using loaded but coded messaging that escapes the oversight of online platforms. There is clearly a need for local perspectives and knowledge within the companies that operate online platforms, to help distinguish this content even in lesser-spoken languages. This research confirmed what other studies have found, that far-right actors in the region and beyond are remarkably adept at evading social media bans by manipulating imagery or displaying symbols in strategic ways.[49] One can assume that far-right groups will persist in exploiting Instagram in this way, treading a fine line that tests the bounds of compliance, while messaging their ideologies and grievances to a younger audience.

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49 Ibid.

Telegram

There are also some platforms on which far-right groups worry much less about compliance, such as Telegram, known for its permissive content moderation policies. Unsurprisingly, this leniency has led to its widespread adoption among much of the world's far right, although it is also used at high rates by mainstream actors in many countries.[50] In the Southeastern Europe, Telegram is not mainstream, and serves mostly as an online safe haven for a small number of far-right groups, which tend to produce or circulate content that could not be posted on other platforms due to its overt extremism or endorsement of violence. A network of pro-Russian Serbian nationalist accounts, such as that of Dejan Berić, also thrive in the Telegram ecosystem.

Image 7: Croatian Active Club celebrating Hitler and hoping for his "resurrection"

As with other platforms, it is not just the moderation policies of Telegram, but its unique functionalities, that make it a conduit for specific far-right content. Telegram's origins as an encrypted messaging service, which gradually evolved into a hybrid platform, makes it distinct from other social media applications, and this has branded it as an 'alternative' platform in the view of many extremists and conspiracists. This perception of Telegram as part of the not-mainstream has heightened the trust of some users in the platform and has granted it a unique appeal among far-right actors in the region, many of whom find an affinity with 'the outsider' and associate more mainstream platforms with 'liberal forces' or the 'deep state'. Hence, our analysis found that Telegram serves as a key platform for coordination among far-right groups. For example, researchers have captured that open groups on Telegram recruit their followers to the more extreme closed groups. For example, one of the linked channels in the Croatian Active Club's Telegram channel description is the 'Vetting Room.' Its stated purpose is for new members to briefly introduce themselves to the administrators, sharing basic information about their background, origins, and ideologies without revealing sensitive personal data like addresses or social security numbers. The group emphasizes understanding each member's ideology, with the intention of grouping like-minded individuals together. The aim is to mobilize these members for unspecified activist activities within Croatia, raising concerns about the potential for these activities to include calls to violence or other disruptive actions.

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50 Telegram has gained significant popularity among citizens in authoritarian regimes, such as Belarus, Hong Kong, and Iran, because it assures confidential and secure communication that can help people coordinate actions while eluding state surveillance. At the same time, that makes the platform a haven for nefarious actors, including terrorists and criminals. For example, members of the Islamic State were known to use Telegram for recruitment and operational purposes, and to disseminate propaganda. See: Lea Gerster, et al., *Telegram as a buttress: How far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists are expanding their infrastructures via Telegram* (Berlin: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022).

The platform hosts a cadre of prominent actors within the regional far-right extremist milieu who have demonstrated a pattern of leveraging their followings to disseminate original content. A number of notable far-right groups also have sizeable followings on Telegram. Serbia's *Narodna patrola* (People's Patrol), for instance, notorious for the involvement of members in real-world violence, hosts a Telegram channel with over 8,000 subscribers.[51] Explicitly neo-Nazi and fascist groups, such as *Hrvatski Aktivni Klub* (the Croatian Active Club) and *Srbska Akcija* (Serbian Action), are also active on the platform. These groups disseminate content espousing violence against the LGBTQ+ community and their perceived political adversaries, as well as openly antisemitic imagery and posts that lionize Nazi collaborators and war criminals. Within these and similar spaces, a dizzying array of pro-Russian, anti-migrant, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-Albanian, anti-Muslim, and Serbian nationalist content also proliferates, in text, video, and images. And while Google (Android) and Apple (iPhone) at times restrict access to certain Telegram channels and chats via their respective app stores, Telegram itself only rarely sanctions or removes this content.

Image 8: Memes and symbols used by the far-right Croatian group

While the subscriber counts of groups like *Hrvatski Aktivni Klub* and *Srbska Akcija* may appear modest, with fewer than 800 and just over 1,500 subscribers, respectively, the unique dynamics of Telegram allow these organizations to amplify their messaging and establish connections with counterparts across the globe, and also cultivate a small but fervent local base of support inclined toward violence. In fact, neo-fascist members of *Srpska Akcija*, who propagate pro-Russian and anti-EU narratives on their website and on Telegram, have a long history of involvement in real-world violence against minorities and migrants.[52] One study found that legal measures against the group had simply pushed it to move its real-world activities underground, and it has done much the same thing online by moving its messaging into less regulated spaces such as Telegram. Notably, this plays into the narrative of far-right actors that their speech is being censored by political and global elites, and 'in the current political and social atmosphere, their ability to speak against the system… make them look appealing to individuals who are dissatisfied with the political and economic situation.'[53]

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51 On violence committed by Nardona Patrola, see: 'Serbian Far-Right Leader Arrested After Nationalists Try To Storm Presidency In Belgrade,' *RFE/RL*, 16 February 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-far-right-knezevic-arrested-vucic-kosovo/32274304.html; and Izabela Kisić, *The Rise of the Right: The Case of Serbia – Foreign Fighters, Extremism and Terrorism* (Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2022).

52 For example, see: "Serbian Police Hunt Anti-Roma Campaigners," *Balkan Insight*, 1 December 2014, https://balkaninsight.com/2014/12/01/serbian-police-search-for-anti-roma-campaigners/; Marina Lažetić, '"Migration Crisis" and the Far Right Networks in Europe: A Case Study of Serbia,' *Journal of Regional Security* 13, no. 2 (2018): 131–178; and Joe Muhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., *State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe, 2021* (London: HOPE not hate Charitable Trust, 2021).

53 Lažetić, '"Migration Crisis" and the Far Right Networks in Europe,' 145.

One notable characteristic of the far-right content shared on Telegram is a predominance of visual elements. A far-right Croat nationalist group disseminates imagery and memes that explicitly celebrate neo-Naziism and the Ustaše regime, for instance, such as in a set of stickers featuring various iterations of Ante Pavelić, a Croatian fascist who was pivotal in establishing the Ustaše movement.[54] In the same set, another sticker appears to show contemporary football player Luka Modrić making a gesture reminiscent of the Nazi salute; but the still image, captured from video of a game, raises questions about the context and intent behind the gesture. Yet another sticker labelled 'Serbian family tree' depicts several figures hanged on a tree. Collectively, the memes included in this set of stickers expose followers to a range of images and symbols associated with the Ustaše movement, which advance far-right Croat narratives, highlighting the role of visual elements in shaping far-right group dynamics and discourse.

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54 Pavelić was central to the founding and early leadership of the Ustaše movement, and later led the wartime Independent State of Croatia.

Twitter/X

A similar discourse may soon be more common on Twitter (now X), which has been accused of facilitating hate speech since Elon Musk assumed control of the platform in November 2022 and reinstated the accounts of previously banned extremist actors.[55] Studies have found a recent surge in speech 'promoting hate and violence, including depictions of rape' emerging from these accounts and others.[56] Although Twitter is less popular in the region than Facebook and Instagram, it is nonetheless a potent platform for hate speech and extremist narratives in the Southeastern Europe, and helps cultivate influencer personas.

The platform is particularly useful to far-right actors seeking to spread political propaganda, speeches, and disinformation. It serves as a space for established figures such as far-right Serbian politician Miša Vacić to engage in hate speech and to construct narratives that almost certainly contribute to the ethno-nationalist radicalization of vulnerable followers. Vacić is joined in this mission by a multitude of accounts, many of which are anonymous. Our research also identified anonymous Twitter accounts affiliated with Bosniak nationalism, which promoted a rather specific narrative of betrayal and victimhood vis-a-vis the recent crisis in the Federation of BiH surrounding the formation of a government. This campaign harnessed the fact that, despite its small user base in the region, Twitter holds an outsized agenda-setting power, influencing media coverage and shaping public discussion.[57] The effect of this reverberates even among 'opinion leaders' and influential figures, including activists, scholars, and political elites.[58]

Thus, as this crisis unfolded in 2023, a network of small, anonymous Twitter accounts, often aligned with the (Bosniak) Party of Democratic Action, disseminated a sequence of interconnected narratives that framed Bosniaks as once again having been deceived by the international community through an orchestrated conspiracy, and fostered fear of Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat political factions. Simultaneously, these accounts condemned some Bosniak politicians, accusing them of collaborating with external actors to the detriment of Bosniaks. Notably, these narratives were not confined to Twitter, as the followers of these accounts included notable figures in Bosnian media, politics, and society, giving these narratives resonance in local media coverage and various online discourses.

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55 Mike Wendling, 'Twitter and hate speech: What's the evidence?' *BBC News*, 13 April 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65246394. And ISD, Understanding antisemitism on Twitter after Musk, 2023, https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/understanding-antisemitism-on-twitter-after-musk/

56 'The haters and conspiracy theorists back on Twitter,' *BBC News*, 8 March 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-64554381.

57 Nicolas Hervé, Béatrice Mazoyer, and Julia Cagé, 'Social media influences the mainstream media,' *Vox EU* (blog), Centre for Economic Policy Research, 9 July 2022, https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/social-media-influences-mainstream-media.

58 Elihu Katz, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and Elmo Roper, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (Routledge, 2017).

TikTok

Increasingly, the same narratives are also finding their way to TikTok, the video-oriented platform that has enjoyed a remarkable rise in popularity over the last several years. Amidst a potpourri of light-hearted videos featuring viral dances and kittens, far-right content posted by extremist actors is ever more present on TikTok.[59] The platform is characterized by a culture of rapid content consumption, continuous scrolling, and frequent sharing, and while videos were initially confined to a fifteen-second duration, this has been repeatedly extended, to one minute, then three, and most recently to the current ten-minute limit. What distinguishes TikTok even from other visual platforms like Instagram is the strength of its emphasis on generating emotive engagement.[60] The platform is primarily used by young people, who are often especially vulnerable to radicalization through content that evokes strong emotions, which has made TikTok a fertile ground for far-right recruitment.

TikTok prioritizes emotive engagement by applying an algorithmic framework that presents viewers with content based on a collection of metrics associated with their prior interactions and reactions on the platform. The algorithm appears to elevate extremist material as it would any other material, whether it is posted by modestly sized accounts or those with a more substantial following. As researchers navigated the platform, they were each presented with different algorithmic recommendations, but in every case these recommendations became increasingly extreme and guided the user towards conspiratorial echo chambers. In this way, the algorithmic nature of TikTok normalizes fringe and far-right narratives by leading users to ever more extreme content over time.

Researchers also found a notable intermingling of far-right narratives on TikTok, with relatively mainstream ethno-nationalist political rhetoric and genocide denial combined with 'anti-vax' content and various conspiracy narratives, alongside hypermasculinity discourse and outright calls for violence. The content recommended to researchers by the platform included a wide range of far-right and conspiratorial themes meant to target various vulnerabilities and cognitive openings in users. Users seeking content in local languages will see videos that centre national pride, amidst more mundane entertainment and lifestyle content.

The ethno-nationalist videos our researchers encountered on TikTok were frequently marked by intolerance towards 'other' ethnic and religious communities; and promoted political extremism. A substantial number of them advocated for violence, raising serious security questions, with implications in both online and offline spaces. The regional far-right extremist milieu on TikTok encompasses a diverse collection of both sizable and smaller accounts. Some users who have more than 21,000 followers, deploy images of wartime meant to evoke emotion among Bosniaks, alongside messaging that condemns ethnic 'mixing'. A number of Serb far-right users in the neo-Chetnik movement engage similarly, propagating Serb nationalist rhetoric and lionizing Serbian war criminals in visual representations.

In the landscape of online discourse, certain users who align themselves with nationalist ideologies, such as those who identify with the Chetnik movement - a nationalist and monarchist paramilitary group that existed during World War II in Yugoslavia - can sometimes propagate exclusivist narratives. For instance, a user with a handle like '@chetnikchad' may disseminate content that asserts anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. Such content

59 Ciarán O'Connor, *Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok* (Berlin: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021).

60 Shanti Das, 'Inside the violent, misogynistic world of TikTok's new star, Andrew Tate,' *The Guardian*, 6 August 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/aug/06/andrew-tate-violent-misogynistic-world-of-tiktok-new-star.

may purport the idea that LGBTQ+ identities are antithetical to Serbian national identity, implying a cultural and moral incompatibility. This stance is often rooted in conservative or traditionalist values that are held up as being central to the group's conception of national identity. This sort of online behavior reflects a broader trend where certain groups use digital platforms to reinforce their ideologies. By asserting that being LGBTQ+ is inconsistent with being Serb, these users are not only marginalizing LGBTQ+ individuals within their own nationality but also attempting to define national identity in a way that excludes diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity. It's an illustration of how online spaces can be used to promote narrow definitions of national and cultural identity, which may have implications for social cohesion and the acceptance of minority groups within a society.

Image 9: This picture shows a boy that supports Tito, communism, LGBTQ+ and the devil, while the strong men supports Draža Mihajlović, Chetniks and Orthodoxy

Mapping Online Far-Right Themes

Far-right groups in the Southeastern Europe are adept at shaping narratives that cast their cause in a righteous and morally just light, and strategically appeal to the genuine or perceived grievances of specific communities. These narratives tend to reflect a reductive, binary worldview that offers overly simplistic explanations for complicated social problems; a worldview that can resonate deeply with some individuals, especially if they feel uncertain, discontented, or as though they regularly confront political, economic, and social injustice.[61] Recruiters in far-right groups use these emotional points of vulnerability to ensnare potential recruits, perhaps offering them a chance at power or payback, for instance. They provide solutions that match the intensity of emotion they sense from a recruit, and this research found that online radicalization thus capitalizes on emotions linked to victimization, exclusion, alienation, or marginalization.[62]

Naturally, given the history of the Southeastern Europe, the content posted by regional far-right groups in online spaces largely harnesses identity to do this, emphasizing ethnicity, religion, and nationality, and linking these with belonging and purpose. The narratives of these groups foster a cohesive community united against perceived enemies. Online platforms happen to provide particularly fertile ground for the cultivation of virtual community cohesion, as well as the dissemination of rhetoric that reinforces perceptions of who constitutes the enemy. Hence, far-right actors have become skilled at manipulating various digital domains to quickly capture vulnerable users in extremist echo chambers; exploiting these platforms to construct virtual spaces where these users experience a palpable sense of camaraderie, mutual support, and shared values, in some cases intensifying their radicalization.

Across ethno-religious identities, far-right engagement in online spaces is dominated by themes of *victimization*, and by *condemnation of the LGBTQ+ community and the West*. Among far-right groups identified here as pro-Serb or pro-Croat, *anti-migrant and anti-Muslim* themes are also prevalent. Together, these four themes were present in more than 80% of the online far-right content analysed by researchers.

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61 Maja Halilovic Pastuovic, Johanna-Maria Hülzer, Gillian Wylie, *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans and MENA Region: Key findings and implications for research*, Theoretical Synthesis Paper (PAVE Publications, 2023).

62 For more on how these emotions are linked to radicalization processes, see: Hina Haq, Saad Shaheed, and Achim Stephan, 'Radicalization Through the Lens of Situated Affectivity,' *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020), DOI: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00205.

Victimization

Narratives of victimhood are commonly exploited by extremists worldwide and are built from more than actual experiences of past, present, or anticipated victimization but from the politicization and revision of collective trauma. The contested nature of such a trauma is made artificially coherent, inevitably leading to some level of distortion and abstraction.[63] Across the region, victimhood assumes a central role in political discourse, not only among more extreme actors but also within mainstream circles, and it was a recurring theme in the far-right online milieu analysed here.

For instance, in Serbia, both online and offline political discourse is dominated by narratives of Serb victimization in World War II at the hands of the Ustaše, the historical victimization of Serbs by Kosovo Albanians and Bosniaks (i.e., Muslims), and the victimization of Serbs by Western powers since the 1990s (e.g., NATO bombings). Far-right parliamentarian Marijan Rističević, a member of the Serbian National Assembly since 2014, has even claimed in a TV show, that was shared on social media outlets, that 'ethnic cleansing against Serbs started in 1931 and still continues today.' He alleged in a July 2023 interview, posted to his Facebook page, that Muslims and the West are engaged in a 'joint criminal enterprise' against Serbs; a cynical recycling of the legal theory used to prosecute Serbs who committed war crimes in BiH in the 1990s.[64] In fact, the historical revisionism of Serbian victimization narratives is often focused on rewriting the wars of the 1990s. In the case of Rističević, his reference to 1931 was not accidental, as this allowed him to compare census results from 1931, 1991, and 2013 to 'prove' that Muslims were not killed in the numbers they 'claim' in the 1990s, because there were more Muslims in 2013 than 1931; a comparison that is deeply misleading and wholly dishonest for a number of reasons and is meant to reinforce the notion that Serbs are the 'real' victims. This is not only a form of revisionism, but of genocide denial. The spread of revisionist narratives online, like those from Marijan Rističević, reinforce perceptions of historical victimization within ethnic Serbian communities, creating echo chambers and amplifying these views. Such claims, especially when shared by influential figures, can deepen mistrust and hinder reconciliation by contradicting established historical facts, potentially leading to real-world tensions and isolation from the international community. This revisionism can also affect inter-ethnic relations, fostering a sense of isolation and grievance that impedes constructive dialogue and cooperation.

Far-right Croat actors in the region similarly emphasize the victimization of Croats in the 1990s and during World War II, at the hands of Serbs, Bosniaks, and the international community. These narratives of victimization permeate the discourse of conservative parties in Croatia, like the ruling Croatian Democratic Union, as well as that of far-right groups like *U ime obitelji* and various football hooligan communities in Croatia and BiH. The revisionism at work in these narratives recasts the actions of the Ustaše and the wartime Nazi puppet regime of the Independent State of Croatia by downplaying or, in some cases, denying or glorifying the atrocities they committed. Among more mainstream actors on the Croat far-right, this may amount to understating death tolls at the concentration and extermination camp in Jasenovac while failing to condemn crimes of the regime; but among more extreme actors, such as the neo-Nazi *Hrvatski Aktivni Klub* or some football hooligans, these atrocities are glorified outright. In online spaces, these extreme far-right Croat actors often share content that simultaneously celebrates the Ustaše and uses anti-Serb and antisemitic language or imagery.

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63 Adam B. Lerner, 'The uses and abuses of victimhood nationalism in international politics,' *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 1 (2020): 62–87.

64 The joint criminal enterprise (JCE) doctrine allows for the prosecution of co-perpetrators of war crimes, even if there is no evidence that those co-perpetrators physically committed those crimes themselves, if they participated in a group that shared the criminal intent to advance or facilitate those crimes. Rističević's interview with InformerTV (in local language) is posted on his Facebook Page at: https://www.facebook.com/marijan.risticevic/videos/6218831161498640.

The fact that the victimization narratives of Serbs and Croats rely on denial and revisionism feeds into the victimization narrative of Bosniaks in the region, and many Bosniak far-right groups have thus found it strategically advantageous to anchor their discourse in Bosniak victimhood as well. In some ways, these groups are leveraging the environment in BiH, where it has become almost commonplace for public and political discourse to involve the active denial of genocide and war crimes perpetrated against Bosniaks.[65] In this climate, it is not difficult to construct a victimhood narrative that Bosniaks face persistent hostility from other groups, and to link this to their Muslim identity (see more on anti-Muslim narratives below). Both online and off, this theme of victimization is prevalent among mainstream actors such as members of the Bosniak nationalist SDA party, as well as a range of far-right actors, from the nationalist AntiDayton movement to the neo-Nazi Bosniak Movement of National Pride. And while historical revisionism is less pervasive in Bosniak victimization narratives, some Bosniak far-right groups do engage in discourse that downplays or denies the controversial actions of Bosniak figures in World War II and the 1990s.

Image 10: The explanation of this picture is "From Croatia with Hate"

All of these ethno-religious narratives of victimization in the region go well beyond a mere recounting of facts from the past, and instead instrumentalize those facts in order to drive sentiment towards specific actions – whether adhering to a hegemonic party line or engaging in online abuse against perceived internal and external enemies – with the promise that these actions will be corrective; meaning, they will preclude further victimization and achieve some sort of justice, or even revenge. The way victimhood narratives are deployed varies among far-right actors, and sometimes the forum in which they are speaking. Mainstream actors in BiH, such as political leaders, tend to avoid overt calls or justifications for violence and may even condemn or disavow violence. But more extreme actors on the far-right tend to engage with victimization and violence in one of two ways; either framing violence as self-defence or glorifying and encouraging it as an existential necessity for their ingroup. These more outright calls for violence often appear on platforms like Telegram and Twitter. For example, one of the posts, dated April 20, 2023, praises Adolf Hitler, portraying him as a distinguished military leader and a visionary for a better Europe. Following this, the channel subsequently shares a training challenge, explicitly dedicated to commemorating Hitler's birthday.

The considerable role of victimhood narratives in shaping the ideologies and actions of extremists in the region highlights how important it is to understand and address the impact of these narratives as part of efforts to counter radicalization and violent extremism. When tensions are highest in the Southeastern Europe, these narratives of victimhood are often supercharged by particularly emotional language and images, and even when political leaders and influential far-right figures do not explicitly endorse violence, the mobilizing power of amplified victimhood narratives can be enough to drive some individuals towards violence.

Understanding these narratives means appreciating the degree to which they are built on historical revisionism. And while academic historians sometimes use the term 'historical revisionism' neutrally, to describe any re-analysis or reinterpretation of history, in this context, **it refers to intentionally misleading interpretations of significant historical events and sometimes a denial that they occurred at all**. In the Southeastern Europe,

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65 See: "'It's getting out of hand': genocide denial outlawed in Bosnia,' *The Guardian*, 24 July 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/24/genocide-denial-outlawed-bosnia-srebrenica-office-high-representative.

and in the examples our researchers identified in the online far-right milieu, this revisionism involves a role reversal, in which the victimizer becomes the victim. This facilitates a justification of historical acts of violence as necessary and unavoidable acts of self-defence, or the relativization of this violence as less severe than the violence of 'others'.

Far-right narratives in the region also portray the victimization of an ingroup, even from centuries ago, as emblematic of present and future victimization. Additionally, these narratives alienate and marginalize people of a particular ethnic group who do not align with the propagated belief of their community's ongoing victimization based on this historic revisionism. The discourse surrounding this issue often creates a dichotomy, polarizing communities and hindering efforts towards reconciliation. In this way, historical revisionist narratives shape current perceptions and potential future actions. To counter these narratives, policymakers and other stakeholders must recognize that revisionism has become a powerful tool in reinforcing ideologies of victimhood, with very real impacts on contemporary political discourses and dynamics in BiH and the wider Southeastern Europe.

Anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives

The term 'gender ideology' and the concept of 'anti-gender' activism are loosely defined, despite their frequent deployment by far-right and conservative actors worldwide to express opposition to gender equality, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and other advancements for women and the LGBTQ+ community. They are essentially catchall phrases that misappropriate the concept of gender in order to mobilize against feminism and the LGBTQ+ rights movement. Behind this 'mobilisation against "gender ideology" is the alleged imperative to return to a morality centred on the traditional heteronormative family.'[66] Thus, 'anti-gender' activists engage with questions relating to marriage, adoption, surrogacy, and reproductive technologies as well.[67]

In the Southeastern Europe, these narratives are common in far-right discourse, across a spectrum of ideologies and degrees of extremism, and often manifest in misogynistic rhetoric that denigrates women.[68] In recent years, there has also been a notable escalation in hate speech targeting the LGBTQ+ population in the region, from a wide spectrum of perpetrators, both mainstream and extremist. Indeed, from politicians in BiH, to 'pro-life' groups in Croatia, to an array of Serbian far-right organizations, a strikingly similar set of arguments and imagery is employed to advance an anti-LGBTQ+ narrative; to such an extent that, for practical purposes, it represents a narrative shared across the region's entire far-right milieu. This narrative is only slightly modified to the specific ethno-religious or other subcultural affiliation of a group, and in every case, both LGBTQ+ people and 'gender ideology' are framed as direct threats to that group or to local ways of life. Often, these narratives assert that this 'ideology' discourages procreation and opposes heteronormative family structures, posing a fundamental challenge to cultural norms.

A novel dimension of this narrative has recently emerged: the malicious conspiracy narratives that 'LGBTQ+ people are "pedophiles" who are "grooming" children in order to abuse them'.[69] This allegation – which misappropriates a real term related to child sexual abuse in much the same way that 'gender ideology' misappropriates the concept of gender – has gained traction within conservative and far-right circles, especially in the US and Europe, and rests on the claim that the LGBTQ+ community and its allies are using non-heteronormative sex education curricula and LGBTQ+ advocacy initiatives to normalize pedophilia and exert undue influence over youth. This has 'fuelled a slew of hostile legislation and policies aimed at erasing the discussion of LGBTQ+ related issues in schools… and, especially, to ostracize, defame and harass transgender people'.[70] Experts say that this has been so effective because 'the idea that our opponents are out to sexually harm children…. associates [them] with the worst evil that humans are capable of committing…. [and] also triggers a primal instinct in every parent to protect their child.'[71]

66 Ov Cristian Norocel and Katarina Pettersson, 'Anti-gender politics in Finland and Romania,' *European Journal of Politics and Gender* (published online ahead of print 2023), DOI: https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16832281009645.

67 Teresa Toldy and Júlia Garraio, 'Gender ideology: a discourse that threatens gender equality,' in *Gender Equality: Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*, edited by Leal Filho, et al. (Cham: Springer, 2021).

68 For more on this, see: Majda Halilović, *Gender and non-violent extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sarajevo: Atlantic initiative, 2023); and Nejra Veljan and Maida Ćehajić-Čampara, *Gender Ideologies: How Extremists Exploit Battles over Women's Rights and Drive Reciprocal Radicalization* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2021).

69 Anti-Defamation League, 'What is "Grooming?" The Truth Behind the Dangerous, Bigoted Lie Targeting the LGBTQ+ Community,' Center for Extremism, 16 September 2022, https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/what-grooming-truth-behind-dangerous-bigoted-lie-targeting-lgbtq-community.

70 Ibid.

71 Matthew Rozsa, 'Why the moral panic over "grooming" is so effective at manipulating the right-wing mind,' *Salon*, 30 January 2023, https://www.salon.com/2023/01/30/why-the-moral-panic-over-grooming-is-so-effective-at-manipulating-the-right-wing-mind/.

This narrative has been embraced within the regional far-right extremist milieu as a means of intensifying the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ people and providing a rationalization for acts of harassment and violence directed towards the LGBTQ+ community. A good example is the instrumentalization of this conspiracy narratives by *Narodna Patrola* during Pride month this year (2023), when it shared content on Telegram linking LGBTQ+ people to pedophilia alongside an image depicting four rainbow flags arranged to form a swastika. Comments on this post called for the immediate execution of members of the LGBTQ+ community and equated their presence in Serbian society to a foreign invasion.

Image 11: The text discusses how "homosexual organizations" are making increasingly radical demands and how people must resist this ideology. It also mentions that every legal means will be used to oppose this. Additionally, it calls on the people to raise their voices and stand against them.

The content shared by far-right groups in the Southeastern Europe to propagate this disinformation is notably similar to (or even the same as) that disseminated by their counterparts in the US and EU, highlighting the extent to which online extremism transcends national borders. A recurring theme in all contexts has been the purported role of LGBTQ+ people and drag queens in undermining the foundations of society. As in other countries, this has mobilized actors in the region to advocate for restraints on information and the removal of educational content deemed too sympathetic to the LGBTQ+ community or the rights of LGBTQ+ people. At the same time, these actors portray the political left as safeguarding the interests of a child abusing LGBTQ+ community, drawing on instances in the US when antifascist groups have provided security at child-friendly events held at LGBTQ+-owned or -oriented businesses. This illuminates how far-right groups distort information to reinforce false narratives, in this case with the very specific intent of evoking the protective instincts of parents, to amplify their influence and increase recruitment.

However, on another side, that has been surge in the increasing portrayal of women as followers in far-right online spaces. Historically, far-right movements have been predominantly male-dominated, with their ideologies often emphasizing traditional gender roles. However, in recent years, there has been a strategic shift towards inclusivity of women, primarily as a means to broaden the appeal and legitimacy of these movements. This inclusivity is not necessarily indicative of a fundamental change in the gender dynamics or ideologies of these groups. Instead, it is often a tactical approach to counter the stereotype of far-right movements as exclusively male and aggressively masculine. By presenting a more diverse and 'normalized' image, these groups aim to attract a wider audience and gain mainstream acceptance.

Image 12: Women sympathizer holding "Mein Kampf" and promotes the reading of Nazi literature with a description; "Happy world book day! Reading is fun!"

Additionally, the portrayal of women as followers and proponents of far-right ideologies serves multiple purposes within the digital sphere. First, it challenges the prevailing narratives of women being inherently more liberal or left-leaning, thus creating a sense of surprise or intrigue that can draw more attention online. Women, especially those who are vocal in their support of far-right ideologies, can be used effectively in online propaganda to disrupt traditional perceptions and garner wider media coverage. Furthermore, their presence can be leveraged to soften the image of these movements, making them seem more accessible and reasonable to the general public. This phenomenon also reflects the broader trend of political movements, regardless of ideology, utilizing digital platforms to create more inclusive and diverse representations to appeal to broader demographics. The involvement of women in far-right online spaces is thus a complex interplay of strategic image management, ideological propagation, and the broader dynamics of digital media and political representation.

Anti-Western narratives

Narratives that frame Western actors as responsible for the past, present, and future victimization of an ingroup are most common among Serb nationalists in the region, who, from mainstream to extreme, attribute the victimization of Serbs to the actions of NATO and the administrations of US presidents Joe Biden and Bill Clinton. These Western forces are characterized as so hostile to Serbs that they seek to undermine or even destroy the Serbian state. These sentiments are often intertwined with pro-Russian attitudes, making far-right heroes out of people like Serbian foreign fighter Dejan Berić. In fact, online content coded as 'anti-West' by researchers, across all platforms, made it clear that Serb nationalist actors are exploiting the war in Ukraine to fortify pre-existing narratives about Western governments. Particularly conspicuous among these is the assertion that the conflict is the result of historical 'NATO aggression' and actions of the West, a claim made by a number of Serbian far-right groups, along with the assertion that Russia and Putin are being vilified by the mainstream media. A specific example of the narrative described can be seen in the statements or publications of Serbian far-right groups like "Srbska akcija" (Serbian Action) or Alcohol Boys. They often frame global conflicts, particularly those involving Russia, as a direct result of what they perceive as 'NATO aggression' or Western interventionism.
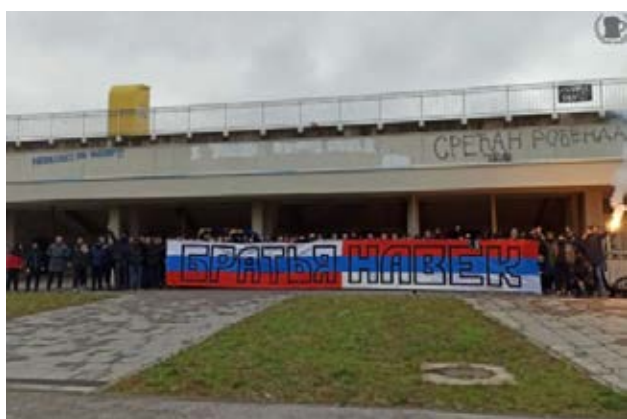
Image 13: A photograph depicts the Serbian and Russian flags crossed together, taken outside a stadium where the flag's entry was prohibited, captured a month after the onset of the aggression, as mentioned in their Instagram statement.

Anti-Western narratives are not solely confined to Serbian nationalist discourse, however. Among the Croatian far-right, anti-Western narratives that blame Western actors for promoting and disseminating 'gender ideology' are frequently interwoven with anti-gender narratives. For instance, on Telegram, Croatian politician Ivan Pernar – who now leads the eponymous Party of Ivan Pernar, known for its Euroscepticism and Russophilia – has described transgender individuals as 'afflicted' and has expressed vehement opposition to the broader 'Western gay agenda'. The online content posted by Pernar reflects a grab bag of far-right animosity, directed towards Jews, Black people, migrants, and women, alongside pro-Russian rhetoric. This has converged in a particularly notable way in Pernar's characterization of Ukrainian President Zelenskyy as a Jew aligned with liberal Western interests, and parallels similar discourse on the far-right about people like George Soros. Pernar also propagates various conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination, and endorses alternative herbal remedies, based on narratives that are again interwoven with anti-Western attitudes.

It is noteworthy that even among Bosniak far-right groups, there has been a recent burgeoning of anti-Western narratives, which have gained considerable traction in 2022 and 2023. This signifies a perceptual shift vis-à-vis the West, as these groups increasingly view Western actors as prone to disregard or betray the interests of Bosniaks. This is particularly visible on Twitter, where a cohort of anonymous users have been disseminating narratives that highlight the ways Western actors have breached the trust of Bosniaks, and content that emphasizes and validates Bosniak disillusionment. Researchers found that the online posts of far-right Bosniak actors on this theme tend to amplify and advance a prevailing paranoia that Bosniaks are being politically

marginalized by the West, coupled with claims of undue Croatian influence over politics in BiH. Many of the accounts analysed for this research echoed this narrative and directed derogatory comments against politicians in the opposition, calling them traitors and quislings.

By portraying Bosniaks as victims of the political machinations of other regional groups or the international community, this discourse cultivates especially strong emotional responses and calls for action. Its resonance is deeply intertwined with lived memories of the wars of the 1990s and the collective experience of Bosniaks, of widespread suffering, socio-political upheaval, and abandonment by the international community. Thus, the anti-Muslim bias of the West is an element of this anti-Western narrative among Bosniaks, and helps shape victimization discourse in the online far-right Bosniak milieu, where the interplay between historical memory, contemporary geopolitical dynamics, and the lingering legacy of past experiences offer endless openings for manipulation by far-right actors.

Anti-Muslim and Anti-Migrant narratives

In the Southeastern Europe, anti-Muslim sentiment is prevalent in the rhetoric of Serb and Croat nationalists, whether mainstream or far-right. These actors often portray Muslims as outsiders who do not 'belong' in their own countries, and characterize them as a potential threat to Serbs and Croats as nations and to their Orthodox or Catholic 'way of life,' respectively. For example, long-time Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik has emphasized the need to safeguard not only the Republika Srpska entity but all of BiH from incoming migrants, particularly those who are Muslim, arguing that they bring distinct cultural practices that cannot be allowed to undermine 'our way of life.' Comments such as this have drawn condemnation and have prompted comparisons between Dodik and Hungary's Viktor Orban; and in fact, Dodik has aligned himself with Orban and his policies, including in a letter he wrote to the Hungarian prime minister praising Orban's approach to preserving Europe's identity and values, particularly through pro-natal instead of pro-immigration measures. 'Hungary has recognized that the appropriate way to biologically renew the nation is to increase its own birth rate,' he wrote, 'and not to import people from… non-Christian faiths.'[72]

In Serbia, anti-Muslim narratives intermingle with an array of other far-right discourses. Serbian narratives vis-à-vis Kosovo, which demonize ethnic Albanians, commonly integrate anti-Muslim sentiment. And in the most extreme far-right groups like *Levijatan* or *Naroda Patrola* – which 'patrol' for migrants in Serbia – online threat narratives about Muslim immigration have fuelled violence in the real world. *Narodna Patrola* has labelled migrants as terrorists, for instance, and has propagated the notion that immigration surges are part of an orchestrated conspiracy by Western, liberal, and leftist forces to facilitate the spread of radical Islam across Europe. Also, it intermingles with the gender issues and misogyny since far-right groups try to use the protection of women to advocate for violence against Muslim migrants.[73]

In online spaces, Serbian far-right groups often combine anti-Muslim content with imagery and messaging that emphasizes Serb victimhood, as *Narodna Patrola* has done by focusing attention on the construction of a mosque in the Belgrade suburb of Mladenovac with posts declaring 'This is not Serbistan' and claiming the construction is illegal. This has been echoed by *Srbska Akcija*, which has taken this rhetoric even further by linking the mosque in Mladenovac to the most extreme Islamist actors, implying that supporters of its construction are proponents of an 'Islamic state'. The group has also disseminated content online highlighting a perceived solidarity between Romanian and Serb nationalists in their shared opposition to 'Islamic terror'. On another side, the Croatian far-right groups *Hrvatski Aktivni Klub* started their online activities with the anti-migrant sentiments and providing support to Juraj Mesić who was detained for attacking a food delivery man of Indian origin in mid-March in Zagreb, insulting him with words; *"Fuck niger, go home to India! (...) This is our country, Croatia, this is Europe. For white people, not for black people"*. He recorded this attack with a mobile phone and then sent the video to a friend. Anti-Muslim and anti-migrant narratives in the region are often based on a Euro-centric perception of self-defence; meaning, far-right actors in the Southeastern Europe present themselves as the guardians of Europe and 'European culture' from potential threat, a cordon sanitaire against a spreading virus. This relies on a certain degree of historical revisionism, as many far-right narratives do, in this

72 See: 'Dodik poslao novo pismo Orbanu: Ovoga puta je prepuno fašistićkih ideja,' *Radio Sarajevo*, 18 May 2022, https://radiosarajevo. ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/dodik-poslao-novo-pismo-orbanu-ovoga-puta-je-prepuno-fasistickih-ideja/457292; and (in English) 'Dodik in a letter to Orban: We will not biologically renew ourselves by importing non-Christian religions,' *Sloboden Pečat*, https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/dodik-vo-pismo-do-orban-nema-bioloshki-da-se-obnovime-so-uvoz-na-nehristijanski-veri/.

73 Nejra Veljan and Maida Ćehajić-Čampara, *Gender Ideologies: How Extremists Exploit Battles over Women's Rights and Drive Reciprocal Radicalization* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2021).

Image 14: A photograph depicts the member/symphatiser of the Croatian Active Club with a sign: "they import livestock and export Croats"

case, to position Serbs and Croats as the protectors of Europe for centuries, having sacrificed and battled on the European periphery for years to keep the continent safe from foreign enemies. These narratives are thus rooted in contested histories, and in generational fears and stereotypes, allowing them to pervade many segments of society, well beyond the far right. This means that understanding and addressing anti-Muslim narratives in the Southeastern Europe is crucial to fostering a more inclusive society and repairing historical traumas in the region.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This research uncovered clear patterns and trends in the dissemination of online extremist narratives by far-right actors in the Southeastern Europe, particularly specific uses of different platforms to exploit their unique formats, and the strategic deployment of content that promotes distinct themes in line with global narratives but is localized for regional ethno-national communities. This analysis found these actors to be rather adept at manipulating the structures of digital platforms to push vulnerable users deeper into information silos and maximizing their formats to propagate themes of ingroup victimization as well as anti-LGBTQ+, anti-Muslim, and anti-Western narratives.

The theme of victimization was especially prevalent, across the regional far right milieu and across digital formats. Short videos often recount historical injustices or perceived threats to evoke a sense of shared victimhood and rally viewers against external forces. Memes advance this messaging by combining images of ingroup suffering with text that emphasizes their oppression. Short texts may also encapsulate this in concise language that activates an emotional solidarity among users. Longer videos and texts then provide comprehensive narrative frames for ingroup struggles and suffering, further legitimizing claims to collective victimhood.

Anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-Muslim narratives are also strategically implemented in online spaces by far-right users. Short videos and memes tend to emphasize stereotypes, for instance, while longer videos and texts are designed to validate discriminatory viewpoints. Often, negative portrayals of both the LGBTQ+ community and Muslims exploit humour as well, to normalize prejudice and desensitize users to imagery and language that dehumanizes these groups; a tactic that has long been associated with antisemitic propaganda. Anti-Western themes, which increasingly permeate other content, are similarly deployed. Short videos and memes typically critique Western cultural or politics and depict Western societies as flawed. Short texts succinctly challenge the credibility of these societies, while long videos and texts delve into critical analyses of Western policies and practices, offering substantiations for anti-Western perspectives.

This strategic use of various content formats by far-right actors is evidence of their adaptability and signals that, as a movement, the global far-right has developed a digital acuity that makes it increasingly more challenging to counter. Far-right groups are not only more connected and more synchronized than ever before, but they have developed a tactical understanding of online platforms that allows them to tailor content to different formats in order to most effectively harness the emotional and cognitive reactions of users, to amplify the resonance of certain narratives. And this research has shown that the significant role of social media and online platforms in the process of narrative creation and consolidation by far-right groups in the region has impacts offline. As the distinction between our online and offline worlds only blurs further, it is essential that the role of social media platforms in facilitating radicalization and extremism in the Southeastern Europe is fully understood.

From these findings, several key policy implications and recommendations emerge:

1. **Mainstreams and Extremes: A Unified Approach**
   This research found time and again that mainstream and extremist narratives in BiH and beyond do not exist in separate spheres. In practical terms, this means that extremist narratives, including those promoting violence, are not detached from mainstream discourses. Thus, *efforts to tackle radicalization and extremism must acknowledge the role of mainstream actors, particularly their gatekeeping and agenda-setting functions.*

2. **Great Replacement Narratives: Foreseeing Potential Risks**
    One may note only a single explicit mention of the prevalent far-right narrative, the so-called Great Replacement theory, in this report. The theory, which imagines a conspiracy to replace European populations with non-European people, is currently less prominent among far-right actors in the region than in other places. Still, it is interconnected with narratives that are common in the Southeastern Europe, such as anti-LGBTQ+ and 'gender ideology' discourses – which frame declining birth rates through the lens of victimhood narratives that centre perceived threats from non-European migrants and suggest the 'replacement' of an ingroup. *To develop effective interventions, policymakers, educators, media practitioners, and other stakeholders should familiarize themselves with the tropes, arguments, language, and symbols used to construct and advance these narratives.*

3. **The Significance of Visual Content and Symbols**
    The visual bias of social media platforms has encouraged the far right to harness the power of visual imagery, especially symbols, to maximize the emotional impact of online content. In the Southeastern Europe, these symbols include old and current flags, historical figures, and context-specific emblems, many of which possess layers of meaning that are sometimes contradictory. *Understanding this semiotic language of the far right is central to effectively combatting violent extremism.*

This research affirmed that social media and other online platforms have become pivotal in processes of far-right radicalization, which flow between online and offline spaces. But importantly, it also clarified that the structures of different platforms and the formats they emphasize significantly shape the strategies of far-right actors in digital spaces. In other words, this paper found that far-right actors in the region are adept not only at creating content in various formats to exploit the key engagement features of social media platforms but are also very shrewd in how they exploit the priorities of social media companies and the algorithms they employ, including the engagement imperative that produces information silos.

Given this, combatting radicalization and extremist content online will require a highly informed, multifaceted, and collaborative approach from policymakers and other stakeholders. One focus should be on increasing the responsibility and accountability of online platforms themselves. By implementing robust content guidelines and proactive monitoring systems with sufficient capacity to moderate content in all the world's languages, social media companies could more swiftly identify and remove extremist content before it spreads widely, and they could do this even more effectively through cooperation. Therefore, countering far-right content in online spaces demands a coordinated effort involving online platforms and other stakeholders, as well as the development of mechanisms to facilitate knowledge exchange and pool expertise.

Western Balkan states must also invest in prevention and intervention, including through early detection mechanisms to identify individuals at risk of radicalization and provide them with targeted support. This can help steer vulnerable individuals away from extremist ideologies before they are radicalized to violence. But this must be accompanied by programming aimed at building resilience, promoting critical thinking, and advancing internet literacy more broadly; such as through educational programming in schools and public service messaging in media. Equipping individuals of all ages with the ability to analyse and challenge extremist narratives empowers them to resist the allure of online far-right narratives.

The transnational nature of online extremism means that any effective response to online radicalization must also entail international cooperation and information sharing. Simply put, cross-border collaboration is paramount to countering cross-border radicalization. By combining resources, intelligence, and expertise, states can act collectively to strengthen their capacity to combat the spread of far-right content online. Through an exchange of best practices, states may also be able to develop comprehensive evidence-based strategies that address the issue of far-right radicalization more effectively.

In mapping the online activity of far-right actors in BiH and across region, this research found that the regional far-right milieu is thriving in digital spaces. Indeed, the radicalization imperative of the global far-right movement and the engagement imperative of social media platforms are both geared towards triggering and harnessing emotion, which has made these platforms fundamental to modern radicalization processes. Addressing online radicalization and extremist content therefore requires a multi-pronged effort that balances greater responsibility and accountability on the part of online platforms with greater investment by states in prevention and intervention initiatives, and encourages international cooperation and information sharing; an effort that has been kick started by the Christchurch Call. It is only by engaging on these various fronts simultaneously that policymakers can foster an environment in which extremism is actively countered and digital spaces are safer and more inclusive.

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