

ULTRAS AND EXTREMISM IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Author:
Mirza Buljubašić

Atlantic initiative
Center for Security and Justice Research

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Mirza Buljubašić

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Football supporter culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina is neither politically neutral nor uniformly extremist. Supporter culture also encompasses club loyalty, friendship, ritual, spectacle, local identity, and mutual belonging. Within parts of this supporter environment, however, particular factions and individuals have used the organisational capacities of supporter groups for ethnonationalist messaging, atrocity glorification, neo Nazi symbolism, intimidation, violence, and, in some cases, criminal activity.

The evidence is strongest for documented public incidents, such as chants, banners, graffiti, assaults, and reported clashes. It is weaker for broad statements about entire groups, continuing criminal structures, party control, recruitment, or travel to foreign conflicts.

The highest policy risk arises where four conditions converge: exclusionary ideology, an organised capacity for violence, involvement in criminal activity or criminal networks, and political protection or facilitation. The presence and intensity of these conditions vary across supporter groups, with the greatest risk arising when several converge and reinforce one another.

The paper recommends a tiered and rights respecting approach. Priorities include better stadium governance, supporter liaison, consistent evidence collection, transparent sanctions, targeted criminal investigation, youth support, digital literacy, lawful online investigation, regional cooperation, and independent evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bijeli Brijeg Stadium in Mostar is more than a sporting venue. Opened in 1958, it was used by FK Velež during the socialist period and is now the home ground of HŠK Zrinjski.[1] Its postwar meaning is closely connected to the territorial and institutional division of Mostar, including Velež's wartime displacement from the stadium and Zrinjski's subsequent use of the ground.[2] The venue also functions as a place of belonging and football ritual. However, banners, chants, and salutes have connected parts of the terrace culture to ethnonationalism, the Ustaša legacy, and neo Nazi symbolism.

FK Velež was displaced from the stadium during the war, while HŠK Zrinjski reemerged and later established the ground as its home. The stadium dispute remains politically charged because it condenses competing memories of the city, wartime displacement, territory, and postwar belonging. This history helps explain why matches between the clubs and supporter displays can carry meanings that exceed sport.

Supporter groups can provide friendship, structure, status, mutual aid, and a strong sense of belonging. Security risk increases where these organisational capacities intersect with exclusionary ideology, organised violence, criminal opportunity, or political protection.

This paper explores how parts of the Ultras subculture in Bosnia and Herzegovina intersect with ethnonationalism, neo Nazism, violence, organised crime, and political influence. It distinguishes lawful fandom from hooliganism and from ideological or criminal conduct, assesses the strength and limits of the available evidence, and proposes proportionate responses.

1 HŠK Zrinjski Mostar. Stadion HŠK Zrinjski. https://hskzrinjski.ba/en/stadion/ [accessed 20 August 2024].
2 Mills, R. (2010). Velež Mostar Football Club and the Demise of 'Brotherhood and Unity' in Yugoslavia, 1922 to 2009. Europe Asia Studies, 62(7), 1107-1133. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2010.497018

2. THE ULTRAS SUBCULTURE: LOYALTY, ORGANISATION, AND POLITICAL MEANING

2.1. Origins and Influence

Ultras culture emerged in Italy during the 1960s and later spread across Europe. Its distinguishing features include organised chanting, choreographed visual displays, pyrotechnics, travel, and an intense commitment to the club.[3] Many groups divide tasks involving choreography, logistics, communication, and relations with club officials. These practices can produce strong solidarity, continuity, and informal authority within the supporter community.[4]

Large visual displays, often called tifos, are central to collective identity. They can communicate loyalty, territorial attachment, humour, grief, or political meaning. Italian groups are well known for elaborate choreographies, while groups such as Torcida Split (Croatia) combine visual spectacle with pyrotechnics and, at times, politically charged messages.[5] The political meaning of a display depends on its symbols, wording, setting, and relationship to other supporter practices.

Ultras and hooligans overlap in some settings but are not synonymous. Ultras refers primarily to a style of organised support, while hooliganism refers to violence or planned disorder connected to football. Some groups contain both forms, while others do not.[6] Where violence is organised, confrontations may occur near stadiums or at prearranged locations, and participation can reinforce status, loyalty, and a masculine warrior ethos.[7]

Some supporter factions arrange confrontations beyond match days, while others reject such

3 Doidge, M., Kossakowski, R., & Mintert, S. (2020). Ultras: *The passion and politics of European football fandom*. Routledge. See also: Buarque de Hollanda, B., & Busset, T. (2022). *Football fandom in Europe and Latin America: Culture, politics, and violence in the 21st century*. Palgrave Macmillan.
4 Giulianotti, R., & Armstrong, G. (1999). *Football cultures and identities*. Palgrave Macmillan.
5 Montague, J. (2020). *1312: Among the Ultras*. Ebury Publishing.
6 Spaaij, R. (2006). Understanding Football Hooliganism: A Comparison of Six Western European Football Clubs. Amsterdam University Press.
7 Doidge, M., Kossakowski, R., & Mintert, S. (2020). *Ultras: The passion and politics of European football fandom*. Routledge.

conduct. States and football authorities have responded through stadium bans, restrictions on pyrotechnics, surveillance, and stronger event policing.[8]

2.2. From Fandom to Mobilisation

The term Ultra describes a form of intensive organised support, while political extremism is identified through ideology, conduct, networks, and attitudes toward democratic equality and political violence. The far right is used here as a broader category encompassing radical and extreme right ideas and actors. Extreme right positions reject core principles of democratic equality and may legitimise political violence. Neo Nazism constitutes a more specific extreme right ideology identified through explicit National Socialist ideas, racial supremacy, antisemitism, associated symbolism, or organisational links. Ethnonationalism is treated separately: it can be exclusionary and authoritarian without necessarily constituting neo Nazism or violent extremism.[9]

Ultras culture can intersect with political movements. A well known example is Lazio's now disbanded Irriducibili, whose members displayed neo Nazi imagery and honoured Željko Ražnatović, known as Arkan (see 4.2.).[10]

Political actors may seek access to supporter networks because organised supporter structures can mobilise people quickly, occupy visible public space, and circulate political messages during periods of social tension.[11]

8 Giulianotti, R., & Armstrong, G. (1999). *Football cultures and identities*. Palgrave Macmillan; Spaaij, R. (2006). Understanding Football Hooliganism: A Comparison of Six Western European Football Clubs. Amsterdam University Press.

9 Buljubašić, M., & Lubarda, B. (2023). *Mapping the extreme-right in the Western Balkans: Criteria, typologies, and methodological considerations*. Balkan Insight. https://balkaninsight.com/extreme-right-organisations/Mapping-the-Extreme-Right-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf. For definitions see also: Buljubašić, M., & Holá, B. (2021). *Historical trauma and radicalisation: How can intergenerational transmission of collective traumas contribute to (group) radicalisation?* Policy Paper No. 2. Atlantic Initiative. Retrieved from https://atlanticinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Policy-Paper-Br.-2-ENG.pdf.

10 Buarque de Hollanda, B., & Busset, T. (2022). *Football fandom in Europe and Latin America: Culture, politics, and violence in the 21st century*. Palgrave Macmillan.

11 Negus, G. M. (2022). *Soccer hooligans to MMA: The changing face of the radical right through sports*. Naval Postgraduate School.



Image 1. Lazio Ultras honour Željko Ražnatović, known as Arkan[12]

Historical far right figures, including Benito Mussolini, have been revived in some supporter displays.[13] Other messages target immigrants, minorities, or political opponents. Combat sports and highly masculine self presentation become relevant understanding extremism where they are embedded in networks or narratives that legitimise political violence, ethnic supremacy, or exclusion.[14]

In the former Yugoslav region, certain supporter factions display far right, neo Nazi, or exclusionary ethnonationalist ideas. The pattern varies across clubs, cities, and periods. The paper therefore focuses on the conditions under which particular symbols, narratives, networks, and opportunities turn supporter organisation into a vehicle for intimidation, political mobilisation, or violence.

12 Delle Donne, V. (2000, February 29). Fans: Über faschistische Tendenzen römischer Tifosi. Der Spiegel. https://www.spiegel.de/sport/fussball/fans-ueber-faschistische-tendenzen-roemischer-tifosi-a-66898.html [accessed 29 October 2024].

13 Testa, A., & Armstrong, G. (2010). *Football, fascism and fandom: The ultras of Italian football.* A & C Black.

14 Negus, G. M. (2022). Soccer hooligans to MMA: The changing face of the radical right through sports. Naval Postgraduate School; Kapidžić, D., Hirkić, M., Bakić, S., & Dudić-Sijamija, A. (2023). *CONNEKT - Meso-Level Drivers: Regional Report on the Balkans*. European Institute of the Mediterranean; See: Međedović, J., Petrović, B., & Želeskov-Đorić, J. (2020). Militant extremist mind-set in Serbian football supporters. *Journal of Political and Military Sociology, 47*(2), 109-121.

3. HISTORICAL PATHWAYS FROM YUGOSLAVIA TO THE PRESENT

3.1. Football Stadiums as Political Arenas

Football stadiums can host celebration, dissent, local rivalry, and political expression at the same time. Their dense crowds, ritualised opposition, and public visibility make them attractive settings for political messaging. Stadiums can amplify social conflicts originating in wider political, institutional, and communal settings.

State institutions promoted football as one arena in which Yugoslav unity and Brotherhood and Unity could be represented, while clubs and supporters simultaneously retained strong local and republican identities. During the economic and political crisis of the 1980s, some rivalries acquired sharper ethnonationalist meanings.[15] Groups including Red Star Belgrade's Delije and Dinamo Zagreb's Bad Blue Boys became associated with Serbian and Croatian nationalist mobilisation.[16] The fragmentation of football institutions formed part of the state's wider dissolution. Stadium violence amplified the political crisis, while political leadership, security structures, institutions, and organised nationalist projects drove the escalation toward war.

3.2. The Militarisation of Supporter Networks

As nationalist mobilisation intensified, parts of supporter networks became connected to paramilitary recruitment. Željko Ražnatović, known as Arkan, used his influence among Red Star supporters and recruited from that milieu for the Serbian Volunteer Guard, also called Arkan's Tigers. Members of that formation later committed atrocity crimes in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[17] Thus, an existing network of loyalty, masculinity, and readiness for confrontation could be redirected toward organised violence.

15 Jovic, D. (2008). *Yugoslavia: A state that withered away.* Purdue University Press.

16 Mills, R. (2019). *The politics of football in Yugoslavia: Sport, nationalism and the state*. I.B. Tauris; Also see: Hodges, A. (2019). *Ultras in Post-Socialist Croatia*. Routledge; Brentin, D., & Zec, D. (2017). From the concept of the communist 'new man' to nationalist hooliganism: Research perspectives on sport in socialist Yugoslavia. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, *34*(9), 713-728.

17 Brentin, D., & Zec, D. (2017). From the concept of the communist "new man" to nationalist hooliganism: Research perspectives on sport in socialist Yugoslavia. The International Journal of the History of Sport, 34(9), 713-728; Čolović, I. (2000). Football, Hooligans and War. In N. Popov (Ed.), The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis (pp. 373-396). Central European University Press.

Political and security involvement also shaped this process. In some settings, political and security actors instrumentalised existing supporter networks and redirected parts of their organisational capacity toward nationalist mobilisation and violence.[18]

3.3. Symbols, Songs, and Political Memory

During the late socialist and wartime periods, some supporter groups adopted nationalist and fascist symbols. United Force, supporters of FK Rad in Belgrade, became associated with neo Nazi imagery. Parts of Torcida Split, whose earlier identity included antifascist elements, later used Ustaša slogans such as Za dom spremni, an Ustaša salute linked to the Independent State of Croatia, not simply a generic patriotic expression.[19] By the 1990s, selected terraces displayed hate speech, revisionist narratives, and praise for wartime collaborationist movements.[20] These developments interacted with earlier punk, metal, and youth subcultures rather than replacing them in a uniform way.[21]



Image 2. United Force, supporters of FK Rad in Belgrade, display a Totenkopf and a Confederate flag[22]

18 Čolović, I. (2000). Football, Hooligans and War. In N. Popov (Ed.), The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis (pp. 373-396). Central European University Press; Mills, R. (2019). *The politics of football in Yugoslavia: Sport, nationalism and the state*. I.B. Tauris.

19 Montague, J. (2020). *1312: Among the Ultras*. Ebury Publishing.

20 Tomić, Đ. (2016). Post-Yugoslavia's "Political Wasteland" and the Radical Right: Between State Sponsored Nationalism and Neoliberal Pro-European Reform Course. In G. Goll & K. Mlinarić (Eds.), *Othering and Right-Wing Extremism in SEE Societies* (pp. 237-253). Peter Lang.

21 Perasović, B. (2005). Sociology of sport and football hooliganism in contemporary Croatian context. In D. Milanović & F. Prot (Eds.), 4th International Scientific Conference on Kinesiology: Science and Profession, Challenge for the Future, Proceedings Book (pp. 768-770). Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Zagreb.

22 The Totenkopf was used by units of the Nazi SS and is now common in neo Nazi milieus. The Confederate flag has several historical uses but is also employed by white supremacist movements. Image source: Mondo.ba. (2017, February 21). Kad utihnu majmunski krici, ostaju NACI simboli. https://mondo.ba/Sport/Fudbal/a719507/Kad-utihnu-majmunski-krici-ostaju-NACI-simboli.html [accessed 28 October 2024].

Songs and banners can condense political claims into memorable forms. Some prominent Serbian supporter groups used Četnik imagery, while some Croatian groups used Ustaša iconography. Red Star supporters sang, "Oj, Srbijo, iz tri dela, ponovo ćeš biti cela," ("Oh, Serbia, divided into three parts, you will be whole again!") expressing an aspiration to reunify Serbian territories.[23] Ustaša references recalled a regime that persecuted and murdered Serbs, Jews, Roma, communists, and other opponents.[24] During the war, football chants were also adapted into military language. One example, published in October 1993 amid the brutal violence and atrocities of the Bosnian War, appeared in *Javnost*—a weekly based in Pale, the political stronghold of the Bosnian Serb leadership located just outside besieged Sarajevo—and read:

"There will be hell again,
there will be a madhouse again,
the specials, the Četniks, are on the move,
from the streets of Foča.

The Četniks are on their way,
the fighters are on their way,
Cosa's men are on their way,
Serbian volunteers."[25]

The chant linked the vocabulary of supporter rivalry to wartime mobilisation. It illustrates how songs can normalise armed identities and places Foča within a triumphalist narrative of Četnik mobilisation.

Nationalist terrace culture developed through both supporter practices and documented political or security involvement. In particular historical settings, political and security actors used supporter networks for mobilisation, while national symbols and narratives also became embedded within everyday supporter culture.[26] Billig's concept of banal nationalism helps explain how national belonging becomes routine through repeated symbols and practices. In some settings, exclusionary and extremist messages are subsequently expressed through this familiar national vocabulary.[27]

23 Mills, R. (2019). *The politics of football in Yugoslavia: Sport, nationalism and the state*. I.B. Tauris.
24 Čolović, I. (2000). Football, Hooligans and War. In N. Popov (Ed.), The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis (pp. 373-396). Central European University Press.
25 Čolović, I. (2000). Football, Hooligans and War. In N. Popov (Ed.), The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis (pp. 373-396). Central European University Press.
26 Andjelić, N. (2014). The rise and fall of Yugoslavia: Politics and football in the service of the nation(s). *Südosteuropa*, *62*(2), 99-125.
27 Billig, M. (1995). *Banal Nationalism*. Sage Publications.



Image 3. Supporters display the insignia of the Croatian Defence Forces, the Ustaša salute Za dom spremni, and Nazi salutes[28]

3.4. Postwar Continuities and Regional Variation

The end of the wars did not end football related violence or its connection to unresolved ethnic tensions. In October 2009, FK Sarajevo supporter Vedran Puljić was killed during disorder surrounding a match in Široki Brijeg. Contemporary reporting confirmed that he died from a gunshot wound, while investigations and public accounts disputed responsibility and police conduct.[29] The case remains a symbol of distrust, disputed accountability, and the capacity of football disorder to activate wider communal tensions.

28 Croatian Defence Forces (military arm of the Croatian Party of Rights). Dnevno.hr. (2021, October 23). 'Za dom spremni' ide u povijest? Milanovićev šef Vrhovnog suda: 'To je civilizacijsko, a ne ideološko pitanje.' https://www.dnevno.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/za-dom-spremni-ide-u-povijest-milanovicev-sef-vrhovnog-suda-to-je-civilizacijsko-a-ne-ideolosko-pitanje-1847018/ [accessed 29 October, 2024].

29 Balkan Insight. (2009, October 5). Sarajevo Fan Died of Gunshot Wound. https://balkaninsight.com/2009/10/05/sarajevo-fan-died-of-gunshot-wound/; Balkan Insight. (2009, October 9). Thousands Mourn Killed Sarajevo Football Fan. https://balkaninsight.com/2009/10/09/thousands-mourn-killed-sarajevo-football-fan/ [accessed 20 August 2026].



Image 4. Škripari (Crusaders), supporters of NK Široki Brijeg[30]

Exclusionary ethnonationalist messaging is more consistently documented than explicit neo Nazi identification. Neo Nazi symbolism nevertheless appears across multiple documented incidents and constitutes a distinct form of extremist expression within parts of the supporter environment.

Regional comparison shows both continuity and variation. In Serbia, elements of the Delije and Partizan supporter milieu have been linked to organised crime and political protection. The case of Veljko Belivuk, associated with Partizan's Principi group, illustrates allegations of interaction among hooligan networks, serious crime, and political influence.[31] However, transactional relationships among hooligan, criminal, and political actors are more clearly documented than direct state direction of supporter organisations.[32]

In Croatia, incidents involving Torcida Split and Bad Blue Boys have included pro Ustaša and anti Serb messages.[33] In North Macedonia, Komiti have participated in episodes shaped by Macedonian and Albanian tensions. In Montenegro, Varvari have displayed ethnonationalist messages during periods of political conflict.[34] These examples show a regional pattern of political use of football identity, but the content, scale, and organisational links differ across countries and groups.

30 SportSport.ba. (2010, November 8). Nacizam ne smijemo tolerisati. SportSport. https://sportsport.ba/fudbal/nacizam-ne-smijemo-tolerisati/46286 [accessed 3 October 2024].

31 Ahern, A. (2022). *Violent Terraces, Violent Government: Football Ultras, Organized Crime, and Political Clientelism in Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Dual State.* Oberlin College. Proceedings of the European and Eurasian Undergraduate Research Symposium.

32 See: Tregoures, L. (2023). *Football fandom in South-Eastern Europe: The countries from the former Yugoslavia*. Palgrave Macmillan. *Cf.* Pavasovic Trost, T., & Kovacevic, N. (2013). Football, hooliganism, and nationalism: The reaction to Serbia's gay parade in reader commentary online. *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, 16(10), 1254-1269.

33 Balkan Insight. (2012, November 30). *Political Football: The Balkans' Belligerent Ultras Avoid Penalties*. Retrieved from https://balkaninsight.com/2012/11/30/political-football-the-balkans-belligerent-ultras-avoid-penalties/.

34 Đorđević, S., & Scaturro, R. (2022). *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics, and organized crime in the Western Balkans*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hooligans-crime-balkans/; Ilijevski, I., Stanojoska, A., & Petrevski, B. (2024). Promotion of Right Wing Extremism Through Fan Groups: The Situation in North Macedonia, Serbia and France. Pravni Horizonti, 8, 9-23. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12599246.

4. ULTRAS AND EXTREMISM IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

4.1. Ethnonationalism

4.1.1. From Football to Ethnic Allegiances

The wars from 1992 to 1995 and the postwar political order shape how clubs are publicly associated with community identity. In public discourse and supporter rivalries, FK Sarajevo is frequently associated with Bosniak identity, HŠK Zrinjski with Croat identity, and FK Borac with Serb identity, although each club and supporter base contains more varied histories and individual identities. Stadiums can therefore become places where club loyalty, local memory, and ethnic narratives meet. These associations are socially and politically constructed and vary across individuals, periods, and supporter settings.

Supporter group	Football club	City
Alcohol Boys	FK Rudar	Prijedor
Crvena Legija	FK Mladost	Doboj Kakanj
Demoni	FK Bosna	Visoko
Fukare	FK Sloboda	Tuzla
Gerila 1989	FK Travnik	Travnik
Horde Zla	FK Sarajevo	Sarajevo
Incident	FK Radnik	Bijeljina
Lešinari	FK Borac	Banja Luka
Ljumani	FK Budućnost	Banovići

Supporter group	Football club	City
Manijaci	FK Željezničar	Sarajevo
No Fear	FK Goražde	Goražde
Red Army	FK Velež	Mostar
Robijaši	FK Čelik	Zenica
Sila Nebeska	FK Jedinstvo	Bihać
Škripari	NK Široki Brijeg	Široki Brijeg
Ultras	HŠK Zrinjski	Mostar
Vandali	FK Iskra	Bugojno
Group names, clubs and cities are adapted from Đorđević and Scaturro (2022).		

Table 1. Selected football Ultras groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina[35]

For some young people, supporter groups offer friendship, routine, protection, recognition, and opportunities for public participation. Economic insecurity and limited mobility can increase the attraction of strong group belonging when they combine with peer pressure, legitimising narratives, opportunities for violence, and weak accountability.[36]

Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system institutionalises ethnic representation and creates recurring incentives for ethnic mobilisation. Political actors use unresolved grievances, memories of victimisation, and claims of communal threat to retain support. Supporter groups can reproduce these narratives independently, receive encouragement from political actors, or resist them. Also, there is a coexistence of autonomous reproduction of ethnonationalist narratives within supporter culture and instances of interaction with political actors.

Authoritarian and nativist narratives often portray a strong leader as the defender of the group and present pluralism, gender equality, or dissent as threats.[37] At events marking 9 January as Republika Srpska Day, supporter factions, including Alcohol Boys, have displayed pyrotechnics and symbols reported as ethnonationalist or neo Nazi.[38] The Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina found the relevant legal provisions designating 9 January as the Day of Republika

35 Adapted from Đorđević, S., & Scaturro, R. (2022). *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics, and organized crime in the Western Balkans.* Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. Retrieved from https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hooligans-crime-balkans/

36 See: Azinović, V., Bassuener, K., & Weber, B. (2011). *Assessing the potential for renewed ethnic violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A security risk analysis*. Atlantic Initiative & Democratization Policy Council.

37 Halilović, M., & Veljan, N. (2021). *Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Atlantic Initiative. See: Buljubašić, M., & Lubarda, B. (2023). *Mapping the extreme-right in the Western Balkans: Criteria, typologies, and methodological considerations*. Balkan Insight. https://balkaninsight.com/extreme-right-organisations/Mapping-the-Extreme-Right-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf. For definitions see also: Buljubašić, M., & Holá, B. (2021). *Historical trauma and radicalisation: How can intergenerational transmission of collective traumas contribute to (group) radicalisation?* Policy Paper No. 2. Atlantic Initiative. Retrieved from https://atlanticinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Policy-Paper-Br.-2-ENG.pdf.

38 Zorić, T. (2022, January 28). Kako su desničarske navijačke grupe mobilisane za proslavu 9. januara. *Detektor*. https://detektor.ba/2022/01/28/kako-su-desnicarske-navijacke-grupe-mobilisane-za-proslavu-9-januara/.

Srpska inconsistent with the Constitution.[39] The documented displays combine supporter mobilisation with ethnonationalist political symbolism and can operate as public assertions of territorial and communal dominance. Evidence of direct political coordination varies between incidents.

Terrace chants, graffiti, and banners draw on war memory, local pride, resistance, and territorial attachment. They can reinforce ethnic solidarity and exclusion, especially when the opposing club is represented as an ethnic enemy.[40] At the same time, local and club identities may compete with ethnic identity, and meanings can change across matches and generations.

Testa's interviews illustrate this internal variation. One Lešinari member rejected a simple nationalist label, stating, "I do not give a f*** about [Serb nationalism]. My best man is Croat, my wife is Muslim, my grandmother is Muslim."[41] The quotation illustrates the distance that can exist between collective terrace performance, individual identity, and organisational practice. A group may display an ethnonationalist collective image while individual members hold mixed, pragmatic, or contradictory views.

4.1.2. Atrocity Glorification, Hate Speech, and Sacralised Ethnonationalism

Documented incidents include inflammatory chants, atrocity glorification, and hate based intimidation. On 20 August 2022, during a match between FK Borac and FK Željezničar, supporters linked to Lešinari (FK Borac) chanted the name of Ratko Mladić. The match was paused and a stadium warning was issued. Mladić was convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity, and violations of the laws or customs of war, and his convictions were affirmed on appeal.[42]

Supporters of HŠK Zrinjski have displayed banners honouring Marko Radić, who was convicted by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina of crimes against humanity. Škripari have commemorated Slobodan Praljak, a former Croatian Defence Council commander whose convictions in the Prlić and others case were affirmed by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia, Appeals Chamber.[43] Such displays reframe convicted perpetrators within heroic community

39 Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Decision U 3/13, 26 November 2015. https://www.ustavnisud.ba/uploads/odluke/_en/U-3-13-1017392.pdf; Decision U 2/18, 28 March 2019, summarised in Summary of Enforcement of U Decisions. https://www.ustavnisud.ba/uploads/documents/summary-of-enforcement-of-u-decisions-rs_1744273471.pdf [accessed 20 August 2026].

40 Bakić, S., Bašić, S., Dudić, A., Hirkić, M., & Kapidžić, D. (2022). *CONNEKT Meso-Level Drivers: Bosnia and Herzegovina*. European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed); Kapidžić, D., Hirkić, M., Bakić, S., & Dudić-Sijamija, A. (2023). *CONNEKT - Meso-Level Drivers: Regional Report on the Balkans*. European Institute of the Mediterranean; *Cf.* Testa, A. (2022). *Waves of extremism: An applied ethnographic analysis of the Bosnia and Herzegovina football terraces. Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 4*, Article 770441. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.770441

41 Testa, A. (2022). *Waves of extremism: An applied ethnographic analysis of the Bosnia and Herzegovina football terraces. Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 4*, Article 770441. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.770441

42 Detektor. (n.d.). Navijači Borca na utakmici skandirali ime Ratka Mladića [Borac fans chanted the name of Ratko Mladić during the match]. Retrieved from https://mapiranjemrznje.detektor.ba/articles/incident/83-navijači-borca-na-utakmici-skandirali-ime-ratka-mladića [accessed 21 October 2024]; International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals. Mladić, Ratko, MICT 13 56. https://www.irmct.org/en/cases/mict-13-56 [accessed 20 August 2026].

43 Arnautović, M., & Behram, M. (2020, November 13). Fašizam na svom terenu: Ekstremistički pokliči sa bh. sta-

narratives despite judicial findings concerning their criminal responsibility. They place celebratory commemoration in direct tension with victim centred remembrance and judicially established responsibility.

The chant "Nož, žica, Srebrenica" ("Knife, Wire, Srebrenica"), reported in connection with Lešinari, invokes the Srebrenica genocide through the language of killing and turns the genocide into a threat directed at Bosniaks.[44] In the collective setting of a terrace chant, it also functions as an assertion of in group dominance and solidarity among participants.

Religious symbols may also be combined with ethnonationalist messages. FK Borac supporters have invoked Serbian Orthodox figures including Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović in public displays.[45] Such references can sacralise ethnic belonging when accompanying messages frame political identity or communal claims in religious terms. The extremist significance of religious references derives from their surrounding language, conduct, and political meaning, particularly where religious belonging is used to sacralise exclusionary ethnic or territorial claims.

4.1.3. Digital Amplification and Online Networks

Social media extends supporter culture beyond the stadium. Pages, forums, short videos, and messaging channels circulate choreography, symbols, rivalries, and political narratives. Exclusionary content can gain repetition and social approval inside networked communities, while the same channels also carry ordinary club news and civic action.[46]

Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and dedicated forums allow groups and informal pages to address younger audiences and maintain contact between matches.[47] Memes and videos can link club allegiance with ethnic pride, masculinity, or hostility.

Online communication also supports regional connections. Supporter pages can reproduce symbols and narratives circulating in neighbouring countries, signalling cultural affinity, friendship, imitation, or ideological alignment. The available information documents symbolic and cultural exchange, while formal alliances or operational cooperation require evidence of sustained contact, coordination, or joint activity.

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diona. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/fašizam-stadioni-bih/30946282.html; Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Radić Marko et al., X KRŽ 05/139. https://sudbih.gov.ba/Court/Case/42 [accessed 20 August 2026]; International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Prlić et al., IT 04 74. https://www.icty.org/en/case/prlic [accessed 20 August 2026].

44 Arnautović, M., & Behram, M. (2020, November 13). Fašizam na svom terenu: Ekstremistički pokliči sa bh. stadiona. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/fašizam-stadioni-bih/30946282.html

45 See: Morrison, K., & Garčević, V. (2023). *The Orthodox Church, Montenegro, and the 'Serbian World'*. Atlantic Initiative; Also see: ATV. (2020, January 10). Banjalučani i navijači Borca uz Srbe u Crnoj Gori; Slavili i Dan Republike. *RTRS*. https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=365430&fbclid=IwAR0usDkzGx5BvXEiFRyMxEqLgOtA9wjPR8URTmJYeatMkBbbXVhXOVqnaOo

46 Halilović, M., & Veljan, N. (2021). *Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Atlantic Initiative.

47 See: http://forum.ultras-zrinjski.net. Testa, A. (2022). *Waves of extremism: An applied ethnographic analysis of the Bosnia and Herzegovina football terraces. Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 4*, Article 770441. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.770441

Stylised videos combine music, chants, masculine imagery, and ethnic references into easily repeatable forms of supporter identity. Risk increases when these formats are used to glorify violence, dehumanise opponents, deny atrocities, or direct followers toward unlawful action.

Digital platforms amplify both harmful and prosocial activity. They can expand the audience for far right material, but they also support match information, charity, mutual aid, and public criticism. Digital platforms therefore function simultaneously as infrastructures for ordinary supporter communication, civic mobilisation, identity performance, and the circulation of extremist material.

4.1.4. Violence, Crime, and Political Protection

Research on the Balkans identifies specific overlaps between football hooliganism, violence, organised crime and political connections. Đorđević and Scaturro distinguish Ultras groups from hooligan groups, identifying 78 Ultras groups across the region and classifying 21 as hooligan groups presenting a security risk.[48] In Bosnia and Herzegovina, they report that some members of Lešinari, Horde Zla, and Škripari commit petty crimes and are also part of organised criminal groups involved in drug trafficking and arms smuggling. The finding concerns members of named supporter groups rather than the organisations as collective actors.

Trusted networks, status hierarchies, and territorial control can reduce the costs of coordination for both lawful supporter activity and violence. The security significance increases where these organisational capacities overlap with violent masculinity, extremist ideology, and criminal opportunity.[49]

Đorđević and Scaturro document the political use of hooligan groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina and elsewhere in the region, including mobilisation, patronage, business opportunity, and political protection.[50] For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the available evidence is stronger for informal and transactional relationships than for direct party command or financing of named supporter organisations. Supporter leaders may influence access, ticketing, informal security, or conduct on terraces. Weak club governance and inconsistent policing can increase that influence.[51]

48 Đorđević, S., & Scaturro, R. (2022). *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics, and organized crime in the Western Balkans*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hooligans-crime-balkans/

49 Đorić, M. (2023). Violent Extremism and Sports in the Western Balkans. Radicalisation Awareness Network, European Commission; Testa, A. (2022). *Waves of extremism: An applied ethnographic analysis of the Bosnia and Herzegovina football terraces. Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 4*, Article 770441. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.770441

50 Đorđević, S., & Scaturro, R. (2022). *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics, and organized crime in the Western Balkans*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hooligans-crime-balkans/

51 Đorđević, S., & Scaturro, R. (2022). *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics, and organized crime in the Western Balkans*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hooligans-crime-balkans/



Graph 1. GI TOC assessment of reported links to violence, politics, crime and paramilitary associations among selected hooligan groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina [52]

At the national level, Đorđević and Scaturro aggregate the scores of the groups included in their study and assess Bosnia and Herzegovina as very high for violence, high for political links and medium for crime.[53] These are source derived qualitative risk ratings based on the study's coding framework, interviews and secondary material. They are not crime prevalence estimates, judicial findings, or ratings applicable to every supporter group.

Dimension	Violence	Politics	Crime
Source rating	Very high	High	Medium

Table 2. GI TOC national level aggregate assessment of hooliganism related risk in Bosnia and Herzegovina[54]

The convergence of ideological justification, coercive capacity, criminal income, and political protection represents the highest risk configuration. Financially motivated crime, spontaneous disorder, planned hooligan violence, hate based offences, and ideologically motivated violence remain distinct forms of conduct because they involve different evidentiary and legal thresholds.[55]

52 Đorđević, S., & Scaturro, R. (2022). *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics, and organized crime in the Western Balkans*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hooligans-crime-balkans/

53 Đorđević, S., & Scaturro, R. (2022). *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics, and organized crime in the Western Balkans*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hooligans-crime-balkans/

54 Đorđević, S., & Scaturro, R. (2022). *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics, and organized crime in the Western Balkans*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hooligans-crime-balkans/

55 Testa, A. (2022). *Waves of extremism: An applied ethnographic analysis of the Bosnia and Herzegovina football terraces. Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 4*, Article 770441. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.770441

4.1.5. Neo Nazi and Ethnonationalist Convergence

Ethnonationalism and neo Nazism are analytically distinct, but they can converge when local narratives of territory, wartime heroism, victimhood, and ethnic threat are combined with a broader ideological repertoire of racial supremacy, antisemitism, National Socialist symbolism, or transnational far right references. In documented supporter settings in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this convergence appears, for example, when Ustaša or Četnik references are combined with symbols and narratives circulating within contemporary neo Nazi milieus.[56] The result is a hybrid ideological repertoire in which local historical narratives and transnational extreme right symbols can reinforce one another.

Militarised masculinity and a warrior ethos provide another point of convergence by framing aggression as defence of the ethnic community.[57] The combination becomes especially significant where nationalist or masculine imagery appears alongside dehumanisation, atrocity glorification, explicit neo Nazi symbolism, threats, organised violence, or documented extremist connections. The following section examines the concrete incidents, symbols, and visual material through which this convergence becomes observable.

4.2. Documented Neo Nazi Activity on and beyond the Terraces

4.2.1. Symbols and Interpretive Context

Neo Nazi symbolism has appeared in documented incidents involving specific supporter factions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example FK Radnik Bijeljina. Reporting has also documented neo Nazi imagery associated with HŠK Zrinjski supporters and public graffiti in several cities.

Symbols reported in these settings include the swastika, Black Sun, Totenkopf, Odal rune, Tyr rune, Wolfsangel, and certain uses of the Celtic cross.[58] Some of these symbols have older or non extremist meanings. Their meaning is established through their combination with other symbols, wording, colour, location, source, and patterns of repeated use. A single rune provides

56 Đorić, M. (2023). Violent Extremism and Sports in the Western Balkans. Radicalisation Awareness Network, European Commission.

57 See: Azinović, V., Bassuener, K., & Weber, B. (2011). Assessing the potential for renewed ethnic violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A security risk analysis. Atlantic Initiative & Democratization Policy Council.

58 See examples: Kuloglija Zolj, N. (2023, April 27). Grupa navijača promoviše nacistički simbol na tribinama u Bijeljini. BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina. https://detektor.ba/2023/04/27/grupa-navijaca-promovise-nacisticki-simbol-na-tribinama-u-bijeljini/; Kuloglija Zolj, N. (2020, November 6). Mostarski navijači i desničari pokazuju naklonost ukrajinskom "Azovu." BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina. https://detektor.ba/2020/11/06/mostarski-navijaci-i-desnicari-pokazuju-naklonost-ukrajinskom-azovu/; Kuloglija Zolj, N. (2020, May 12). Desničarske i neonacističke organizacije neometano ističu simbole u Prijedoru. BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina. https://detektor.ba/2020/05/12/desnicarske-i-neonacisticke-organizacije-neometano-isticu-simbole-u-prijedoru/; Zorić, T. (2022, January 28). Kako su desničarske navijačke grupe mobilisane za proslavu 9. januara. Detektor. https://detektor.ba/2022/01/28/kako-su-desnicarske-navijacke-grupe-mobilisane-za-proslavu-9-januara/. For guidance on contextual interpretation, see Colborne, M. (2023). How (Not) to Interpret Far Right Symbols. Bellingcat. https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/2023/04/04/how-not-to-interpret-far-right-symbols/

weak evidence of ideology, while a cluster of neo Nazi symbols, racial slogans, salutes, and links to extremist pages provides substantially stronger evidence.

Within some supporter settings, these symbols form a visual vocabulary of exclusion, ethnic supremacy, or territorial entitlement. Đorić argues that far right symbols can construct group identity and mobilise emotion.[59] The documented cases show convergence in particular settings rather than a uniform progression from ethnic identity to neo Nazism.

Ultras Incident (FK Radnik Bijeljina) Totenkopf Symbol



Ultras Ultras (HŠK Zrinjski Mostar) Wolfsangel Symbol



Ultras Alcohol Boyz (FK Rudar Prijedor) Celtic Cross Symbol



Ultras Alcohol Boyz (FK Rudar Prijedor) Confederate Flag Symbol



Image 5. Neo Nazi symbols on terraces and in public spaces[60]

59 Đorić, M. (2023). Violent Extremism and Sports in the Western Balkans. Radicalisation Awareness Network, European Commission.

60 The Celtic cross, Wolfsangel, and several runes have older or non extremist uses. Their meaning depends on context, combination, wording, and repeated use. See: Mujkić, S., & Jeremić, I. (2019). How Russian fighters train Serb teens at military patriotic camps. Detektor. https://detektor.ba/2019/07/19/how-russian-fighters-train-serb-teens-at-military-patriotic-camps/?lang=en; BIRN BiH. (2022, August 17). Nacistički simbol na utakmici Radnika. Mapiranje Mržnje. https://mapiranjemrznje.detektor.ba/articles/incident/84-nacistički-simbol-na-utakmici-radnika; Kuloglija Zolj, N. (2020, November 6). Mostarski navijači i desničari pokazuju naklonost ukrajinskom "Azovu." Detektor. https://detektor.ba/2020/11/06/mostarski-navijaci-i-desnicari-pokazuju-naklonost-ukrajinskom-azovu/; Kuloglija Zolj, N. (2020, May 12). Desničarske i neonacističke organizacije neometano ističu simbole u Prijedoru. Detektor. https://detektor.ba/2020/05/12/desnicarske-i-neonacisticke-organizacije-neometano-isticu-simbole-u-prijedoru/

Similar imagery appears on terraces in Croatia, Serbia, and elsewhere in Europe. Cross border repetition can result from ideological exchange, imitation, or a shared visual culture. Shared symbols demonstrate visual and ideological diffusion; organisational connection requires additional evidence of contact or coordination.

4.2.2. Acts of Violence and Intimidation

During the 14 February 2015 commemoration of the liberation of Mostar (World War II), a group of young men attacked antifascist visitors at the Partisan Memorial Cemetery with stones and insults. Contemporary reporting documented the attack, while BIRN later reported that photographs taken during the incident showed Marko Vidović, identified by its journalists through two unofficial sources, wearing a shirt marked "hooligans" beside another man performing a Nazi salute. The Ministry of Interior of Herzegovina Neretva Canton told BIRN that persons who disrupted the visit had been found and processed, although their identities were not publicly disclosed.



Image 6. Individuals photographed following the February 2015 attack on antifascist visitors to the Partisan Memorial Cemetery in Mostar. One individual wears a shirt marked "hooligans", while another performs a Nazi salute[61]

61 Tacno.net. (2015, February 17). The police revealed the reason for the rampage of neo Nazis in Mostar: The sunny weather is to blame. https://arhiva.tacno.net/mostar/policija-otkrila-razlog-divljanja-neonacista-u-mostaru-krivo-je-suncano-vrijeme/ [accessed 4 November 2024]. For the subsequent identification of Marko Vidović through two unofficial sources and discussion of his connection to the Zrinjski supporter setting, see Kuloglija Zolj, N. (2020, November 6). Mostarski navijači i desničari pokazuju naklonost ukrajinskom "Azovu". Detektor.

In June 2022, the cemetery was subjected to a much larger act of destruction, with hundreds of memorial plaques smashed.[62] The attack occurred at a site with an already documented history of attacks on antifascist commemorations, Nazi salutes, and Ustaša and neo Nazi graffiti. Later reporting records that local police said there were no witnesses and that they were unable to investigate the June 2022 attack. The evidence therefore establishes continuity in the targeting of the antifascist site and in the ideological symbolism surrounding earlier attacks, but not continuity of perpetrators.

Mostar has experienced repeated clashes involving Red Army and HŠK Zrinjski Ultras, including incidents reported in 2023 and 2024. A 15 year old was seriously injured in the October 2024 disorder.[63] These incidents establish recurrent violent rivalry, serious physical harm, and the involvement of minors, while the available reporting does not identify a common ideological motive across all confrontations.

In March 2023, LGBTIQ activists and journalists in Banja Luka were attacked after police restricted an announced event. Later reporting described the assailants as hooligans and quoted an attacked activist identifying Lešinari among them, while the investigation and official attribution remained unresolved.[64] Political rhetoric hostile to the event formed part of the surrounding context, and the case raised separate questions about police protection and accountability.

4.2.3. Transnational Connections and Foreign Conflicts

Supporter imagery in Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects competing transnational reference points. Some Croat nationalist pages and displays have used imagery associated with Ukraine's Azov movement, which emerged from a neo Nazi milieu and later developed a wider political and military identity.[65] Some Serb nationalist supporters have shown support for Russian aligned actors. In 2024, Incident supporters in Bijeljina displayed a banner linked to Espanola, a Russian formation with roots in football supporter networks.[66] Such displays demonstrate symbolic endorsement.

62 Al Jazeera. (2022, June 16). Vandals attack Yugoslav Partisans' Necropolis in Bosnia. Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/16/vandals-attack-yugoslav-partisans-necropolis-in-bosnia [accessed 19 September 2024].

63 Behram, M. (2023, August 10). Policija na vrijeme zaustavila sukob navijača u Mostaru. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sukob-navijaca-mostar/32239993.html; N1 BiH. (2024, October 21). Epilog navijačkih nereda u Mostaru: Teško povrijeđen 15-godišnjak, grafit prekrečen. *N1 BiH*. https://www.n1info.com/sport/nogomet/neredi-u-mostaru/; Arnautović, M., & Behram, M. (2020, November 13). Fašizam na svom terenu: Ekstremistički pokliči sa bh. stadiona. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/fašizam-stadioni-bih/30946282.html [accessed 16 October 2024].

64 Karić Gauk, Ž. (2024, March 18). Godina od napada na LGBTIQ+ aktiviste u Banjaluci: Vlast zaštitila huligane, pretučeni žive s traumom [A year after the attack on LGBTIQ+ activists in Banja Luka: The government protected the hooligans, and the beaten live with trauma]. Žurnal. https://zurnal.info/clanak/vlast-zastitila-huligane-pretuceni-zive-s-traumom/26714 [accessed 5 November 2024].

65 See: Colborne, M. (2022). *From the fires of war: Ukraine's Azov movement and the global far right*. Ibidem Press.

66 Hodžić, E. (2024, March 27). Navijači iz Bijeljine na utakmici istaknuli baner ruske vojne formacije u Ukrajini, oni im se na mrežama zahvalili. Detektor. https://detektor.ba/2024/03/27/navijaci-iz-bijeljine-na-utakmici-istaknuli-baner-ruske-vojne-formacije-u-ukrajini-oni-im-se-na-mrezama-zahvalili/ [accessed 20 October 2024].



Image 7. Incident, supporters of FK Radnik Bijeljina, and Alcohol Boys, supporters of FK Rudar Prijedor, display support for the Russian formation Espanola[67]

Foreign conflicts can provide extremist milieus with symbols, narratives, contacts, and, in some cases, combat experience. Rękawek describes Ukraine as a potential meeting and training space for foreign extremists.[68] The evidence also includes reported participation in foreign conflict. For example, persons from the Zrinjski Ultras setting fought in Ukraine.[69]



Image 8. Incident, supporters of FK Radnik Bijeljina, display the Četnik slogan 'For King and Fatherland' beside imagery interpreted in the source material as support for the 2023 Banjska attack

67 See: Facebook group, Incident: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=480080634367620&set=p-cb.480080761034274&locale=hr_HR [accessed: 3 November 2024]; Facebook group, Alcohol Boys: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=794741682687708&set=pcb.794741772687699 [accessed: 4 November 2024].

68 Rękawek, K. (2022). *Foreign fighters in Ukraine: The brown-red cocktail*. Routledge.

69 Đorđević, S., & Scaturro, R. (2022). *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics, and organized crime in the Western Balkans*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hooligans-crime-balkans/

4.2.4. Civic Action, Public Legitimacy, and Historical Appropriation

Online material examined by Veljan and colleagues shows that pages linked to far right milieus can combine provocative content with claims of service, loyalty, and community protection.[70] Supporter groups also undertake disaster relief, blood donation, charity, and mutual aid. During the October 2024 floods, BH Fanaticosi, Manijaci, Horde Zla, Red Army, HŠK Zrinjski Ultras, and other groups mobilised assistance and used social media to call for donations.[71]

Visible civic action can increase social legitimacy and strengthen supporters' standing within local communities. Civic contribution and extremist conduct can coexist within the same broader supporter environment, including across different members, factions, or periods.



Image 9. The image of Dževad Begić, known as Đilda, is appropriated by the neo Nazi group Desni sektor UNA in Telegram propaganda

Extremist pages may appropriate respected public figures to make their messages appear familiar. A manipulated sticker depicts Croatian footballer Luka Modrić, who played for HŠK Zrinjski in 2003, as if performing a Nazi salute; the image provides no evidence of his endorsement.[72] Desni sektor UNA has similarly used the image of Dževad Begić, known as Đilda, a former leader among FK Željezničar supporters who was killed during the siege of Sarajevo in 1992, without evidence that Begić shared the group's ideology. Both examples demonstrate how digital propaganda can detach an image from its original biography and attach it to a new political message.

70 Veljan, N., et al. (2024). The Digital Dynamics of Radicalisation: Tracing Far Right Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Southeast Europe. Atlantic Initiative.

71 Mrkonja, H. (2024, October 4). Navijači HŠK Zrinjski se priključili akciji pomoći unesrećenima u poplavama. N1 Info. Retrieved from https://n1info.ba/sport/nogomet/navijaci-hsk-zrinjski-se-prikljucili-akciji-pomoci-unesrecenima-u-poplavama/ [accessed 4 November 2024].

72 Veljan, N., et al. (2024). The Digital Dynamics of Radicalisation: Tracing Far Right Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Southeast Europe. Atlantic Initiative.

5. CONCLUSION

The central security concern is not Ultras culture itself, but the capacity of particular supporter networks to connect collective identity, organisational discipline, coercive capacity, and public visibility with exclusionary ideology, criminal opportunity, and political protection. Bosnia and Herzegovina presents documented examples of these elements across different supporter settings, although their configuration and intensity vary considerably. The greatest risk arises where several of these elements converge and reinforce one another.

Policy should therefore focus on identifiable conduct, networks, and risk conditions: organised violence, hate based intimidation, atrocity glorification, neo Nazi activity, criminal involvement, political protection, and mobilisation toward unlawful action. Such an approach directs resources toward the smaller factions and actors presenting the highest security risk while preserving lawful supporter culture, supporter engagement, and ordinary football identity.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Bosnia and Herzegovina needs a tiered response that matches the evidence and the type of harm. Counterterrorism tools should be reserved for conduct that meets the relevant legal threshold. Public order, hate speech, organised crime, safeguarding, stadium safety, and club governance require their own institutions and procedures. All measures should comply with legality, necessity, proportionality, privacy, data protection, and freedom of expression.

Adopt a Tiered Risk and Response Framework

Objective: distinguish lawful fandom, public disorder, hate based conduct, organised crime, and violent extremism.

Action: the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina should coordinate a common analytical framework and information exchange within its competencies. Competent police bodies should record and investigate public order, violence and hate based incidents within their jurisdictions. The State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) and competent prosecutors should become involved where evidence indicates offences falling within their respective jurisdiction, including organised crime or terrorism. The Football Association and clubs should address licensing, stadium governance and disciplinary measures. Civil society and supporter representatives should contribute to prevention, oversight and evaluation rather than enforcement. The current Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Prevention and Combating Terrorism, which runs through 2026, and any successor framework should address the small subset of cases that meet violent extremist or terrorist risk thresholds. Other conduct should remain within ordinary criminal law, public order, discrimination, organised crime and stadium governance frameworks.[73]

73 Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Decision adopting the Action Plan for implementation of the Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Prevention and Fight Against Terrorism, 2021 to 2026. Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 71/23.

Indicators: publication of the annual anonymised assessment; proportion of comparable incidents classified consistently across competent bodies; proportion of referrals accepted by the competent authority; repeat high risk incidents involving previously sanctioned actors; proportion of decisions changed following review; and documented gaps in evidence or interagency referral.

Strengthen Stadium Governance and Supporter Liaison

Objective: prevent escalation, improve communication, and make sanctions predictable.

Action: use the integrated safety, security and service principles of the Council of Europe Saint Denis Convention as a policy benchmark and consider accession to the Convention.[74] Enforce and professionalise the existing supporter liaison officer requirement. The Football Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina should audit whether clubs comply substantively rather than formally, including evidence of regular supporter meetings, participation in risk briefings, communication with away supporters, cooperation with safety officers and police, documented de escalation activity, and annual training.[75] Establish written rules for banners, chants, pyrotechnics, discriminatory conduct, ticketing, and access; preserve evidence; provide reasoned decisions; and allow review.

Indicators: number and proportion of clubs meeting the supporter liaison training and practice standard; structured supporter meetings and risk briefings completed; repeat discriminatory or violent incidents per 100 comparable matches; injuries associated with supporter disorder; sanctions upheld or overturned following review; supporter confidence in liaison mechanisms; and complaints against police or stewards and their disposition.

Improve Targeted Investigation and Evidence

Objective: focus enforcement on persons and networks responsible for violence, serious hate based offences, corruption, and organised crime.

Action: create joint case protocols among police, prosecutors, financial investigators, and club authorities. Train personnel to interpret symbols in context, document digital and visual evidence, protect victims and witnesses, trace criminal finance, and distinguish association from proof of participation. Monitoring of private communication must follow legal authority, judicial oversight, and data protection rules.

74 Council of Europe. Convention on an Integrated Safety, Security and Service Approach at Football Matches and Other Sports Events, Saint Denis Convention. https://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/safety-security-and-service-approach-convention [accessed 20 August 2026].

75 UEFA. (2011). Supporter Liaison Officer Handbook. https://editorial.uefa.com/resources/01ff-0f84280a8aee-e3525baf90b0-1000/uefa_supporter_liaison_officer_handbook_2011_version.pdf [accessed 20 August 2026].

Indicators: cases opened; proportion of investigations progressing to charge; charging, dismissal, and conviction outcomes; financial investigations resulting in seizure or recovery; evidentiary failures contributing to discontinued cases; victim and witness protection measures used; substantiated complaints; findings of unlawful surveillance or discriminatory policing; and repeat offending among previously sanctioned actors.

Invest in Youth, Education, and Inclusive Fan Culture

Objective: reduce the appeal of violent and exclusionary factions without stigmatising young supporters.

Action: fund accessible sport, mentoring, historical literacy, digital literacy, trauma informed support, and youth led supporter projects. Schools and social services should use ordinary safeguarding procedures based on behaviour and need, not an early warning label based on ethnicity, club affiliation, clothing, or online interest. Support intercommunity matches where local partners judge them safe and meaningful.

Indicators: participation and retention; participant reported safety and belonging; knowledge of rights, historical facts, digital literacy, and nonviolent conflict resolution; uptake of voluntary support or referrals; completion of mentoring or support; safeguarding concerns identified and resolved; and continued participation in lawful club or community activity.

Address Online Harm with Legal Safeguards

Objective: reduce threats, incitement, atrocity glorification, and recruitment into violence while protecting lawful expression.

Action: establish a specialist contact point for clubs, police, prosecutors, civil society, and platforms. Preserve public content using clear evidentiary rules; request removal only where platform standards or law are engaged; provide reporting routes for victims; and publish guidance on coded symbols, manipulated images, and contextual assessment. Private channels should be investigated only in specific cases under lawful authority.

Indicators: response times; proportion of reports meeting the agreed evidentiary standard; public content preserved successfully for investigation; platform actions sustained following appeal; judicial outcomes; victim support uptake; false positive findings; successful appeals; and recurrence of harmful conduct involving previously reported accounts or actors.

Build Regional Cooperation, Transparency, and Evaluation

Objective: address cross border incidents and networks while improving public confidence.

Action: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia should exchange incident data through designated contact points, subject to data protection and legal rules. The Regional Cooperation Council, Council of Europe, UEFA, and relevant European Union programmes can support joint training, supporter liaison, research, and evaluation. Civil society, victim groups, clubs, and supporter representatives should participate in oversight.

Indicators: proportion of participating jurisdictions producing comparable annual data; cross border referrals resulting in investigative action; joint cases producing charging or judicial outcomes; recurrence of identified cross border incident patterns; implementation of recommendations from independent evaluations; and documented corrective actions following identified failures.


Atlantic
initiative
Center for Security and Justice Research