POTENTIAL GENERATORS OF RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN THE ERA OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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SUMMARY

Post-conflict society, i.e., the legacy of the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia, has been one of the dominant generators of the extreme right for a number of years. However, the emergence of the migrant crisis and health crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus are new contributing factors to the rise of right-wing extremism in Serbia. The forms of extreme right on the global scale differ. They range from latent xenophobia and extreme nationalism to the most brutal forms of racism, Nazism, and fascism. It is possible to distinguish two dominant forms of the extreme right in Serbia: 1. Nazi-fascist (of marginal presence) and 2. Clerical-nationalist (dominant). To understand right-wing ideology and practices, it is also necessary to analyze the role and behavior of hooligans and their various links with radical thinking and extremist actions.

One major impact of the pandemic is that citizens perceive permanent change in their habit and behavior as a kind of alienation due to lack of interaction. This is cited by one in three respondents (34 percent). Two consequences of the pandemic are cited by equal percentages of citizens (20 percent each): severe problems in the health system and the unnecessary spread of fear and panic.

Nearly half of the population perceives democracy as a better form of governance than any other (47 percent), with 21 percent fully agreeingwith this statement and 26 percent believing democracy to be "mostly" better than any other form of governance. By contrast, 23 percent of respondents said that democratic and undemocratic regimes are the same, while 15 percent went a step further by saying that, in some cases, an undemocratic government might be better than a democratic one. One in nine respondents answered that the pandemic severely affected the state of democracy in Serbia, while 23 percent assessed these consequences as moderate. The majority felt that the pandemic did not affect the state of democracy: one-third said that it had no impact at all and one-fourth that this impact was "unremarkable."

In the aggregate, 41 percent of respondents believe that the pandemic affected the survival of the family and its values, with 17 percent assessing this impact as severe, while 24 percent rated it as moderate. By contrast, 56 percent of citizens reported that the pandemic had no impact at all on the family (32 percent) or no particular impact (24 percent). Two-fifths of respondents thought that the pandemic affected the survival of the nation (31percent moderately and 9 percent% severely), while 54 percent state that there was no impact or that it was unremarkable (27 percent each).

When it comes to attitudes toward face masks and vaccination, Serbian citizens tend to accept face masks and 74 percent fully support wearing them. Conversely, 21 percent felt that face masks should not be mandatory, but that each individual should have the option to choose, while 5 percent were expressly against wearing them. The situation is more complex when it comes to vaccines: only one-third (34 percent) of citizens were expressly supportive of vaccination, while 41 percent maintained that vaccination should be voluntary, and one-fourth (23 percent) were against compulsory vaccination. Twenty-three percent are ready for vaccination and claim that they will definitely do it. Given the option, which is the case in Serbia, 45 percent will not be vaccinated. One in three respondents stated that they will be vaccinated, though reluctantly, because they believe that the COVID vaccines were developed too quickly and there was not enough time for detailed testing.

In regard to attitudes toward migrants, the highest percentage of respondents are clustered around the middle-ground, with indifference and no positive or negative qualification, as reported by 44 percent. On the other hand, citizens who harbor negative attitudes toward migrants (37 percent) far outnumber those with favorable views – 14 percent. More than two-fifths (43 percent) agree that migrants and the migrant crisis caused problems but never jeopardized the survival of the state or its values. One-fifth of the population reported that everything was functioning as normal, outweighed by 7 percentage points by citizens who felt that the impact was adverse for people living in Serbia. There is a high degree of unanimity (66 percent in the aggregate) that

differences in culture and customs between Serbian citizens and migrants are irreconcilable. On the other hand, there is a significant drop in the number of citizens (20 percent) who agree with the statement that migrants discriminate against Serbians.

A desire for social distance is overwhelmingly highest toward ethnic Albanians and, for each of the six levels of interaction, more than one-fifth of the population opposes having any social contact with them. Overwhelmingly, the greatest desire for social distancing is toward ethnic Albanians and, for each of the six levels of closeness, it exceeds one-fifth of the population. Most citizens are against inter-marriage (55 percent), followed by those against having an Albanian as a teacher of their children (32 percent) and being friends with them at 29 percent of those polled. The size of social distance towards Albanians is also evidenced by the data that 22 percent do not want to be neighbors with them. Bosniaks come second. with a relatively low social distance score at more general levels (below 10 percent) but rising from having a member of the Bosniak ethnic community as teacher of their children, (14 percent) and reaching the highest score on being married to them at 41 percent. Identical trends are recorded for

ethnic Croats, with a slightly lower percentage of those opposed to marriage relative to Bosniaks; 37 percent are against marriage with a Croat (by four percentage points less than marriage to Bosniaks).

In terms of social distance, half or more of the population is against having migrants as neighbors (50 percent), as their children's teachers (51 percent), being friends with and visiting their home (52 percent),and finally, being married, to them or their children, where the percentage of those against reaches a high of 67 percent of those surveyed. The distance toward the LGBT population surges when people are questioned about friendship and visiting at home (46 percent), being their children's teachers, while the most discouraging data refers to marriage (to them or their children), with 85 percent against.

Asked if conflict would be justified to resolve Kosovo, the majority of respondents answered in the negative (88 percent), while 1 out of 11 respondents in Serbia believed that engaging in armed conflict in Kosovo was justified. Among this 9 percent, 6 percent would be personally willing to take up arms, while 3 percent up would justify conflict but would not participate.

1. INTRODUCTORY NOTES

The COVID-19 pandemic raises many security implications and has implications for the rise of right-wing extremism. The Western Balkans and Serbia are no exception. Historical experience shows that crises are fertile soil for destructive and extremist ideas. Several things account for this: first, during times of social crisis, extremists offer "easy solutions" which are dominantly populist and utopian and involve violence as a rule; second, when a nation feels "threatened" it tends to lock itself up, looking for an actual or imagined enemy, in an attempt to achieve national homogenization; and third, the Western Balkans is a post-conflict society where nationalist sentiments are easy to re-kindle . An environment affected by COVID-19 raises feelings of worry, nervousness, and fear, both health-wise and

economy-wise, that contribute to the rise of right-wing extremism.

The new potential instigators of right-wing extremism in Serbia increasingly include migrants. Extremists perceive them as security, social, economic and demographic threats, as witnessed in the attack on the refugee center in Obrenovac and the organization of 'people's patrols,' whose missions are various forms of persecution of migrants. Fear and concern, coupled with the viral spread of fake and/or sensationalist me ssaging, give rise to conspiracy theories among members of the extreme right, especially those suggesting that COVID-19 is a lie designed to allow globalists to conquer the world. Contributing to the rise of the extreme right are anti-vaccine movements, worries about "microchips,"

and narratives about the safety and/or the danger of vaccines for individuals and for the nation as a whole. Closely allied with this group are anti-maskers, or people who believe that face masks have no protective effect and serve only to demonstratethe submissive nature of humans.

All of these factors can be rightfully regarded as new generators of right-wing extremism in Serbia, primarily triggered by the latest pandemic. The authors' goal is to explore how these factors correlate with the extreme right and how the right uses them to promote its ideological values and political influence.

The main objective of this paper is to examine the current status of right-wing extremism in Serbia in the context of the social crisis caused by COVID-19. This analysis' specific objectives are1) to map the modern forms of right-wing extremism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and 2) to draft recommendations and suggest preventive measures to contain extremism in Serbia and the region.

2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Right-wing extremism in Serbia is a multidimensional phenomenon and research into it requires a multidimensional approach. To accomplish this, it is necessary to obtain additional information and insight into right-wing extremism in Serbia, as well as insight into population-wide public attitude toward right-wing extremism, with a special focus on changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the authors proposed a combined approach of both quantitative and qualitative methodology.

The proposed methodology for the assessment of right-wing extremism in Serbia features both exploratory and explanatory research. An exploratory approach offers basic insight into the social phenomenon observed. The proposed methodology is also of explanatory character, seeking to identify the causal and functional correlations of different phenomena.

Quantitative research

By applying quantitative survey techniques to a representative sample in Serbia, it is possible to capture Serbians' general attitudes. Public opinion is one of the important factors influencing the perception of specific social phenomenon, and it also influences policies implemented by the state in response to that phenomenon. The aim of the quantitative research is to capture Serbian citizens' perceptions of right-wing extremism.

Table 2.1. *Methodological framework for the public opinion poll*

SURVEY PERFORMED BY	THE AUTHORS * **With the support of CeSID pollster network**
Fieldwork	Between 10 and 25 October 2020
Sample type and size	Random, representative sample of 604 Serbian citizens aged 18 and above
Sample frame	Serbian citizens who have a landline phone
Selection of households	Random sampling without replacement
Selection of respondents by household	Respondents selected by date of first birthday from survey date
Survey technique	Phone / Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) technique
Survey instrument	Questionnaire with 30 questions plus demographics

The applied methodology resulted in the following **sample description**.

Gender: male 48%, female 52%

Age: 18-29 (14%), 30-44 (22%), 45-59 (23%), 60 and above (41%)

Education: elementary (33%), secondary (50%, including 11% with 2-year or 3-year secondary school and 39% with 4-year secondary school) and college/university (17%)

Ethnicity: Serb (84%), Muslim/Bosniak (3%), Hungarian (4%), Albanian (1%), Roma (1%), Croat (1%), other (6%)

Region: Vojvodina (28%), Belgrade (22%), West Serbia and Šumadija (29%) and South Serbia and East Serbia (21%)

Settlement type: urban (58%), rural (42%)

Qualitative research

By means of in-depth interview techniques we sought to examine the attitudes, sentiments and knowledge of individuals about right-wing extremism. The sample is intentional and oriented at targeted individuals within different analytical units. The aim of using in-depth interviews in researching violent extremism is to obtain a stratified qualitative description of the phenomenon from different perspectives and fields of expertise.

Table 5.2. *List of in-depth interviews*

AFFILIATION	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
Security Sector	1
Parliament	2
Civil society sector	3
Embassies	1
International organizations	2
Media	4
Academic community	4
TOTAL	**17**

In-depth interviews contribute to a better understanding of different stakeholders' attitudes about right-wing extremism and when combined with the findings of the quantitative research, research done to date and available documents, they will be an important source of information for conclusions and recommendations.

3. WHY IS RESEARCH ON RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IMPORTANT?

Right-wing extremism is on the rise world-wide and, by extension, in the Western Balkans and Serbia as well. Post-conflict society (the legacy of the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia) has, for years, been among the prime generators of extreme right-wing sentiment. However, the migrant and health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are new contributing factors to the intensification of right-wing extremism in the territory of Serbia.

Extreme right movements have seen an international renaissance in the aftermath of the collapse of communism and end of the Cold War when, due to a pluralism of ideas, right-wing ideology began to manifest itself in extreme forms. Serbian society was not left, from the upward trend of extremist right-wing ideologies, despite the fact that Serbs suffered massive casualties from the very same ideologies during World War II (Nazism, fascism, Ustasha) and had a well-developed anti-fascist movement.[1] One of our interviewees from the academic community observed that "extreme right parties rose to prominence, in both national- and local-level ballots, on a wave of populism in Europe, and Serbia, as part of the global capitalist system, albeit at its (semi-) periphery, does not drift separately from the world and from Europe." The extreme right comes in various forms and ranges from latent xenophobia to extreme nationalism to the most brutal forms of racism, Nazism and fascism. In Serbia, two dominant forms of extreme right can be distinguished:[2]

1. Nazi-fascist
2. Clerical-nationalist

The Nazi-fascist version of extreme right in Serbia is still marginal in scope,[3] with its most flagrant manifestations associated with international online groups,[4] such as Blood and Honor, Stormfront, and Combat 18. One of our interviewees from the academic community observed that "extreme right parties rose to prominence, in both national- and local-level ballots, on a wave of populism in Europe, and Serbia, as part of the global capitalist system, albeit at its (semi-) periphery, does not drift separately from the world and from Europe." A typical example of this type of organization would be the Nacionalni stroj (National Alignment), banned by the 2011 Constitutional Court decision. Recent events associated with Nazi-fascist ideology include an attempt to organize a concert of neo-Nazi bands[5] on 10 October 2020 in the BIGZ building in Belgrade. This attempt was stopped by the police.

A far greater problem for Serbia, in the context of right-wing extremism, are the so-called clerical-nationalist organizations, movements, and groups, which perfidiously abuse national sentiments and religion. These groups often try to hide their extremist ideologies and political goals behind mainstream organizations and sentiments. A trend of "mainstreaming" is present among these political entities, as an attempt of infiltration through legal societal flows, by concealing their real ideology and political goals, which essentially use violence and hatred as their modus operandi. This phenomenon was also identified by one of our interviewees: "the masking and normalization of the extreme right discourse can be clearly seen in the example of Leviathan, allegedly advocating for animal rights while using vio-

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1 Around 700 000 Serbs, Jews, Romas and anti-fascists were executed by the Ustasha in Jasenovac alone. Source: Neubacher,Hermann, Sonderauftrag Südost 1940-1945 Bericht eies fliegenden Diplomaten, Musterschmit-Verlag, Göttingen, 1957, p. 31.

2 Đoric Marija, *Ekstremna desnica: međunarodni aspekti desničarskog ekstremizma* (Extreme right: international aspects of right-wing extremism), Udruženje Nauka i društvo Srbije, Belgrade, 2014, p. 325.

3 This is presumed to be due to the massive killings of Serbs during World War II by the Nazis and fascists.

4   Several in-depth interviewees pointed to the links between the Serbian extreme right and these groups.

5 The concert was planned to be a memorial to Ian Stuart Donaldson, leader of the neo-Nazi band Skrewdriver.

lence as one of the main instruments to achieve its political goals."

The extreme-right can be especially attractive for younger generations, motivating them to defend "vulnerable groups" (nations, religions) from potential, purported, or invented enemies. Any extremism, including right-wing, bases its ideology on an enemy as a means to achieve group integration. The findings obtained in this research (through opinion polls and in-depth interviews) confirm this hypothesis. This is also borne out by the statement of one of our interviewees from Serbian civil society:

> "For Serbian citizens, any form of right-wing extremism is dangerous, whether these messages are sent by individuals or ruling party (-ies) or by different formal or informal actors outside the regime. When we refer to right-wing extremism, we mean any form of division seeking to declare some as traitors and enemies or aiming for a rigid understanding of collective identity, usually ethnic identity, which seeks to exclude some Serbian citizens from this perception of collective identity or put them lower or unequal position."

Extremism is dangerous because it destabilizes democracy and the rule of law and because it is based on hatred, often transforms into complex forms of political violence such as terrorism. Hence, counter-terrorism efforts should be based on the prevention of extremism. The problem with extremism is that it is sometimes hard to define, due to its amorphousness, double political standards, different temporal and spatial distance,[6] etc., so it is no surprise that these difficulties have caused the crime extremism to be missing from the Criminal Code of Serbia.[7] According to Marija Đorić, a scholar at the

Institute for Political Studies in Belgrade, extremism can be generally defined as a "way of behavior or thinking on the edge of permitted lines, with a tendency to cross these lines and contrary to the legal, customary and cultural norms of a society. As such, extremism is an unwelcome phenomenon because it does not correspond to the value system of modern democracy as it directly undermines the law-based state and the rule of law".[8]

Serbian legislation recognizes violent extremism, including right-wing extremism, as a threat. Violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism are recognized in the National Strategy for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism (2017-2020) as contemporary security threats. The strategy explicitly mentions right-wing extremism in the form of right-wing terrorism as a threat to the security of the Republic of Serbia.[9] The Ministry of Interior Development Strategy (2018-2023) recognizes the fight against violent extremism as its priority. It identifies relevant priorities in police work, notably the "fight against terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism,"[10] with a special focus on violence at sports events.[11]

Of note regarding the Serbian extreme right are its close links with football hooligans, which are increasingly evolving into serious criminal groups, as was confirmed by a member of the security sector. He noted that right-wing extremism is sometimes fueled by hooliganism and, in response, the extreme left is rising, too.[12] This brings us to the phenomenon of "reciprocal extremism," or one kind of terrorism leading to another.

According to Serbian police estimates, there are about 30 active extremist groups in Serbia of approximately five members each.[13] It should be noted

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6   This means that extremism is perceived differently in different times and spaces. For example: what is considered extremism today, used to be normal behabiour in the past.

7   There are, however, synonyms such as hate speech, discrimination, incitement of religious and ethnic hatred and intolerance, etc. Unlike extremism, terrorism is easier to define in both political and legal contexts and thus, there are several articles dealing with terrorism in the Serbian Criminal Code.

8   Đorić Marija, *Nasilni ekstremizam: multidisciplinarni pristup* (Violent Extremism: A Multidisciplinary Approach), Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade, 2020, p. 17.

9   Ibid.

10   Development Strategy of the Ministry of Interior, http://mup.gov.rs/wps/wcm/connect/71fdf00f-7eb3-455f-9421-02ee6a190e17/PDF_Strategija+razvoja+MUP-a+2018-2023.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=mtlzhL9, 14.03.2020.

11   Ibid.

12   Left-wing extremism in Serbia is growing in the form of the anarchist and environmental organizatioms.

13   Petrović Predrag, Stakić Isidora, *Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum – Serbia Report*, British Council, 1 May, 2018, https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_report_serbia_2018.pdf, p. 9

that, besides their official members, extremists also have followers and sympathizers, whose number is hard to capture, but which increase with each socio-political crisis. It is well known that the extreme right thrives in times of crisis since "it offers easy answers to pressing social issues."[14]

As Serbia considered public health measures around COVID-19, the anti-vaccine/anti-masker movement also began to grow. At certain points anti-vaccine groups appeared aligned with the extreme right, especially when it came to conspiracy theories. Some of our in-depth interviewees ranked anti-vaxxers as members of the extreme right, although it is important to be cautious when making such statements not to automatically classify them within the extreme right ideology. That said, we cannot deny the obvious connection between members of anti-vaccine groups and members of extreme right.

The migrant crisis further inspired right-wing extremists to stand up "in defense" of their nation. This is also due to fake news spreading across various online platforms and social networks about the "secret settling of migrants" on Serbian territory during the state of emergency. One of our interviewees, a journalist, notes that the "migrant crisis is perceived in a negative context," and that "inadequate media reporting contributed to the rise of xenophobia."

The opinion poll finds that ethnic discrimination persists and often directed at migrants. Sixty-seven percent of those surveyed would mind if they (or their children) married a migrant, indicating the largest distance in the survey (even relative to Albanians, where it stands at 55%). This leads to the conclusion that there is a negative perception of migrants, which is further generated by fears arising from the pandemic (we will discuss social distance in more detail in a separate chapter).

In view of the above, it is possible to conclude that the research of right-wing extremism is important for several reasons:

- Serbia (like all former Yugoslav states) experienced a wave of right-wing extremism during the 1990s, resulting in civil war.

- At present, extreme right sentiment is growing, albeit in different circumstances, and is more focused on migrants. It is therefore necessary to examine the allure of the extreme right.

- Extreme right sentiments are a growing trend, globally, and are likely to spill over to the Western Balkan countries, including Serbia.

- The rise of Islamist extremism, both worldwide and in the Western Balkans, has fueled the extreme right. In response, we can expect the rise of the extreme left, although in Serbia today the risks from the extreme left are marginal. Confrontations between these two political options in Serbia have arisen over the issue of migrants.[15]

- Aggression borne of frustration, lifestyle changes due to the pandemic, existential fear, and fear for one's livelihood all contribute to demonizing "enemies," perceived as other ethnic groups and migrants, and supported by extreme right propaganda.

- The above-mentioned reasons justify an examination of potential generators of right-wing extremism in Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is vital in order to act preventively on preserving the rule of law and the democratic value system.

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14   Unfortunately, these answers are often accompanied by violence as *a modus operandi.*

15   Left-wing members defended migrants, while right-wing members attacked them during the protests near the central bus station in Belgrade.

4. THE REGULATORY FRAMEWORK IN SERBIA

The regulatory framework in Serbia recognizes the dangers of terrorism and also, to a lesser degree, of violent extremism. Namely, in 2017 the Republic of Serbia adopted the National Strategy for the Prevention and Fight Against Terrorism for the period 2017-2020. The relevant action plan lists four priority areas: 1) the prevention of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism, 2) the detection and elimination of terrorist threats and system weaknesses, 3) the prosecution of terrorists, with respect for human rights, and the rule of law and democracy, and 4) a systemic response in the event of a terrorist attack. The strategy directly states that violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism are current security threats expected to grow in the near future.

To understand the state's approach to violent extremism, one must look to the Development Strategy of the Ministry of Interior for the period 2018-2023. It identifies violent extremism as one of the country's top priorities. It "identified security priorities in police work between 2017 and 2021 are organized crime, fight against terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism, improvement of the current state of peace and public order by counteracting violence, with special emphasis on the violence at sports events…." Violence at sports events is regulated in more detail in the National Strategy for Combating Violence and Misconduct at Sports Events for the period 2013-2018, but that strategy expired two years ago. The challenge for that strategy was the fact that violence at these events was not linked to forms of violent extremism. The Strategy for the Development of Sport in the Republic of Serbia[16] is another strategic document that prioritizes the prevention of violence and misconduct at sports events. The Law on the Prevention of Violence and Misconduct at Sports Events was passed by the Republic of Serbia in 2003,[17] the Law on Sports was adopted in 2016. In 2017, the government also adopted the Decision on the Establishment of the National Council for the Prevention of Negative Phenomena in Sports.[18]

Finally, the Criminal Code (with its latest, 2019 amendments) in articles 391-393 determines the criminal acts of terrorism, terrorism financing, and terrorist association. As Serbian nationals began to appear on foreign battlefields, the debate on introducing new criminal offenses not included in the Criminal Code intensified. The objective of these new amendments was to encourage potential criminals to refrain from repeating them in the future. The Criminal Code was amended with two new criminal offenses: participation in war or armed conflict in a foreign state in article. 386a, and organizing participation in war or armed conflict in a foreign state in article 386b. The Criminal Code does not determine or address criminal acts in the area of violent extremism.

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16 The Strategy expired in 2018. In the intervening period, a Working Group was created and tasked with drafting the new 10-year Strategy.

17 The law was supplemented several times, notably after the killing of a French supporter, Bruce Taton.

18 Similar bodies were established under previous government mandates, but with no visible effects.

5. ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

Any kind of extremism is dangerous, given its potentially devastating effects on democracy and human rights.[19] Protection of the collective, i.e. group identity, is the *condition sine qua non* of right-wing extremists, as they are able to recruit potential new members in this manner. When a group (ethnic, religious, race, or supporter group) is jeopardized, then, in extremists' opinion, the use of any means and methods, including violence, is justified. To define themselves, right-wing extremists always need an enemy. In the context of current sociopolitical developments, right-wing extremists in Serbia perceive their two main enemies to be migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic. The first one, migrants, is visible and easy to target via the so-called people's patrols (right-wing groups gathering at spots where migrants stay, threatening them, and sending messages that they are not welcome), while the second enemy, the coronavirus, generated nebulous fears, conspiracy theories, and collective anxiety, which threaten to erode Serbia's system of democratic values.

Enemies change depending on the constellation of sociopolitical events. Thus, the main enemies for the extreme right in the Western Balkans are neighboring nations with whom they clashed during the breakup of Yugoslavia. For a long time, the extreme right in Serbia coalesced around fear of Albanians, Croats, and Bosniaks.[20] But with large-scale migration from the Middle East and North Africa, migrants emerged as major new "enemies" and a potential threat to the survival of the Serbian nation. Animosity toward migrants is growing, due to propaganda from the extreme right, particularly online. This is also evidenced by an interviewee from the academic community: "the migrant crisis additionally fueled extreme right activities, particularly in the segment

of their ideology that plays the card of danger to the nation and fear of migrants populating the country."

A YouTube video in which people's patrols allegedly discovered secret symbols used by migrants to mark Serbian houses is particularly interesting.[21]

The symbol in question is the eye of Horus, a simplified version of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph *wadjet*. Its symbolism is mainly positive and represents power, protection and good health. But according to the people's patrols, the eye of Horus is a symbol of Muslims strength over Christians. This is designed to generate panic and fear and create a negative attitude toward migrants, destabilizing democracy.
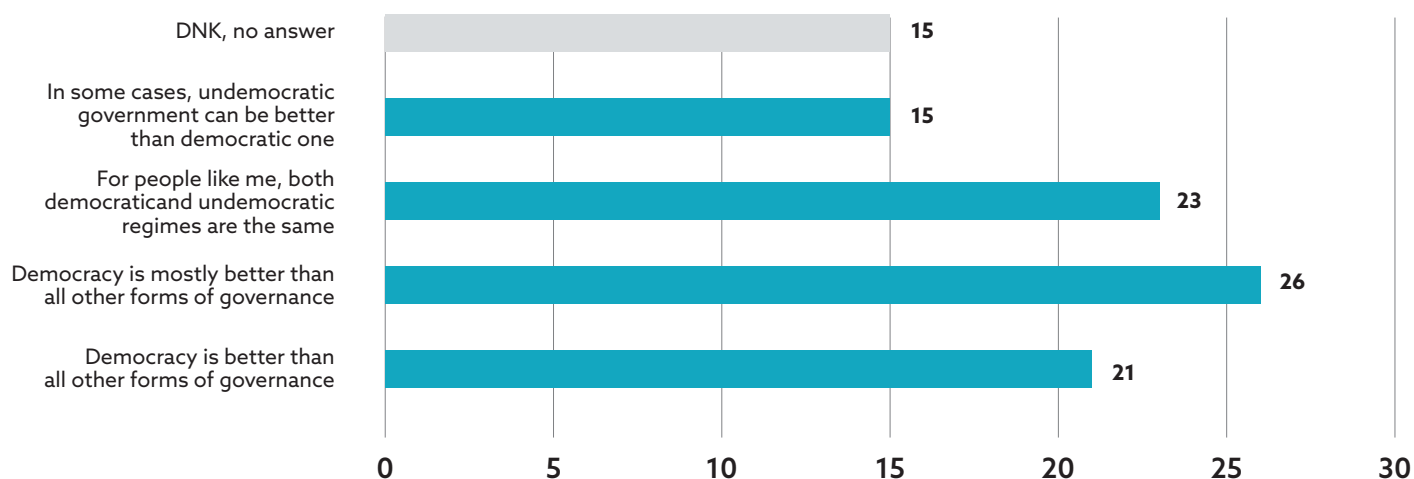
Governance Serbia was assessed based on the common questions in public opinion polls, which gave us the answers about what citizens really think about democracy. Nearly half of the population believes that democracy is better than any other form of governance (47%). Twenty one percent absolutely believe in this statement, while 26% believe that democracy is "mostly" better than any other form of governance. A slightly lower percentage, by nine percentage points, are ambivalent about democracy. Notably, 23% of respondents say that, both democratic and undemocratic regime are the same, while 15% go a step further, stating that in some cases an undemocratic government might be better than a democratic one. If we compare these findings to past surveys, we can conclude that there has been an increase in the percentage of citizens who support democracy as the best form of governance (between 2005 and 2016, these percentages stood at up to 40%), but also a slight increase (if we look at average scores) in the number of citizens who believe that democratic and undemocratic regimes are the same.[22]

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19 According to: Đorić Marija, *Ekstremna levica: ideološki aspekti levičarskog ekstremizma* (Extreme Left: Ideological Aspects of Left-Wing Extremism), Institut za političke studije, Belgrade, 2016.

20 These are the same ethnic groups that were the protagonists of the conflicts during the 1990s.

21 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6PNTfkaWqs, 12 December 2020.

22 Compare findings with: CeSID, *Politička i društvena situacija u Srbiji, Istraživanje javnog mnjenja* (Political and Social Situation in Serbia, Public Opinion Poll) Belgrade, spring 2016. Available at: http://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/CeSID_USAID_Politi%C4%8Dke_prilike_u_Srbiji_2016.pdf, 04 January 2021.

Chart 5.1. *General attitudes toward democracy* (in percentages)

Category	Value
DNK, no answer	15
In some cases, undemocratic government can be better than democratic one	15
For people like me, both democraticand undemocratic regimes are the same	23
Democracy is mostly better than all other forms of governance	26
Democracy is better than all other forms of governance	21

What do citizens from different age groups think about democracy, since significant socio-demographic deviations were noted predominantly among youth? The proportion of younger respondents (18-29) in the group with an ambivalent attitude toward democracy is above-average. Over one-third of young people (34%) state that for people like them, democratic and undemocratic regimes are the same. We also found above-average deviations, to a lesser extent, among citizens aged 45-59, of which 22% believe that in some cases an undemocratic government might be better than a democratic one.

Fear is a generator of right-wing extremism. Generalized fears around the COVID-19pandemic led to unease and mistrust of people and institutions. Fear of the unknown exacerbated long-standing tensions over migrants and, by extension, also influenced perceptions of democracy. To the question "did the pandemic and its consequences affect the state of democracy?" one in nine respondents answered yes, while 23% shared the view that they were moderate. The majority, however, believes that the pandemic had no implications for the state of democracy: one-third of respondents said that it had no impact at all, while one-fourth said "not significantly." No major deviations were recorded in terms of the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics.

One-third of those who believe that the pandemic impacted democracy say it should be a wake-up call for the elite, with particular focus on the media, judiciary, and politicians. This is underscored by the reports of several international organizations that point to the destabilization of democracy in 2020, some of them very strongly.[23]

23 https://www.danas.rs/politika/evroposlanica-eu-ne-otvara-nova-poglavlja-sa-srbijom-zbog-pogorsanja-stanja-demokratije/, **14 December 2020.**

6. THE PANDEMIC AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

The first case of the coronavirus in Serbia was officially registered on 6 March 2020 and just a few days later on 11 March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared theCOVID-19pandemic. This precipitated a range turbulent social, economic, and political events that also had implications for activities of right-wing extremists world-wide, including in Serbia.

It is common knowledge that extremism thrives in times of crisis.[24] Crises fuel the use of violence, which is the key modus operandi of extremists. Between March 2020 and the end of the year, right-wing extremism in Serbia underwent two dynamic phases of activity:

1. The first phase was characterized by online activities using online platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channels and websites. This phase was especially interesting during the curfew, when movement restrictions were imposed. As direct communication was impossible, extremists shifted their action to cyberspace. In addition to claims of forced vaccinations and insertion of microchips, air spraying with chemical agents, and similar theories, allegations about the massive settling of migrants in the territory of Serbia also emerged, prompting anti-migrant sentiments. One of these popular Facebook groups is entitled "STOP the settling of migrants" and has 323,000 followers.[25] There are also other Facebook pages, e.g. "Migrants STOP,"[26] "Against migrants settling in Serbia,"[27] and similar, but with a far lower number of followers. Links with right-wing extremists from abroad remain evident in the online space.[28]

2. The second phase started after the curfew was lifted, when general dissatisfaction escalated among citizens, leading to massive and violent protests outside the National Assembly. Interestingly, these protests were heterogeneous in terms of ideology, bringing together left-wing and right-wing adherents, along with numerous frustrated citizens. In this phase of activity, the extreme right revealed its links with football hooligan groups (gang-like sports fan clubs), which often provoked incidents at the protests. During these events, the danger from migrants was marginalized, while dissatisfaction and pent-up frustrations of members of the extreme right assumed hooligan features. This confirms the hypothesis that what differentiates Serbian hooligan groups is their link with the extreme right and politics.[29] It is important to note that the majority of our interlocutors also perceived hooligans as the main proponents of right-wing extremists. These hooligans have nothing to do with sports but have evolved into serious criminal groups operating not only in Serbia, but throughout the region.

Anti-migrant sentiment lingered after the protests and was acknowledged by our in-depth interviewees. They highlighted several right-wing events inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic. These included an attack on the migrant center in Obrenovac carried out by a member of the Leviathan movement, as well as the protest outside the Belgrade bus sta-

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24 Đorić Marija, *Ekstremna desnica: međunarodni aspekti desničarskog ekstremizma* (Extreme Right: International Aspects of Right-Wing Extremism), Udruženje Nauka i društvo Srbije, Belgrade, 2014.

25 For more about this group, see their FB page : https://www.facebook.com/groups/512775282720731. The same administrator also edits the FB page entitled "Stop the Betrayal of Kosovo and Metohija".

26 See: https://www.facebook.com/Migranti-STOP-102374564759512

27 See: https://www.facebook.com/tudjenecemosvojenedamo

28 The Serbian division of "Blood and Honor" closed its forum in 2013 and moved to other web addresses,none of which are available on the Internet anymore. That is not the case with the international"Stormfront"webpage, which is still there, along with its Serbiandivision.https://www.stormfront.org/forum/index. php?s=51a6f8d9ce94715b09879da75f02d281, 11 December 2020

29 This also refers to other hooligans in the Western Balkans. More in: Đorić Marija, *Huliganizam: nasilje i sport* (Hooliganism: Violence and Sport) , Nauka i društvo Srbije, Belgrade, 2012.

tion entitled "Clear up the Park Outside the Faculty of Economics." Apart from anti-migrant sentiments, members of the extreme right also demonstrated an aversion to differences of opinion and expression during the pandemic, by attacking a cartoon exhibition called "New Age" in Zemun and attempting to prevent the Miredita, dobardan festival, a festival dedicated to improving Serb-Albanian relations, in Belgrade.

The majority of our interlocutors, including one quoted below, agree that extreme right activities in Serbia during the pandemic remained the same or increased in intensity:

> "Their activity virtually remained the same and perhaps even intensified a bit. I believe that activity increased especially in the online space, due to the movement restrictions during the curfew."

He highlights the extreme right anti-migrant narrative:

> "The outset of the migrant crisis ushered in racist and nationalist narratives. An example is threats addressed by a passer-by in Apatin to a taxi driver who was driving migrants. Some organizations use the migrant threat for the spreading of right-wing extremism, which is dangerous for the community."

Extreme right groups also fueled the rise of so-called "White Power Music," by trying to stage a concert to pay tribute to the founder of the international racist group Blood and Honor, which was banned by Serbian police. Our interviewees from the security sector highlighted this event, saying that while right-wing extremism and Islamic fundamentalism might pose a security challenge for Serbia, ethno-separatist extremism constitutes the greatest threat to security:

> "I would first point out ethnic separatism (the Kosovo issue), reflected in the irredentist idea of Kosovo. Then we have tensions in the Novi Pazar ranging from nationalism to Islamism. We should also mention separatist sparks in the south of Serbia. As regards the north of Serbia, separatism is noticeable in Vojvodina through Hungarian nationalism, evident from the actions of extremist movements such as the Sixty-Four Counties Movement, as well as from tendencies to create the Vojvodina

> nation. In the south of Serbia, Bulgarian nationalism is also latently present. The proponent of these ideas is the Bulgarian Ataka movement."

It is also important to highlight some ties between the extreme left and extreme right during the pandemic. Aside from being similar, in terms of modes of operation-- the use of violence—they also agree on anti-globalism. This link within in the context of the pandemic was explained by one of our interviewees, a media representative:

> "The only link between the extreme right and extreme are their extreme approaches. For example, members of the extreme left are paranoid when it comes to the coronavirus, while the extreme right denies its existence. Members of extreme right are prone to conspiracy theories, claiming that everything that is going on in the world is directed against the Serbian people, that the destruction of Bulgarian, Bosniak, Hungarian, and Vojvodinian separatism and Serbs is the focus of the new world order. On the other hand, the extreme left believes that there is no need for patriotism, that nation as a term and the identity of a group is unwelcome and that anything designated as 'national' is old-fashioned and outdated."

This view is also shared by a professor at the University of Belgrade, who notes that "there are no organizational or personal links between the extreme left and extreme right." In his opinion, both types of extremism have the same enemies, but different responses.

The pandemic period was marked by right-wing extremism's further entry into mainstream political and social dialogue. One of our interviewees from the research community observed: "particularly dangerous is that right-wing organizations portray themselves in public discourses as patriotic and humanitarian, fighting for the rights of the destitute and vulnerable (Serbs, from their perspective)." However, although the danger from the extreme right is real, our interlocutor is also aware of other potential problems in the context of extremism: "although it seems to me that right-wing extremism is current-

ly the most dangerous for Serbia, I would not discount ethnically-motivated extremism, particularly in the context of further developments on the issue of Kosovo." Our interlocutor is also aware of a great number of websites and portals that foster extreme right discourse (Srbin info, Vidovdan, People's Freedom Movement, etc.). She mentioned the leader of the Serbian Right Miša Vacić, Obraz (Mladen Obradović), Goran Davidović Führer, Leviathan, National Avant-garde, Serbian Honor, Blood and Honor, "Oath keepers, and the Serbian National Movement Zbor as fairly typical.

6.1. The influence of the pandemic on society, family and nation

The pandemic affects the whole of society and the aim of this analysis is to point to some of its effects closely correlated with the perceptions and understanding of right-wing extremism. At the most general level, we asked our respondents to share how the pandemic has affected society on the whole and, more specifically, the possible implications for families and the nation, both being important concepts in the perspective of right-wing extremism.

The greatest impact of the pandemic identified by citizens is the permanent change in our habits and behaviors, as well as a kind of alienation due to a lack of contact. This is cited by every third respondent (34%). Next, an equal percentage (20% each) of citizens cite two consequences: severe problems in the functioning of the health care system and needless spreading of fear and panic. More than one tenth (12%) of those surveyed regard concerns for economic livelihoods as the most important consequence of the pandemic, while 8% name disruption of human rights and democracy. It is evident that the pandemic changed social perceptions, amplified fears, and adversely affected economic processes and, to a lesser extent, democracy. Aside from alienation due to physical distance, a possible consequence may also turn out to be a lack of empathy for others, which may explain fear of migrants. People are afraid for their lives amid the high pressures on the health system due to the pandemic, daily reports on casualties, and the fears related to job security. The spread of fake news in the media further contributed to the escalation of anti-migrant attitudes based on half-truths, which were intended to arouse panic and anxiety.

Chart 6.1.1. *Implications of the pandemic for society on the whole* (in percentages)
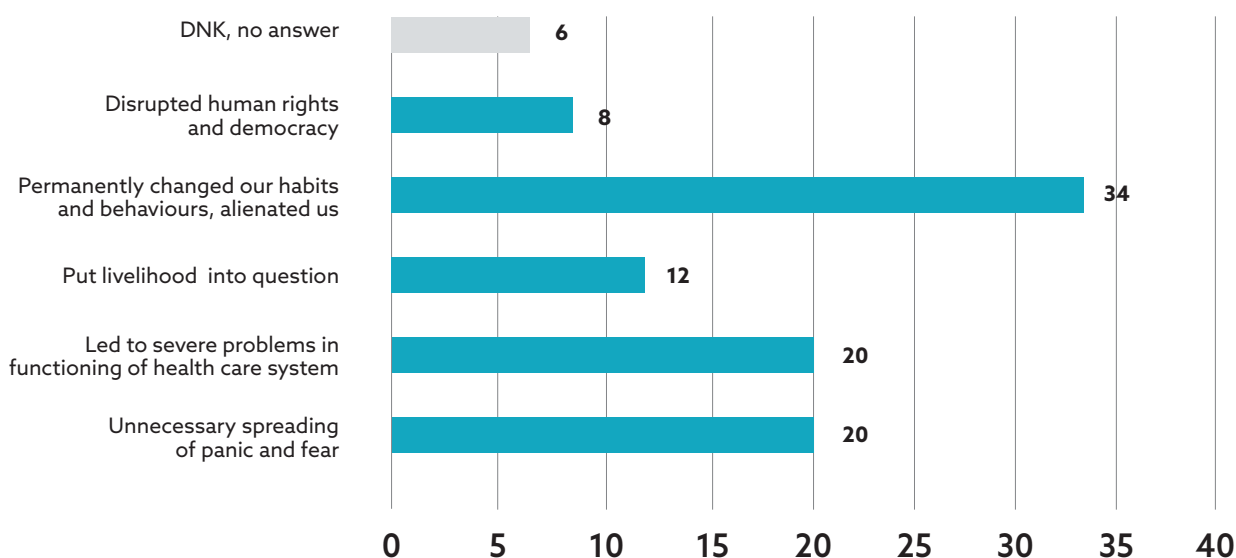
An above-average share of respondents aged 45-59 believes that the pandemic affected the state of democracy (14% in this age group shared this view), while citizens with elementary education or lower think that the pandemic meant the needless incitement of fear and panic (27%), while Belgraders cited job fears more frequently (23%) than the national average.

Nearly all our in-depth interviewees agreed that the fear which accompanied the pandemic contributed to the spread of right-wing ideas, and that those ideas shifted harder right. The impetus for this was not only fear about the nation, family, fear of migrants, but also various conspiracy theories accompanying such narratives. One of them reported that a number of groups saw the pandemic as a global conspiracy that had to be opposed. An interviewee from the academic community warned that, although there is a definite correlation between fear and the rise of extremist beliefs, "it is never just one factor--the pandemic, in this case--rather the context and synergy of different factors, mainly economic and political." One media member quoted Yoda: "fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate," adding that "humanity simply does not have answers to a number of questions at the moment, and this often leads to a search for alternative solutions which often involve a scapegoat – and that scapegoat typically an outsider or minority group."

For members of the extreme right, protection of the family and preservation of the nation are high on the list of priorities. An aggregate 41%, or two in five respondents, believe that the pandemic affected the survival of the family and its values, out of which 17% rate this impact as "a lot," and 24% rate it as "moderate." Conversely, 56% assessed that the pandemic did "not particularly" impact the family or had "no impact." Socio-demographic analysis yields no major deviations, except that fear for the family is more distinct in populations over 60 years of age.

When analyzing the correlation between the pandemic and survival of the nation, the findings are very similar to those for families. Two-fifths of respondents believe that the pandemic affected the survival of the nation (31% rate its impact as moderate and 9% as high), while 54% of citizens believe that there was no impact at all or that it was minor

(27% of citizens for each). As for the previous question, we found that Serbian citizens believe, in relatively high percentages, that the pandemic affected the survival of the nation, but this does not necessarily imply extremism (concerns for the nation may be due to health reasons, genuine care for fellow citizens, etc.). This means that only a segment of the population is more vulnerable to populist narratives that members of the right-wing tend to embrace.

Although citizens' objections to wearing facemasks and vaccination are not automatically linked to right-wing ideology and even less with extremism, experiences from Serbia show a very strong correlation. That correlation is the most explicit on social networks, but also clearly visible in those promoting such ideas and their political articulation (at least three actors from the June 2020 elections are also members of the right-wing, two of them with very radical views). The fear is of submission and also that masks and vaccination may be hazardous not only to health, but also to lifestyle, family, and the nation.

Health professionals' jobs are made more difficult by the fact that movements opposed to facemasks and vaccination receive support from public figures who promote fake news and semi-truths. In some cases, highly controversial attitudes about facemasks and vaccines are even shared by some doctors, thus empowering anti-mask and anti-vaccine movements.

Findings show that adult Serbians do not fully embrace masks and vaccines. Most importantly, our survey shows that the state needs to further its efforts in promoting the beneficial effects of both masks and vaccination. This is especially true for vaccinations, which have begun in Serbia and where, as around the world, a large turnout is necessary to achieve herd immunity. Facemasks are more easily accepted by Serbian citizens and, at the moment, 74% of them fully support their wearing. At the same time, 21% believe that they should not be mandatory, but that everyone should have a choice, while 5% are expressly against them. The vaccine situation is more complex. Only one-third (34%) of citizens were explicitly supportive of vaccination, 41% stated that it should be voluntary, while nearly one-fourth (23%) of the population was expressly against mandatory vaccination.

These questions were intended to gauge attitudes toward mask-wearing and vaccines in order to identify potential challenges, since the Serbian state has already decided (following examples of other countries) that vaccination should remain optional. Hence, it is very important to understand who demands freedom of choice for vaccination, in order to try to communicate with them. Although statistical deviations are not significant, there are more men, aged over 60, in this group (the survey also showed sub-average scores on the variable of being against mandatory vaccination), citizens with high education, and from south and east Serbia. When it comes to facemasks, they are mandatory, and it is up to the state to see their wearing is consistently controlled.

Chart 6.2.1. *What is your attitude to facemasks and vaccination?* (in percentages)
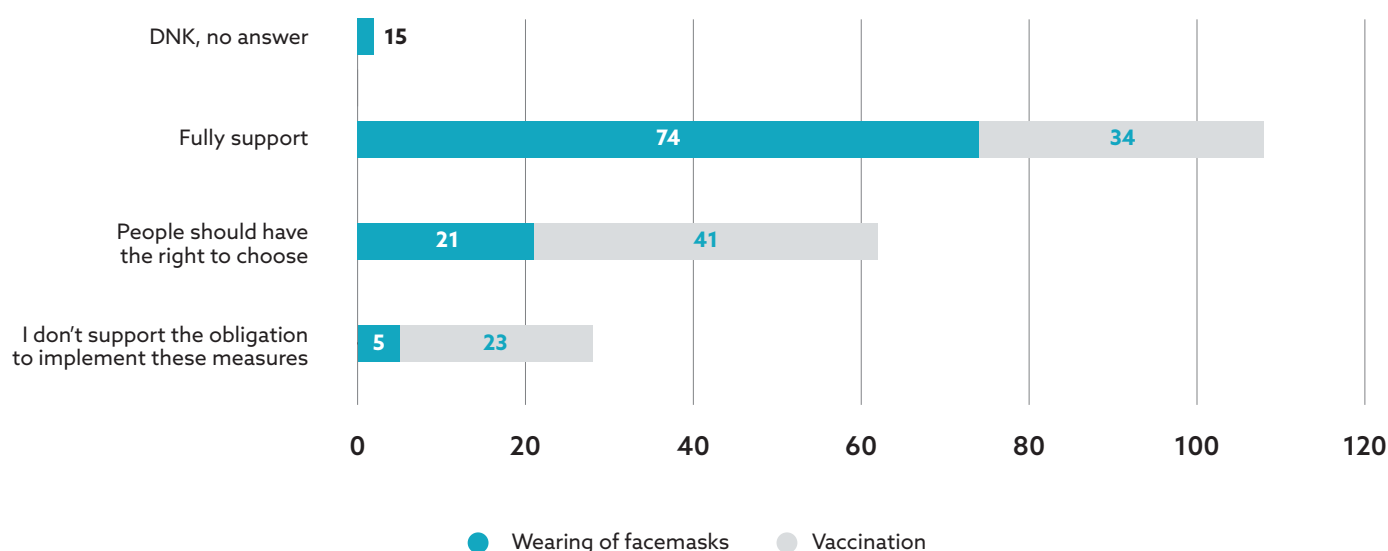
Estimates at the end of 2020 showed that between 25% and 30% of Serbian citizens had some immunity,[30] which, according to experts, is not enough to achieve herd immunity. Health experts say it is necessary for about 60% of the population to have immunity, and the only way to acquire it is through vaccination, along with natural resistance by exposure. We asked citizens directly: are you going to be vaccinated against coronavirus? Their answers reflect their underlying fears and concerns, but also fake news, conspiracy theories and irresponsible messages that people are exposed to almost daily. Almost one quarter (23%) were ready for vaccination. Given a choice, which is the case in Serbia, 45% of those surveyed said they would choose not to be vaccinated. Every third person stated that they will be vaccinated, though reluctantly, out of concern that the vaccines were developed too quickly, without enough time for detailed testing. If the state aims to increase the number of vaccinated citizens, which seems to be the case, it should step up its media campaign and target the one-third of the population which still harbors doubts about vaccine safety.

There are no drastic statistical deviations within the group that will not be vaccinated. Above-average opposition is registered among youth (18-29), citizens from west and central Serbia, and members of the Bosniak/Muslim ethnic community.

These findings indicate that the government, aided by health experts, should try to improve its messaging about vaccines. In light of this paper's focus,

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30 https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/institut-za-primenu-ne-kolektivni-imunitet-u-srbiji-izmedju-25-i-30-odsto/, 08 January 2021

attitudes on right-wing extremism, it is clear that concerns about facemasks and especially vaccines, coupled with various conspiracy theories, may encourage right-wing ideologies. The leaders of right-wing organizations are likely to take advantage of people's vulnerability on this issue. It is possible to conclude that vaccines can help homogenize right-wing ideologies, but whether attitudes to vaccines will become a long-term trigger for the escalation of right-wing ideologies depends on the success of the state and of those responsible. The more successful the vaccination process and fight against COVID-19 is, the lower the chances for occurrence of any kind of extremism and vice-versa.
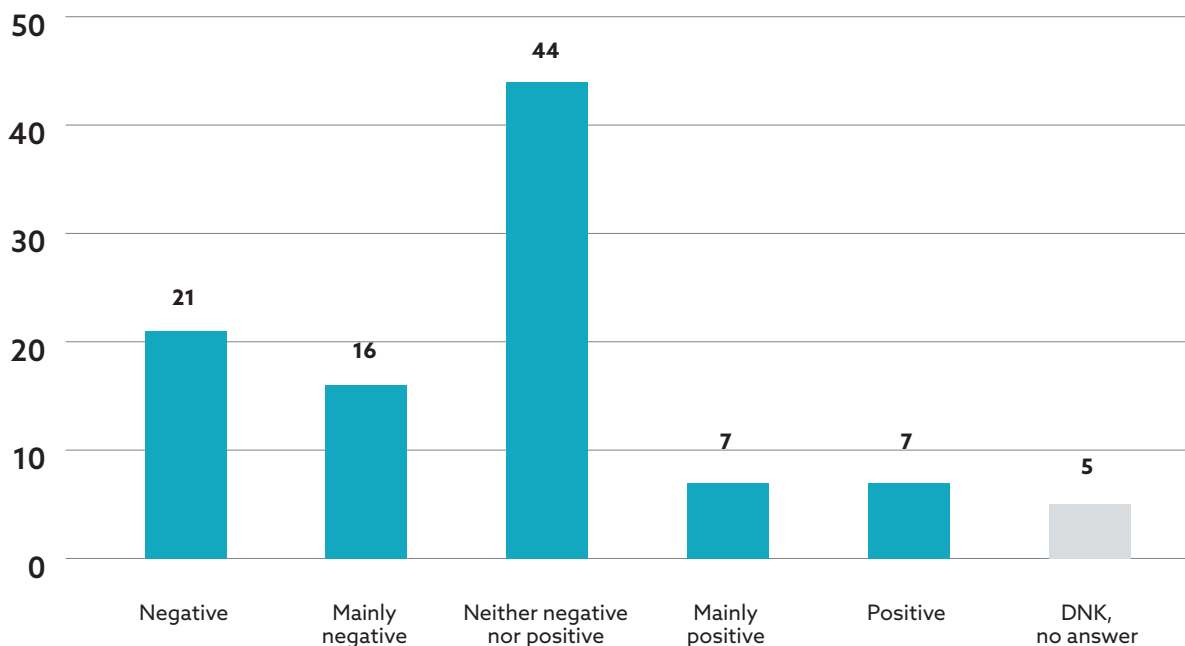
6.3. Citizens' attitudes toward migrants

We have already noted that migrants and the migrant crisis are the strongest new drivers of right-wing extremism in Serbia. This chapter seeks to provide more detailed insight into public attitudes toward migrants and the implications of the migrant crisis for the state and its core principles, as well as for cultural and identity differences.

The first survey question asked citizens to share their overall attitudes toward migrants in Serbia. The highest percentage of respondents, 44%, clustered around the middle-ground, with a tendency toward indifference, and without any positive or negative labels.. On the other hand, citizens with negative attitudes to migrants, 37%, far outnumber those with positive ones, some 14%. A negative attitude toward migrants is also above-average among citizens with only elementary school education, aged 45-59, and self-declared religious believers observing their religious customs.

### Chart 6.3.1. Attitudes to migrants in Serbia (in percentages)

A representative of an organization dealing with migrants shared an anecdote which illustrates attitudes toward migrants. A citizen told her that "he has never seen the Taliban, but that he is afraid of them." She added that, in her experience, people often refer to all migrants as Taliban. Besides prejudice, she notes, major damage to the treatment of migrants is caused by fake news contributing to the perception that migrants wish to stay in Serbia permanently, which is not the case.

One of the common themes of all right-wing groups in Serbia is that migrants, in one way or another, have an impact on the survival of the state and its values. We therefore asked Serbian citizens to what extent migrants actually affect the state, its values, principles and survival. Here, we note that 43% of citizens agree with the statement that migrants and the migrant crisis led to problems, but that they did not at any point threaten the survival of the state or its values. One-fifth of the population says that everything is functioning as normal, while the number of citizens claiming that the migrants' impact was adverse, and affected people living in Serbia, was higher by seven percentage points.
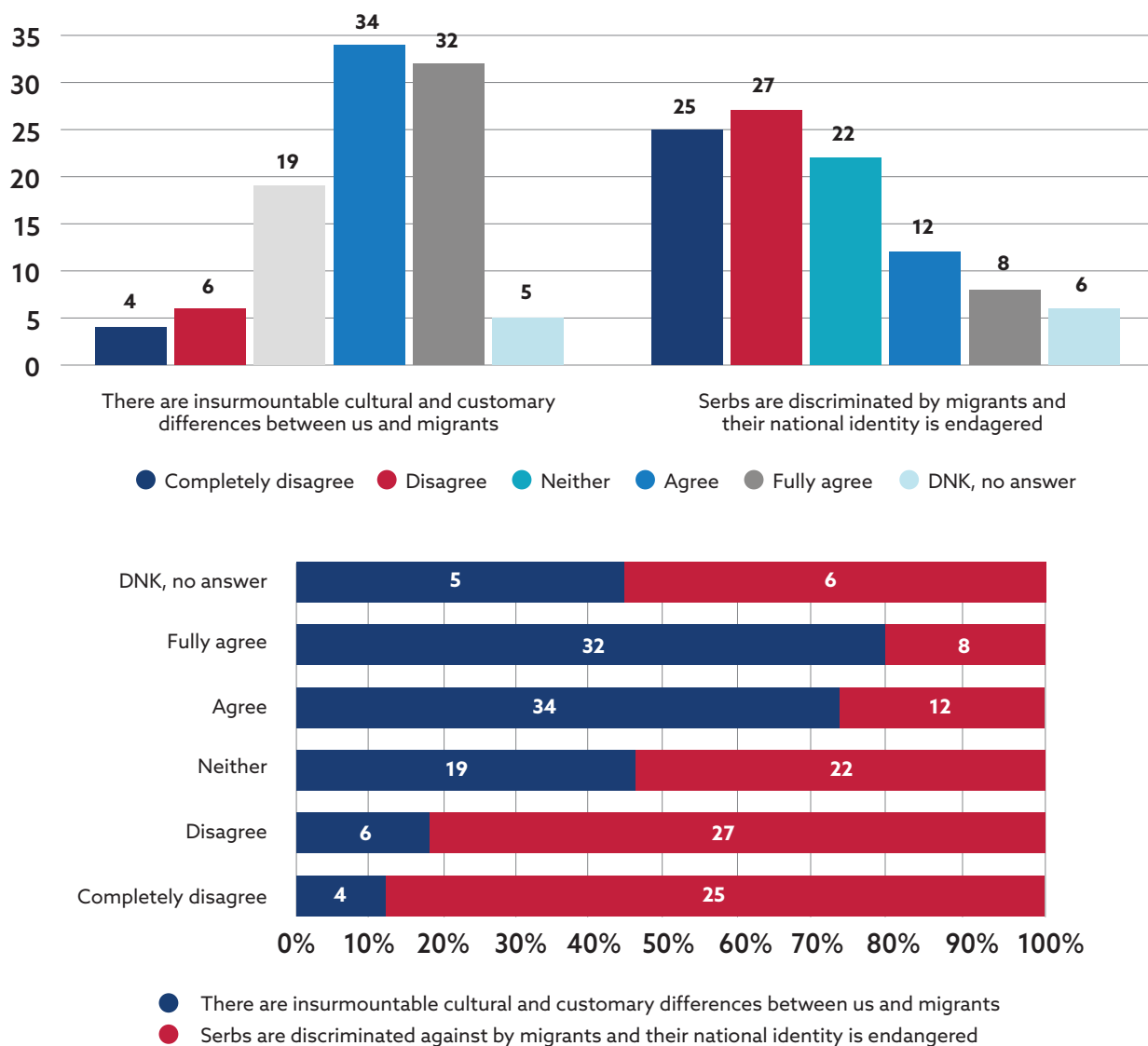
Chart 6.3.2. *To what extent do migrants and the migrant crisis affect the state, its values, principles and survival?* (in percentages)
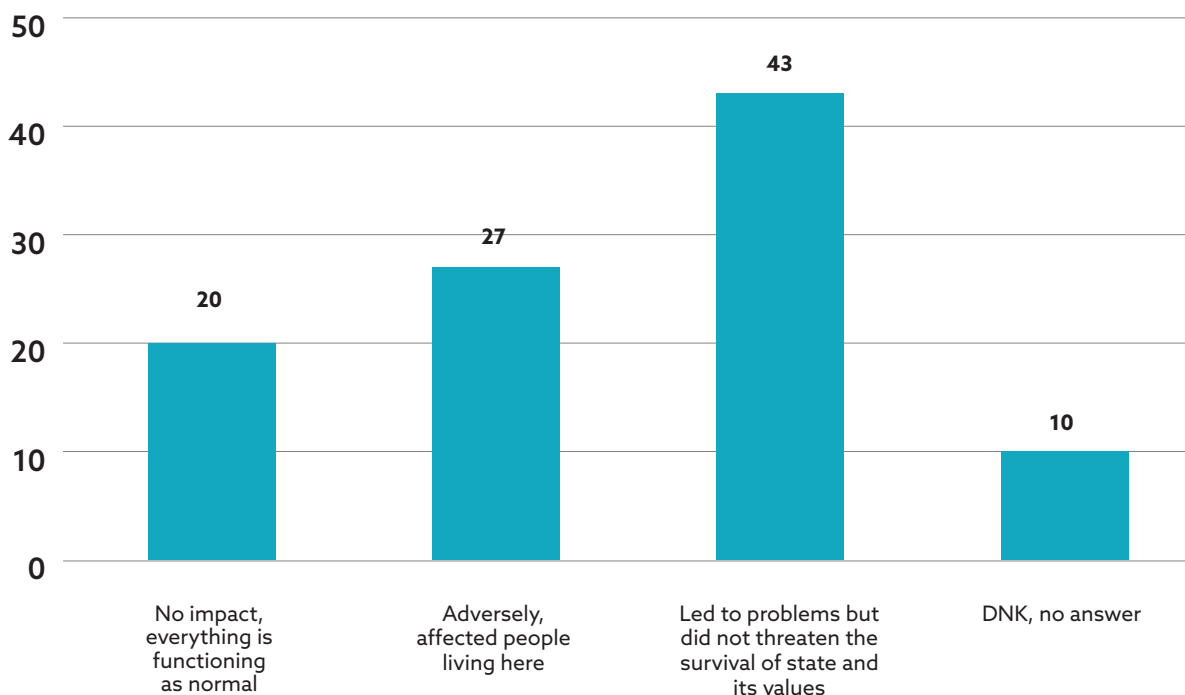
We close this chapter with two statements which seek to capture the public's attitudes toward migrants in the context cultural and traditional differences, that is, in the context of threats to national identity. Citizens' attitudes to these statements varied significantly. While there is a high degree of consensus (66% in the aggregate) that there are irreconcilable differences between Serbians and migrants in terms of culture and customs, a significantly lower number of citizens (20% in total) agree with the statement that migrants discriminate against Serbs. One-fifth of the population is not a small percentage when it comes to a common view that Serbian national identity is threatened, but it is beyond doubt that citizens generally see insurmountable barriers in culture and customs. When it comes to the statement that migrants discriminate against Serbs, an above-average percentage of those who agree are citizens with only elementary school education or lower, and among younger respondents, aged 18 to 29.

Chart 6.3.3. *Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?* (in percentages)

- Completely disagree
- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Fully agree
- DNK, no answer

- There are insurmountable cultural and customary differences between us and migrants
- Serbs are discriminated against by migrants and their national identity is endangered

We reached the conclusion that the underlying cause of the fear of migrants is a lack of knowledge.

"The migrant crisis and the pandemic spurred afear of migrants and consequently also activity of some right-wing and anti-migrant groups. This is deplorable, because migrants are satisfied with their status in our country, as well as by the way Serbia cares for them. They are used to being harassed by police from other countries, so they are delighted with their treatment in Serbia. Thus, for example, when they try 'game' (migrant slang for crossing the border) at the border with Croatia, many

of them return beaten and physically abused. A migrant apprehended by Croatian border police and returned to Serbia once told me: 'I was lucky, they just slapped me and broke my phone.' Otherwise, we have seen many cases where Croatian police brutally beat them up, broke their phones and stripped their clothes and then returned them to Serbia."

This interviewee also noted that migrants face most problems from members of Leviathan and so-called "people's patrols" (groups of 15-30 people with dogs), who visit sites where migrants are hosted in the evenings. This behavior, according to our interviewee, infringes on migrants' human rights and creates a negative media image of Serbia. By contrast to these movements and groups, there are also left-wing movements who defend migrants, thus leading to a confrontation between these two ideological options.[31]

7. ETHNIC AND SOCIAL DISTANCE

Ethnic and social distance is the degree of closeness or distance of one or more individuals relative to an ethnic or social group. The golden standard for measuring ethnic/social distance is the Bogardus scale, which represents the willingness of one or more individuals to accept some social interactions (from more distant to closer levels) with a typical member of an ethnic or social group. The rule is that the more prejudice or stereotypes individuals have for an ethnic or social group, the greater the distance, or the lower the willingness to accept social interactions with that group, and vice-versa. In practice, the question ranged from: would you mind if a member of the following groups was your neighbor, colleague, or your childrens' teacher (more distant levels of acceptance of social interactions) all the way to being friends, their boss, or married to them (they or their children), which are closer levels of acceptance of social interaction.

Citizens were questioned about five ethnic groups: Serbs, as the majority population group, Roma, Bosniaks, Croats and ethnic Albanians. All the findings are presented in Table 7.1. Over a fifth of the population wants nothing to do with ethnic Albanians. Most citizens are against inter-marriage (55%), followed by those against having an Albanian teach their children (32%) and (29%) opposed being friends with ethnic Albanians. Twenty-two percent are against being neighbors with them. Bosniaks come second, with a relatively low social distance score at more general levels (below 10%) but climbing. Fourteen percent of those polled don't want a member of the Bosniak

ethnic community teaching their children, and 41% don't want to marry a Bosniak. Identical trends are recorded for ethnic Croats, where the percentage of respondents against marriage is slightly lower relative to Bosniaks, 37% would mind being married to a Croat (by four percentage points less than Bosniaks).

Serbs' aversion to Roma on the first five levels was lower, on average, to Albanians, Bosniaks and Croats, but surged sharply to 45% on the closest level of social interaction(marriage), higher than for Bosniaks and Croats. When it comes to the Roma, we see signs of social mimicry, where the majority population shows sympathy because of historical co-existence with the Roma, but also because there were no wars or conflicts with the Roma. This carries on up to a level showing genuine willingness for social contact– marrying or having their children married to them. At this level, willingness for social interaction is higher for the Roma than for Bosniaks or Croats.

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31 A good example of the conflict between members of the right and left over the status of migrants took place on 25 October 2020 in Belgrade. Organized by the people's patrols, an event entitled "Clean up the Park Outside the Faculty of Economics" (a gathering spot for migrants), was announced on social networks. In response, several left-wing organizations organized an event entitled "Tea of Solidarity" at the same venue, expressing their support for the migrants.

Table 7.1. *Ethnic distance: would you mind if a member of the following groups became…?* (in percentages)

	Roma		Bosniaks		Croats		Albanians		Serbs	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
… your neighbor	10	87	9	89	9	91	22	72	0.4	99.6
… your colleague	4	93	8	90	7	91	23	72	0.4	99.5
… teacher of your children	11	85	14	83	12	87	32	62	0.4	99.6
… your friend and you visited each other's home	12	54	11	88	11	89	29	66	0.3	99.4
… your boss	7	88	10	87	9	89	22	71	0.3	99.3
… married to you or your children	45	42	41	52	37	58	55	35	2.8	96.2

Table7.2. shows social distance towards migrants and the LGBT population, which we know, from previous surveys, to be two groups towards which the Serbian public maintains a high social distance. At the same time, both these groups play an important part in right-wing ideology – they are a concern either for the nation or the state--migrants-- or for the survival of the family—the LGBT community.

Although we assumed that there is a high social distance towards these groups, the data we obtained are still surprising and discouraging. The average distance toward migrants is above fifty percent, and there is no level at which the percentage of respondents opposed to social interactions falls under two-fifths. Half of the population or more is opposed to having migrants as neighbors (50%), their children's teachers (51%), friends and visiting each other (52%) and, finally, being married to them. The percentage of those against reaches as high as 67% of respondents.

The distance score for the LGBT population is also very high – slightly lower relative to migrants at more distant levels (neighbor or colleague) and for a member of LGBT community being their boss (under two-thirds of those polled). However, distance increases when it comes to friendship and visiting each other (46%), teachers of their children (52%), and the most discouraging are data for marriage (your or your children's spouse), where as many as 85% of citizens oppose this kind of social interaction.

Table 7.2. *Social distance: would you mind if a member of the following groups became…?* (In percentages)

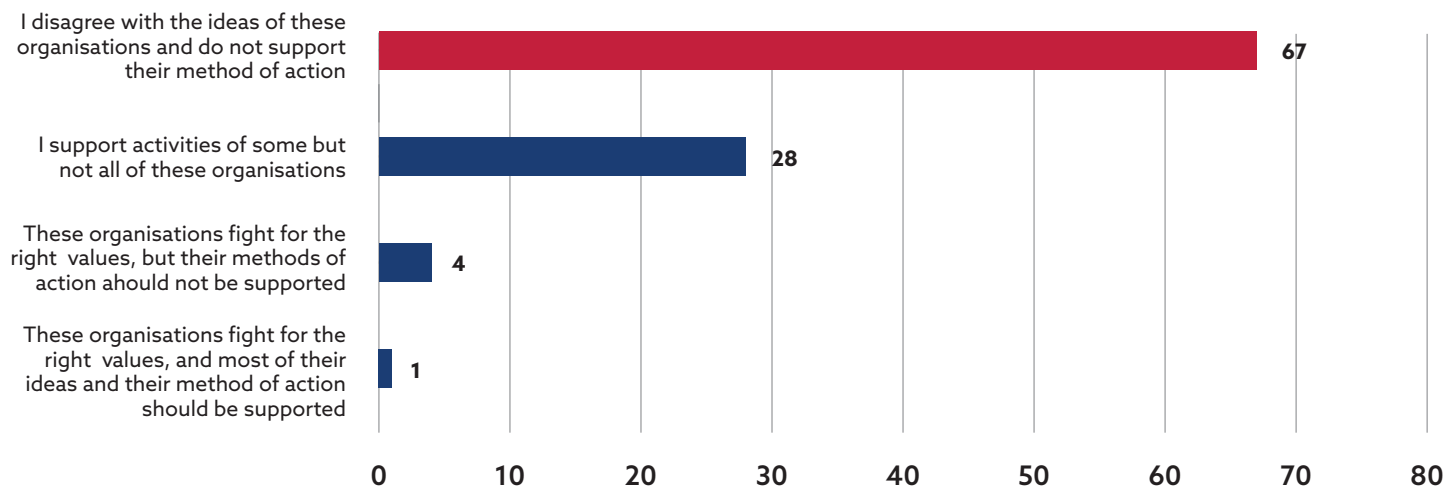|	Migrants		LGBT	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
… your neighbor	50	38	37	58
… your colleague	44	44	33	61
… teacher of your children	51	37	52	42
… your friends and visiting your home	52	37	46	48
… your boss	45	42	36	58
… your or your children's spouse	67	22	85	8

8. THE PERCEPTION OF RIGHT-WING ORGANIZATIONS

Due to their variety and heterogeneous structure, right-wing organizations can be hard to define. This is primarily due to the fact that the extreme right ranges from neo-Nazism and fascism (divisions of Blood and Honor, Stormfront, National Alignment), through clerical nationalism (e.g. Obraz, Serbian Right), to organizations that present themselves as patriotic and do not pursue an explicitly extremist ideology, like Oath-Keepers. The problem with the extreme right is that some of its representatives do not favor extremism in their programs and objectives but exercise it in practice – and vice-versa. This is why, for clear ideological definition, it is necessary to analyze not only the extreme right's official programs but also their practices and public discourse.

Hooligan groups in Serbia flirt with various forms of the extreme right. The majority of our in-depth interviewees mentioned National Alignment and Obraz, as well as hooligan groups, especially supporters of FC Rad - United Force, as typical representatives of the extreme right. A representative of the security sector explicitly told us that hooligans have the closest ideological links with the extreme right in Serbia, as do some intellectual circles. Our interviewee from academia pointed out that "the leader of the outlawed neo-Nazi organization National Alignment, Goran Davidović 'Führer,' whose conviction for incitement of religious, racial, and national hatred was voided, announced political action in early 2020 and is also very active on his Twitter profile, both in promoting hate speech and in supporting right-wing protests in Serbia." This view was also shared by a representative of civil society, who said that in Serbia so-called "political extremism" is a big problem: "there is an extreme usurpation of public resources at the local level in Serbia, which is unacceptable for any state aspiring to a democratic value system."

The perception of right-wing organizations in Serbia is dominantly negative, as established through both quantitative research--opinion polls-- and in-depth interviews--qualitative research.

In the opinion poll, we asked citizens to give their opinion on right-wing organizations like National Alignment, Obraz and others, in order to capture general attitudes towards these groups, their principles, and their modus operandi. Two-thirds of those polled saw right-wing organizations as unacceptable, both in terms of their ideas and their operations. However, 28% support some right-wing organizations, which is not an insignificant figure in the context of our research, especially since some of these organizations promote violence. The survey shows that 5% of citizens say they understand these organizations, 4% say that these organizations have good ideas but do not support their activities (with above-average scores in west Serbia and Šumadija), while 1% of citizens wholeheartedly support both their ideas and actions.

Chart 8.1. *Attitude toward right-wing organizations* (in percentages)

I disagree with the ideas of these organisations and do not support their method of action	67
I support activities of some but not all of these organisations	28
These organisations fight for the right values, but their methods of action ahould not be supported	4
These organisations fight for the right values, and most of their ideas and their method of action should be supported	1

A representative of an international organization believes that the risk from this type of ideology exists, but is contained:

> "It is real, because of tacit support by the ruling elite and is even by part of mainstream politics. Its most extreme forms are still insufficient to mobilize a large enough number of supporters, so the government still successfully controls them."

A member of the regional media assessed the danger of right-wing activity during the pandemic, saying that this ideology might be especially inspiring for the younger population, "as it includes several aspects –religious, QAnon theories (anti-vaccine, anti-migrant rhetoric, 5G, etc.),and political (formulated around the Kosovo issue). All this, combined and packaged in products attractive for young people is a phenomenon with capacity for great popularity. Recently, we were able to witness the force of this option during the protests outside the Parliament."

In terms of its international cooperation, the extreme right in Serbia seems to be well connected and collaborates with extremists in Russia and Poland, and in the U.K. and the U.S., particularly through the divisions of Blood and Honor, Stormfront, and Combat 18.

As observed by a security expert, all extremists, including right-wing ones, have learned their lessons.

In his words, "no one, or hardly anyone, crosses the line, no one threatens or says 'I'm gonna kill you' or 'expel you.'" They communicate their extremist narratives while staying on the edge of criminal liability. The same interviewee added that right-wing organizations take advantage the state's omissions or weakness.

> "Right-wing members pursue the logic of imposing narratives – we will win over the majority and dictate the topics. Religious extremism was highly stigmatized and now they are shifting in a different direction. People's patrols' messages do not amount to criminal liability; they say to migrants: you are outside the center as an excuse from prosecution. This is activism, not elements for criminal charges. There is no reaction from the state, and this is how radical thinking is normalized."

9. READINESS FOR ARMED CONFLICT OVER KOSOVO STATUS

Despite their heterogeneous structure and a wide spectrum of ideologies, members of the extreme right in Serbia are united over two common views:[32]

1. Kosovo is an integral part of Serbia[33]

2. Homophobia

The issue of Kosovo's status is very sensitive and engages all political actors in Serbia, including members of extreme right. The issue of Kosovo's status was raised several times as a priority for continuing Serbia's integration into the EU. The EU itself is not unanimous on the resolution of this issue,[34] while similar dissonance also exists within the larger international community.

This is why we asked Serbian citizens if they believe that it was justified to engage in an armed conflict in order to finally define the status of Kosovo. The question incorporates, inter alia, the potential to measure radical thinking among the Serbian public. The vast majority of respondents replied negatively (88%). One in 11 believe it is justified to engage in armed conflict in order to define Kosovo's status . Only six percent of respondents said they would be willing to personally engage in such conflict, while three percent find armed conflict justified but would not engage personally. This confirms that an overwhelming majority of Serbian citizens would not go

to war over Kosovo's status; the memory of the devastation of the wars of Yugoslav dissolution in the 1990s may account for some of this overwhelming majority. It is important to understand the 9% of citizens who find armed conflict justified, and especially the six percent who would personally engage in armed conflict, because radical thinking could morph into extremism.

A member of the academic community points to sensitivities over Kosovo:

> "Depending on the further course of developments on this issue, it might become one of the activating factors of ethnically motivated extremism (I primarily refer to the Preševo Valley), but in that case, it is also possible right-wing extremism will be further activated in Serbia, which may very easily shift into an ethnically motivated one (fight for preserving Kosovo and the nation, since one of the key features of right-wing extremism in Serbia is the ideology of national unification and purity of the nation). Push and pull factors act in synergy depending on the context."

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32 Today, we increasingly come across a third common denominatorthat has been on the rise during the pandemic. This is anti-globalism. More on this in: Đorić Marija, *Ekstremna desnica: međunarodni aspekti desničarskog ekstremizma* (Extreme Right: International Aspects of Right-Wing Extremism), Udruženje Nauka i društvo Srbije, Belgrade, 2014.

33 It should be noted that this attitude is characteristic not only of right-wing extremists, but also for a majority of Serbian citizens adhering to moderate options. Besides, this is also the official position of the Republic of Serbia.

34 Five EU Member States do not recognize Kosovo's independence.

10. SPORT TEAM SUPPORTERS AND SUPPORTER GROUPS

Our research showed that sport team support groups, or rather, hooligan groups are directly linked to right-wing extremism in Serbia. This problem is identified not only by our in-depth interviewees, but also by citizens. Many say they cannot distinguish between supporters and hooligans. While a supporter in a broad sense is the term with a positive connotation,[35] a hooligan is a negative phenomenon associated with violence. A supporter can be anyone who peacefully supports their sports club without the use of violence, as opposed to hooligans, for whom sport is peripheral, while primary categories are violence and lucrative interest.[36]

The evolution of the hooligan scene in Serbia can be divided into three phases:

1. Up until the 1990s. This period is characterized by the emergence of support groups and hooligans within these groups.

2. From the 1990s and up until 2000.The second phase of hooliganism is directly related to the wars in the former SFRY. Namely, members of paramilitary units were largely recruited from the ranks of hooligan groups.[37]

3. From 2000 to the present. The third phase is marked by the politicization of hooliganism, or the use of hooligans for political purposes. In Serbia, hooligans helped topple Slobodan Milošević's regime in 2000 and later became more involved in criminal activities, leading to a new, fourth, phase-the use of hooligans for criminal purposes. Today, hooligans are less associated with sports, especially

soccer; instead, they have become s in crime.[38] According to Božidar Otašević, assistant professor at the University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies, since 2000, "there was no major public political gathering without the participation of extreme supporter groups" in Serbia and/or Belgrade.[39]

Our interviewees almost unanimously cited hooligans as the most prominent representatives of extreme right. A representative of the security sector told us that "among typical organizations, we can mention National Alignment, Obraz, as well as certain [sport team] supporters, i.e. hooligan groups." Partisan and Red Star supporters have extremist wings; other groups cited as particularly violent are those associated with less popular football clubs, such as supporters of FC Rad who go by the name of United Force.[40]

Hooligans can be an instrument of politics, as witnessed in several events, like the American Embassy torching,[41] street riots during gay pride parades, etc. Danger lies in the fact that regional links exist between criminal groups and hooligans, such as cooperation between the Montenegrin Skaliari clan and Serbian supporter groups, as was the case with some Grobari ("Gravediggers," supporters of Belgrade football club Partisan) factions.[42] Hooligan groups also reach across international borders to "export and import " aligned brawlers, as witnessed at the 2017 football match between Red Star and Partisan at Partisan stadium, when hooligans from Croatia, Bulgaria and Greece were "imported" for

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35 See: Otašević Božidar, Nasilje na sportskim priredbama (Violence at Sports Events) (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2015)

36 Đorić Marija, *Huliganizam: nasilje i sport* (Hooliganism:Violence and Sports), Nauka i društvo Srbije, Belgrade, 2012, p. 90.

37 This phenomenon was characteristic not only for Serbia, but also for Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

38 Đorić Marija, *Huliganizam: nasilje i sport* (Hooliganism:Violence and Sports), Nauka i društvo Srbije, Belgrade, 2012, p.

39 Otašević Božidar, Nasilje na sportskim priredbama (Violence at Sports Events) (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2015), p. 86.

40 The specificity of this group is that (although small in size), it is very violent and is comprised of the members of the racist skinhead movement.

41 The events in question occurred in 2008, when, in response to their recognition of Kosovo independence, the embassies of Turkey, Croatia, US and some other nations were attacked.

42 Source: https://www.republika.rs/vesti/tema-dana/31896/hrvatske-huligane-platio-vodja-skaljaraca, 27.12.2020.

the purposes of violent confrontations.[43]

The politicization of hooliganism was also evident during the protests outside the Parliament in Belgrade in July 2020. The protests were against measures introduced by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic,[44] and their main protagonists were unidentified hooligan groups who attempted to break into the National Assembly.[45]

In the opinion poll carried out for this study, we asked the following question: "Do you or a person close to you belong to any supporter group?". The majority of respondents answered negatively (85%); 2% answered "not personally, but a close person does;"12% answered "yes, I am a fan, but I don't attend football matches or belong to any group;" while 1% reported that they were members of support groups, with very few specifying which one, although they had the option to do so. It is possible to conclude that very few self-declared supporters attend football matches, but a significant number

consider themselves supporters, although they do not attend football matches, and that they know people belonging to supporter groups. The potential for radical thinking can be found among 1% of citizens who are members of supporter groups, but we should not equate extremism with membership in supporter groups.

In order to obtain a more complete picture of hooligan activities within supporter groups, we asked a second question to provide comprehensive answers. We asked citizens if they have ever participated in clashes between supporter groups in Serbia. As many as 99% of our respondents answered that they have not, while 1% answered affirmatively, explaining that this is "part of the tradition and that it is not justified to call all supporter clashes hooliganism." This one percent is potentially already a member of a hooligan group, for whom violence, not sports, is the primary motivator.

43 https://www.b92.net/sport/fudbal/vesti.php?yyyy=2017&mm=12&dd=14&nav_id=1336142, 28.12.2020.

44 One of the main reasons for the protest was the idea of another curfew, accompanied by opposition to vaccination, new world order, etc.

45   It is interesting to note that, even during the curfew, some supporter groups gathered, shouting political slogans and lighting torches on the rooftops of residential buildings in Belgrade. This time, the slogans were directed against the opposition.

11. MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Media are an important communication channel for all right-wing organizations and individuals. The rise of populism in Europe is based, inter alia, on the well-planned and well-timed use of media, especially online platforms and social media. We found that all major right-wing organizations and individuals, including those known for violence, are active users of social networks. Unfortunately, they are also given a lot of space in influential mainstream media.

Looking at media consumption averages, we find that Serbians spend 3.3hours a day, on average, listening to the radio. This is followed by 3.1 hours daily watching TV. However, another finding indicates that TV is a much more influential force medium; 93% of Serbians watch TV daily, while only 47% report listening to the radio. Television is the media of choice for the age 60+ population, with elementary school education or lower, predominantly living in the south or east Serbia. Radio draws above-average audiences from populations aged 45-59 and living in Belgrade.

Citizens report using websites and social networks about1.9 or 1.8 hours per day, respectively, with a higher percentage of citizens following websites

(56%) than social media (46%). Slightly over one third of Serbians spend, on average, one hour and 20 minutes reading newspapers. Predictably, young people, aged18-29 spend above-average time on websites and social media, with significant above-average deviations for websites in the age group aged 30-44. For both forms of online media, above-average results are also recorded for those with elementary school education, as well as those living in rural areas. Predictably, those aged 60+ are the biggest group of newspaper readers.

In order to capture media consumption by members of the right-wing, it is necessary to understand social networks and communication channels such as Viber and WhatsApp. Messaging channels like Telegram are also an important tool, as we learned from the participants in our qualitative survey.

One of our interviewees warned that before focusing on right-wing groups, "the way of reporting on social groups needs to change, because this reporting is irresponsible and full of prejudice and unverified allegations from nearly all vulnerable groups in Serbia."

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our assessment shows that the pandemic gave rise to fear. Fear, in turn, prompted concerns/anxieties which create and consolidate right-wing beliefs. The pandemic raised concerns for democracy, but more significantly fueled worries about the survival of families, the state and nation. These concerns were fertile topics for the extreme right and its narratives.

Our research shows that, in addition to the existing drivers of right-wing extremism in Serbia, attitudes about migrants and the migrant crisis are

also stoking right-wing groups. Our research also shows that the pandemic is fertile soil for the growth of right-wing beliefs, because of fear and the meshing of that fear with attitudes toward vaccines, facemasks, and conspiracy theories. This does not mean that everyone who opposes vaccines or facemasks shows tendencies for extremist behavior, but it does mean that their attitudes can potentially bolster the rise of right-wing narratives. Serbia shows that attitudes to vaccines, facemasks and popular conspiracy theories almost always go hand in hand with

right-wing ideologies, with some of them gaining a clear political articulation in groups like Leviathan and Serbian Right.).

Understanding right-wing extremism, especially in recent years, involves understanding of attitudes to migrants and the migrant crisis. **Social distance from migrants is high, prejudice is strong and the narrative that Serbian citizens and migrants are culturally distant is amplified.** These factors, in combination with often false or incorrect news stories (the most prevalent is that migrants want to settle in Serbia permanently) contribute to a negative perception of migrants. During the past few months, almost every violent action by right-wing groups also involved migrants. This driver of extremism, combined with some long-standing ones and with a strong fear for the nation and the family during the pandemic, is an environment conducive to right-wing organizations. **In conflict theory, the prevalence of incidents amounts to escalation and there have been several incidents in Serbia,** fortunately of a low-intensity so far. At the same time, the Serbian situation should be understood through traditional and authoritarian behavioral patterns, as well as prejudice toward Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats, and the Roma. There is even greater opposition toward the LGBT population.

The research also shows a relatively low level of readiness for conflict especially over Kosovo's status. It also shows a fragmentation of right-wing groups which prevents them from pursuing large-scale actions that could threaten democracy. Furthermore, any analysis of the right wing in Serbia would be incomplete without a deeper insight into the behavior of hooligans who have become an indispensable part of various criminal organizations.

Lastly, right-wing extremism does not exist in a social vacuum, but in a context delineated by a number of other local and global factors. On the local level, those range from the actions of the government, the role of civil society and the media. Internationally, influence comes from rising populist movements, the expansion of social networks and communications channels such as Telegram, and links with foreign right-wing groups.

Below, the authors offer a brief overview of possible strategic interventions and practical recommendations. All of them may apply to local initiatives or may have regional potential.

(1) Strategic interventions

- Build partnerships, and foster new ones, with national and local partners to address the new drivers of right-wing extremism (migrants, fear of the pandemic). Institutions to build partnerships with include ministries (the Ministries of Interior, Education, Science and Technological Development, Youth and Sports, and Culture and Information); Parliament, local self-governments; educational institutions (primary and secondary schools and universities), media, civil society sector;

- Enhance cooperation with the ministries responsible for media and information, media and media programs, but also with international organizations, and promote media literacy, and especially digital literacy, due to the increasing importance of communication in organizing right-wing groups;

- Establish or further cooperate with international and local organizations dealing with migrants, with a focus on human rights as well as socio-economic assistance;

- Establish or enhance cooperation with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration to help support migrants hosted in, or transiting through, the Republic of Serbia, as well as organizing activities which might change citizens' attitudes toward migrants.

(2) Practical interventions

- Organization of school-based workshops, webinars and other activities with students and /or their parents externally on 1) the identification of extremist behavior, 2) the use of media and social networks (media or digital literacy) and 3) awareness-raising on the importance of combating right-wing extremism. This activity can be organized with other programs;

- Support and work with local institutions in the communities most exposed to the migrant crisis – local self-government, local NGOs, local security councils and councils for inter-ethnic relations, youth offices – on organizing workshops, public campaigns, research;

- Rollout public campaigns in the digital sphere targeting younger people, make use of social networks and influencers as communication channels with the goal of sensitizing them to the dangers of right-wing extremism, the ways of identifying and combatting right-wing theories and groups. The campaign should speak the target population's language and aim for authenticity;

- Target media, and all influencers, by organizing workshops on reporting basics, not about right-wing extremism, but about vulnerable groups typically targeted by attacks (national minorities, migrants, LGBT);

- Launch and/or organize a regional program covering the Western Balkans countries, or some of them, with a focus on the correlation between right-wing extremism and the COVID-19 pandemic, including recommendations for stabilizing and improving the situation.

- Educational activities to raise awareness on the importance of combating extremism, possibilities for improving the situation, improving public policies in the domain of fighting extremism, etc., with Parliament representatives, the Committee for Control of Security Services, Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality Committee, Committee for Defense and Internal Affairs and more and local parliaments, municipal assembly presidents, deputies.

- Draft a protocol for crisis response related to extremism and radicalization, targeting parents, teachers, parliament representatives, youth, and local self-government.

- Develop a platform with information on violent extremism, emergency contact phone numbers; legislation, strategies, events, news. An idea for website name: pobedimoekstremizam or stopekstremizmu.

- Organize an annual closing event to take stock of the previous year's results in extremism prevention. The platform would bring together leading local and national actors.

- Design a special strategy for the prevention of violent extremism, since extremism is mentioned as an accompanying phenomenon in strategies on terrorism, national strategy, etc. The strategy should include a segment on the prevention of extremism in the online space, which is on the rise. This can be done via advocacy, among decision-makers, or via a working group that would draft the proposal.

- Discuss amendments to the Criminal Code, which would consider the new criminal offences associated with violent extremism. This can be begun through advocacy, among decision-makers, or via a working group.

Designs for programming

All future activities should be designed based on: 1) international best practices and Serbian national legislation (and that of other Western Balkans countries), along with 2) partnership-building with local and micro communities, and 3) the use of cross-cutting principles not focused on a single factor or driver, or on a single target group, but which seek to understand all factors contributing to right-wing extremism.

Since one of the findings of the study is that all extremists learn to adapt to changing scenarios, all strategic interventions need to be different, innovative, authentic and customized to the context. Old approaches and old tools will be ineffective.

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**POTENTIAL GENERATORS
OF RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN
THE ERA OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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