

PAVE

Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism
through Community Resilience

Policy Brief for Bosnia and Herzegovina



The PAVE project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870769.

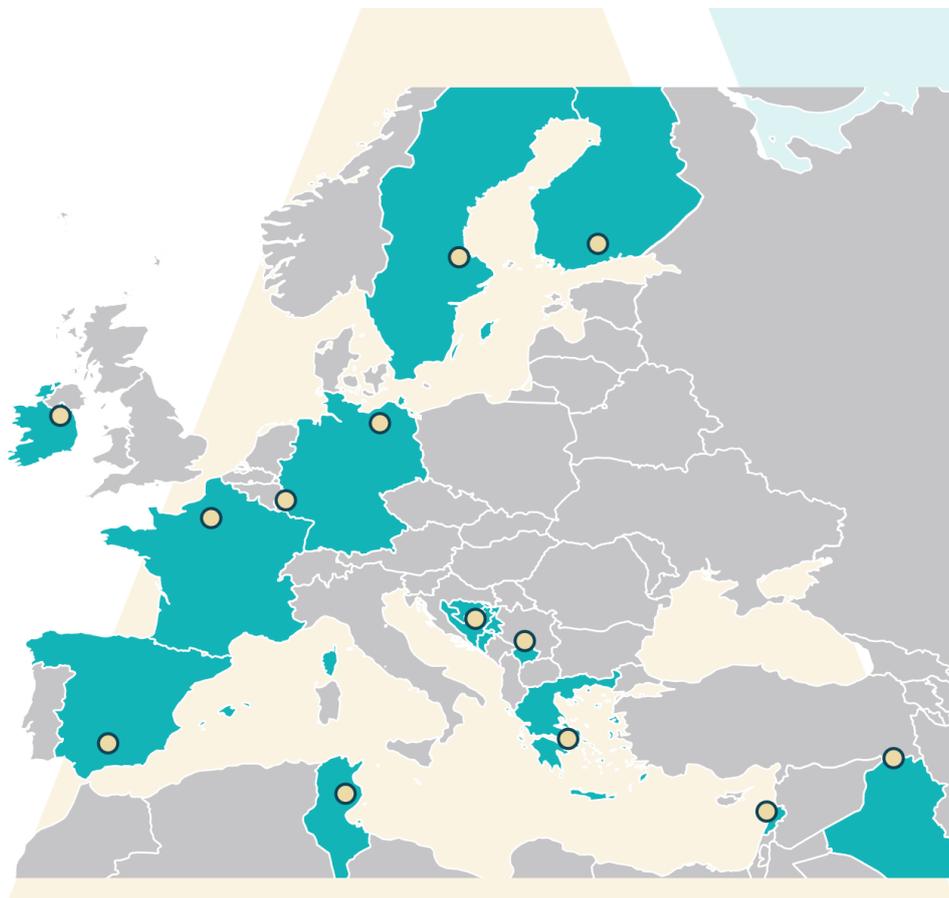


Introduction to the PAVE project

The PAVE research project (2020-23) collects evidence-based knowledge on trends in radicalisation and violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Western Balkans. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and community leaders for the development of an effective prevention strategy between the European Union and its neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, innovative training tools for stakeholders are developed based on the project's findings.

The PAVE consortium consists of 13 partner organisations based in 12 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development. In all countries, community leaders such as local state representatives, religious leaders, educators, youth organisations and women's organisations were consulted to validate first the research plans and later the research findings.

Empirical data was gathered in seven case study countries through a variety of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method approaches and compared across selected communities (e.g. municipalities) which are unevenly affected by violent extremism. Factors of vulnerability and resilience were identified at the meso level of community dynamics and actors, based on three thematic clusters: the interface between religious, political and ethnic/sectarian extremisms; the interaction between religious and public institutions; and the interplay between online and offline narratives on (de)radicalisation.





Introduction to PAVE research in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The research in Bosnia and Herzegovina was conducted in four local communities (Sarajevo, Mostar, Prijedor and Brčko) in the period from June to November 2021; a total of 39 in-depth interviews were conducted. Respondents who participated in the study represent local elites or stakeholders who are employed in various types of institution such as state, religious, non-governmental and international organisations. Respondents were selected according to the relevance of the topics under study in the daily work of the interlocutors: most of them were involved in projects or actions relating to the prevention of violent extremism in their respective communities. The three main questions which this field research attempted to answer were: i) Do the respondents recognise cumulative extremism in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina; iii) What are the pivotal factors of community vulnerability to extremism; ii) What are the pivotal factors of community resilience to extremism?

A specific form of extremism – cumulative extremism – appeared in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina primarily due to different ethno-political narratives, political opportunity structures, experiences and narratives from the war, the political organisation of the state, and economic conditions, as well as general ethnic relations that are intertwined with the religious matrix and religious identities. The identified drivers of community vulnerability to cumulative extremism can be summarised as follows: as part of the activities of the *political community*, the key indicators of vulnerability are unclear community values, pronounced political fragmentation of the community, and the dominant populist and extremist narrative in the public political space. The key indicators of vulnerability within the *social functioning of the community* are the general immobility and sluggishness of democratic processes within society, material poverty, slowness and inconsistency in the implementation of legal decisions, lack of diversification and emancipation of political from religious social identity, and in(adequately) implemented and experienced processes of reconciliation, forgiveness and the establishment of new trust through tolerance, cooperation and respect for the other. Indicators of vulnerability in activities and processes within *religious communities* include insufficient sensitivity to the problem of extremism, permeation of political discourse in religious activities within the community, and insufficient (media) visibility of religious communities' actions regarding promotion of reconciliation, trust and forgiveness.

The research team generally had difficulties in identifying clear-cut community resilience factors to cumulative extremism. However, most respondents recognised the work of *religious communities* as key potential bearers of indicators of resilience in the community. Their more proactive and 'visible' work on promoting reconciliation, forgiveness and coexistence in the community has been identified as one of the most significant contributions to resilience. Additionally, interviewees singled out the approach of the *civil society sector* in promoting and strengthening resilience within communities. Given that resilience factors were significantly more difficult to name for all interlocutors, it can be assumed that on the vulnerability-resilience continuum, all those indicators that are presented as vulnerability indicators can be viewed as potential indicators of resilience.



1. Recommendations for the government

- Devise strategies that would deal with matters related to C/PVE, with a particular focus on the **development of a system of early recognition of all forms of extremism**, as well as programmes and mechanisms that would detect all those forms that may have reciprocal effects ('cumulative extremism'). Given that civil servants are on the 'frontline', their work should be supported, and they should be trained to adequately recognise risk factors, primarily among the youth in schools.
- **Expand research on cumulative extremism** in BiH in cooperation with academic and other institutions, with the aim of further clarifying whether one form of extremism 'feeds' and encourages the emergence of another (religious, political, ethnic, etc.). Such research projects and programmes should be regularly supported by state and entity institutions through funding programmes established by relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Education.
- Develop specific **security, social and educational programmes for 'vulnerable local communities'**, with an emphasis on increased participation of local religious communities, the youth and women. Such programmes could be implemented in cooperation with other non-state actors and should be included in the strategic framework of institutions at the state level.
- Support **interreligious dialogue and activities** carried out by the Interreligious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, more specifically, increase cooperation and programmes with/for young people in order to strengthen resilience to cumulative extremism. Such programmes should be carried out with the involvement of all religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with their adequate recognition of the problems that occur within each of them.
- Establish a **digital education platform** with the aim of raising awareness of cumulative extremism through interactive presentations and discussions. This could be done in partnership with the academic community, civil society and international organisations.
- Introduce special programmes or workshops in the education system with the aim of developing **preventive activities for students**.
- Consider the possibility of establishing prevention programmes, or models of cooperation and **communication of state bodies** (police, judiciary, social services, etc.) **with vulnerable groups** (e.g. football/sports fan groups) that could manifest cumulative extremism.



2. Recommendations for the international community

- Develop **general prevention programmes** (both extremism and cumulative extremism-specific) through cooperation with all relevant actors (state, religious communities, CSOs and others).
- Establish a **national and/or regional (Western Balkan) prevention programme** with the participation of domestic and international expert groups.
- Develop a programme of **additional education for civil servants** (police, judiciary and others) with the participation of academia, religious institutions and CSOs.
- Strengthen **regional cooperation between state institutions** and regular sharing of experience in preventing and combating cumulative extremism.
- Develop and support peacebuilding projects, with a special emphasis on **building trust in 'vulnerable local communities'**; and consider the possibility of organising **citizens' forums** with the participation of all relevant actors.



3. Recommendations for civil society

- Ensure the **involvement of CSOs in the design of prevention programmes** and activities, e.g. through platforms for cooperation between state institutions and CSOs.
- Develop **thematic workshops in local communities** with the participation of all relevant actors (state, academia, CSOs and others) – with an open dialogue on issues of extremism and cumulative extremism.
- Organise **specific workshops on how gender dynamics influence the strengthening of resilience**. Furthermore, emphasise the role of women (through the family and society) in the prevention and suppression of cumulative extremism.
- Conduct **educational activities that emphasise the possible dangers of radicalisation of women** – primarily in communities that have a history of extremism of any kind.
- Design a **programme and training activities to build capacity in vulnerable communities**, with a special emphasis on the role of women.



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