



# BALKAN CHALLENGES

## Countering disinformation from Russia and radical Islamists

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**T**he countries of the Western Balkans, which include Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, have made clear commitments to join the European Union and, with the exception of Serbia, other Euro-Atlantic structures such as NATO. Each of these countries has, to varying degrees, made significant progress in the integration process. The EU — despite internal problems related to Brexit and so-called enlargement exhaustion — continues to support their bids for membership. NATO espouses a similar policy, supporting membership to the Alliance for all countries of the region.

Regional peace and stability issues are factors in the integration process. The EU and NATO have made it clear that resolving all standing bilateral disagreements that might negatively affect peace and stability is a precondition to membership. However, the security challenges facing Western Balkan countries are daunting. These challenges include increased interference from Russia, as Moscow seeks to reassert Soviet Cold War-era political and economic interests in the region, and from radical Islamist groups, originating mostly from the Middle East, which aim to impose radical Muslim ideology on the Balkans' Muslims.

Propaganda and disinformation are major tools in the respective strategies of Russia and radical Islamist groups. The Russians target countries with

predominant or sizable Christian Orthodox populations. Countries with predominant or sizable Muslim populations are targeted by radical Islamist groups, espousing rigid and intolerant interpretations of Islam.

### HYBRID WAR

Russian propaganda and disinformation activities in the Western Balkans are based on the following factors: First, they are part of a broader campaign orchestrated by the Kremlin under the paradigm of a “hybrid war” aimed at undermining the EU and Euro-Atlantic structures such as NATO. Second, they target the process of democratic transition — including coping with legacies of the interethnic wars of the 1990s — with the aim of destabilizing the region. And finally, the EU's internal problems, due to Brexit and the decreased pace of enlargement, hurt the development of efficient strategies and tools to counter the Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation campaign.

In the Western Balkans, the Kremlin's campaign is part of a broader one aimed at undermining Western institutions and embodied in the hybrid war strategy, which includes an array of military and nonmilitary measures, tools and objectives employed to exploit identified weaknesses and vulnerabilities in targeted countries. For example, in Baltic countries, propaganda and disinformation activities focus mostly on fueling interethnic tensions between Russian minorities and the





majority populations, and supporting anti-European sentiments that might surface there. In addition, the Kremlin influences mainstream political parties, the media and civil society groups in many EU countries in an effort to incite anti-EU policies and sentiments. A January 2018 U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations report, “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security,” highlights the true magnitude of Russian meddling in the affairs of EU countries, emphasizing the Kremlin’s leveraging of mainstream political parties in many of them. The report lists far-right political parties, such as the Freedom Party in Austria, Jobbik in Hungary, the Northern League in Italy, the National Front in France and AfD in Germany. These parties are believed to be receiving financial support from the Kremlin, including organizational, political and media expertise.

These factors indicate that the Kremlin’s propaganda and disinformation efforts in the Western Balkans

## COPING WITH CHALLENGES

The Western Balkans is a diverse region with respect to ethnicity, culture and religion, and political systems and allegiances. Relationships among the region’s people are often dominated by deep divisions and tensions, which occasionally escalate into armed conflict and unrest. The wars in the former Yugoslavia that preceded the creation of new Western Balkan states left a lingering legacy of interethnic tensions and unresolved territorial disputes.

The scope of the Kremlin’s propaganda and disinformation methods varies depending on the country. These activities are aimed primarily at countries with closer religious and ethnic kinship to Russia, based on Slavic ancestry and Christian Orthodoxy, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

**Serbia**, the country with the closest political and cultural ties to Russia, is targeted by Kremlin propaganda and disinformation far more than any other. Accordingly,

Russia has traditionally been perceived by the Serbian people and governments as Serbia’s closest and most trustworthy ally. Despite its formal commitment to join EU structures, the current political establishment in Serbia is for the most part adhering to pro-Kremlin policies, which frequently contradict policies espoused by the EU, the United States and other Euro-Atlantic entities.

The Kremlin’s propaganda and disinformation system operates on two levels in Serbia. The first involves Russian media outlets directly sponsored by the Kremlin, such as the Russia Today and affiliated Sputnik Serbia broadcasting agencies. The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee report highlights methods these agencies use to spread their messages. For example, Sputnik Serbia provides stories and bulletins to 20 radio stations across Serbia free of charge. Russian mainstream print media is also involved in propaganda and disinformation. The Serbian newsweekly *Nedeljnik*

carries the monthly supplement *R Magazin*, which is funded by the Russian government, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

The Kremlin actively targets Serbia and other countries in the region using new technologies of mass communication, such as the internet and social media. A March 2018 report for the German think tank Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, “Propaganda and Disinformation in the Western Balkans: How the EU Can Counter Russia’s Information War,” by Dr. Sophie Eisentraut and Stephanie de Leon, emphasizes Kremlin efforts such as the Russian government-sponsored news supplement “Russia Beyond the Headlines.” According to the report, in 2016 this media organization launched a mobile application for iOS and Android called RBTH Daily. The



This radicalized Bosnian was arrested after firing several shots at the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo in October 2011. REUTERS

are part of a widespread campaign targeting the EU and the broader Euro-Atlantic region. Any response that Western Balkan countries might contemplate to counter these activities must take this into account, meaning they must act in a concerted fashion, based on close and sincere cooperation. Individual responses from any targeted country are doomed to failure since the balance of forces favors Russia over any Western Balkans country, or even all Western Balkan countries together, which in turn necessitates the active involvement of the EU and NATO.



application is free and by early 2018 it was available in 14 languages, including those spoken in the Western Balkans.

The second level of the propaganda and disinformation system includes homegrown Serbian entities such as media outlets that transmit pro-Kremlin news and programs, civil society groups, humanitarian organizations and the Serbian Orthodox Church. According to the U.S. Senate report, more than 100 media outlets and nongovernmental organizations in Serbia “can be considered pro-Russian.” In addition, the Kremlin successfully exploits connections between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church to espouse pro-Russian sentiments among the Serbian public and, at the same time, vilify Western democracies as anti-Serbian.

**Republika Srpska**, a constitutive entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina, is the main target of propaganda and disinformation activities in that country. The Republika Srpska has a predominantly ethnic Serb population, and its political leadership, heavily influenced by the Kremlin, has for many years pursued policies that are in defiance of the central government, aimed at rendering the country dysfunctional and eventually defunct. In addition, uniting with Serbia — thus dismembering Bosnia-Herzegovina — has been set as the chief goal, to such a degree that a referendum was held in 2016. Kremlin-sponsored media outlets, civil society organizations and Christian Orthodox

Milorad Dodik, president of the Serb-controlled Bosnian entity Republika Srpska, is pictured on a billboard calling for a referendum on Statehood Day, which was ruled unconstitutional by the Bosnian Supreme Court. REUTERS

Church affiliations have all been in the forefront of most activities supporting these secessionist ambitions.

**Macedonia** is also a hot spot of pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation. The primary goal is to incite interethnic tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians to destabilize the country and disrupt its progress toward EU and NATO integration. Serbia-based websites, such as Pravda, Vaseljenska and Webtribune, are renowned as sources of Russian propaganda throughout the region. They target the mostly ethnic Macedonian public with fake news and disinformation alleging that ethnic Albanians intend to break up the country and create a “Greater Albania,” partly carved out of Macedonian territory. According to this propaganda, powers such as Germany, the United Kingdom and the U.S. are the main instigators of such intentions.

**Montenegro** is perhaps the most illuminating case in the context of exposing the threat from propaganda and disinformation as part of a hybrid war strategy. Montenegro has for a considerable time been targeted by a Kremlin-sponsored campaign aimed at thwarting its bid to join

NATO. When it became evident that the campaign was not producing the desired effects, the Kremlin quickly reversed its soft-power strategy in favor of more violent hybrid war methods. In 2016, Montenegrin security services foiled a plot aimed at overthrowing the pro-Western Montenegrin government, a plot that included the assassination of Prime Minister Milo Đukanović. Although the Russian government denied any involvement, Montenegrin prosecutors said the plot was hatched by former Russian intelligence officers with the direct support of a notorious pro-Russian Serbian paramilitary organization, the Serbian Wolves.

### THE EU COUNTERSTRATEGY

The EU and EU-affiliated organizations have not been successful in countering Kremlin-sponsored propaganda and disinformation in the Western Balkans. Despite continuous support for all countries in the region in critical areas such as democratic development, the rule of law and economic reforms, the EU has lagged considerably

in exposing Kremlin-sponsored propaganda and disinformation. Even NATO, whose presence in the region — most notably in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina — has been critical in maintaining peace and stability, has not been successful.

As a result, societies under the Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation influence, such as Serbia, the Republika Srpska, ethnic Serb communities in Kosovo and Montenegro, and ethnic Macedonians in Macedonia, still view the EU and NATO with distrust. At the same time, Russia is extolled in a majority in these places as a true protector of Slavic and Orthodox Christian communities in the Western Balkans.

The EU and NATO have in fact engaged in some activities aimed at countering Kremlin-sponsored propaganda and disinformation, although with little to show. The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung report emphasizes that the European Council in 2015 established a Strategic Communications Task Force at the European External Action Service, aimed at exposing disinformation and fake news and providing media education in Eastern Europe. However, the initiative's biggest challenge was reaching the local populace since most of the program is available only in English, Russian and German, not in the languages spoken in the Western Balkans.

The EU and NATO also lag in using practices and methods that have proven successful elsewhere in Europe and beyond. For example, the Alliance for Securing Democracy, an initiative sponsored by the German Marshall Fund, has been successfully challenging Kremlin-sponsored propaganda through a monitoring project that tracks Russian propaganda in real time. Projects like this could be adjusted to Western Balkans realities by focusing on Kremlin-sponsored media outlets rather than on Twitter accounts, as is done in Germany and the U.S.

The EU's and NATO's inefficient approach to countering Kremlin-sponsored propaganda and disinformation creates a dangerous void, one that the Russian government is filling aggressively. If Russia is not deterred, the EU and NATO integration process for Western Balkan countries will be left in serious jeopardy.

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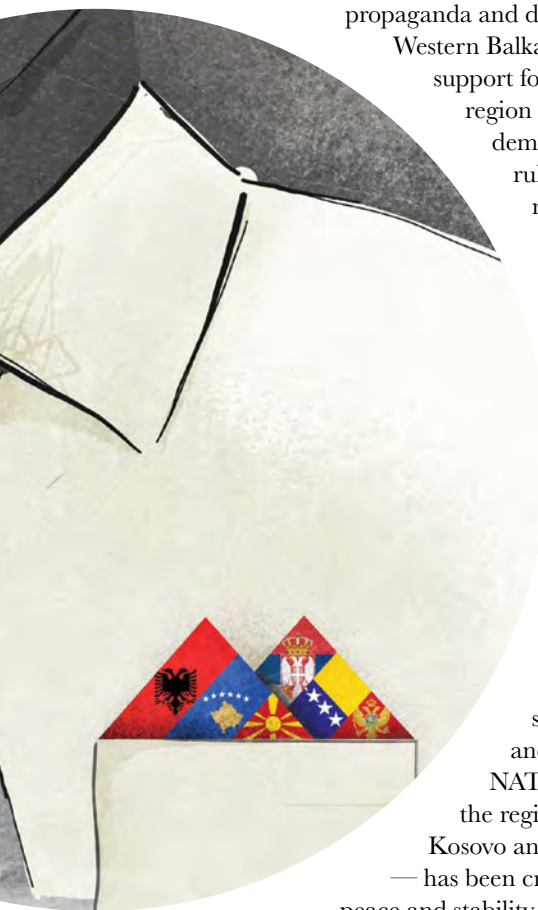
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### RADICAL ISLAMIC IDEOLOGY

Extremist Islamist ideology, which culminated in the creation of the Islamic State, is exerting its negative influence in the Western Balkans. As with Russian efforts to expand influence in countries with sizable Christian Orthodox populations, radical Islamists are pursuing similar patterns to achieve their goals through the region's Muslim populations.

Radical Islamist goals converge with Russia's in many aspects. For instance, radical Islamist groups also intend to distract the people of the Western Balkans from the EU and NATO integration process. The core values of Euro-Atlantic democracies, such as the rule of law and civil and political rights, which Western Balkan countries are striving to promote, are prime targets of radical Islamist ideology, which in turn relies on a rigid and intolerant interpretation of Islam, embodied mostly in the Wahhabi and Salafist streams.

Propaganda and disinformation are important tools in radical Islamist efforts to create instability in the region, primarily — as with Russian efforts — by





stirring interethnic tensions, which often coincide with religious differences. In this regard, radical Islamist propaganda and disinformation seeks to portray such tensions as based on religion, rather than ethnicity. To such a purpose, the radical Islamic groups' strategies revolve around efforts to substitute Muslim religious identity for ethnic/national identity in targeted populations with the goal of transforming Muslim-majority societies, such as Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina (ethnic Bosnians), Kosovo and Macedonia (ethnic Albanians), into Islamic societies and ultimately Islamic states.

The current socio-political environment in the region is not conducive to achieving these goals; the odds of transforming Western Balkan countries with sizable Muslim populations into Islamic societies or states are meager, if not nonexistent. Radical Islamist groups cannot easily disseminate their radical views or interpretation of Islam to local Muslims, who traditionally follow the Hanafi strand of Islam, a tolerant and peaceful school of thought.

With regard to ethnic Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), such an assumption is supported by polling data. According to a 2015 poll by the Pew Research Center, "the majority of Bosnian Muslims — nearly 60 percent — believe that Islam and Christianity have shared values, and nearly a fifth of Bosnian Muslims polled — 18 percent — said they engage in interfaith meetings." In addition, the collective identity of ethnic Albanians is based on ethnic/national foundations, not religion, primarily owing to the fact that their religious faith is spread among three major religious denominations: Islam, Roman Catholicism and Christian Orthodoxy.

However, security challenges remain, and they are serious. The radical groups' propaganda and disinformation in the Western Balkans has grown significantly in recent years. In addition, their recruitment of Islamist fundamentalists from the region to fight in Syria or Iraq has reached disturbing proportions. In "De-radicalizing the Western Balkans" by Tatyana Dronzina and Sulejman Muća in the New Western Europe online magazine, approximately 900 of about 4,000 Europeans who joined the ranks of the Islamic State originated from the Western Balkans. Such a high percentage puts the region "on the top of the list in the ranking of the number of foreign fighters per capita."

Such results suggest the existence of a broad and well-functioning network capable of coordinating such activities. A closer examination indicates that networks of radical Islamist groups, operating in all countries of the region and supported mostly from Middle Eastern countries, are behind these jihadist recruitment campaigns. To achieve their goals, they rely on diverse societal strata, including Muslim clerics operating within and outside Muslim societies in the targeted countries, nongovernmental organizations and social media.

**Bosnia-Herzegovina** has been especially affected by radical Islamist propaganda and disinformation, which targets the 1.5 million Muslim population, about 40 percent of the country's total population. As a result, according to Dronzina and Muća, as of June 2017 at least 330 Bosniaks had gone to fight in Syria. As with the Russians, radical Islamist groups use both foreign and domestic means to spread propaganda and disinformation.

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Kosovo police escort a man to court in Pristina, where he and 39 others were charged with fighting alongside extremists in Syria and Iraq.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Russian soldiers train near Kovin, Serbia, during Slavic Brotherhood, a joint Serbian-Russian military training exercise. Russia and Serbia maintain close ties based on culture and religion.

REUTERS

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Radical Islamist groups mostly use social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. With the aim that such messages have a closer appeal to local populations, video messages are frequently disseminated in local languages and feature IS fighters originating from the region. In addition, domestic propaganda and disinformation are best exemplified by two genuine entities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sharia villages and unofficial mosques, called *paradzemati*. Sharia villages are populated by Muslim families who wish to live according to strict Islamic rules. These villages, according to Dronzina and Muća, are frequently “locations where illegal activities are conducted in support of the jihadist movement, such as stockpiling of arms and military training.”

The radicalization of Bosnian society is also carried out through the *paradzemati*, which operate outside the official and legally recognized Islamic community, or *Islamska Zajednica*. These unofficial mosques are often used by extremist imams to disseminate extremist messages to their congregations. According to “Balkan Jihadists: The Radicalization and Recruitment of Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 64 *paradzemati* operate in Bosnia.

Bosnia-Herzegovina has felt the effects of such propaganda and disinformation. Radicalized people or groups have carried out terrorist attacks, such as a bombing near a police station in Bugojno in 2010, and three separate attacks by gunmen, one on the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo in 2011, another on a police station in Zvornik in 2015, and the third on a betting shop in Rajlovac in 2015. Collectively, these attacks resulted in four police officers being killed and a dozen people being wounded.

**Kosovo**, a country of about 2 million inhabitants, the majority of whom are ethnic Albanians of the Muslim religion, is also experiencing the effects of radical Islamist ideology. Until two years ago, Kosovo led European countries in per capita participation in the Syrian war, but the number has dramatically decreased, owing primarily to the robust actions of Kosovo authorities to forestall radical Islamist propaganda and disinformation.

Radical Islamist propaganda and disinformation, which preceded the flux of Kosovar jihadist fighters to Syria, still represent a serious security threat to Kosovo society and the state. The modes of operation are multifaceted and hark back to 1999, when the United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) assumed the role of primary governing body in postwar Kosovo. Disguised mostly as humanitarian and charity organizations, many radical Islamist groups — supported by sources in the Middle East espousing radical Islamist ideology — took advantage of the situation to set up contingents throughout Kosovo. In a 2016 article in *The New York Times*, Carlotta Gall found that, owing to the activity of radical Islamist groups disguised as

humanitarian organizations, the Wahhabi and Salafist interpretations of Islam became enrooted in Kosovo.

The dissemination of Wahhabi and Salafist teachings is carried out through a diverse set of methods and tools. Since the onset of the UNMIK administration, Kosovo has seen many Saudi-style mosques constructed, with the aim of providing an ambience in which congregations would find themselves more receptive to the new extremist messages and become further alienated from the Hanafi teachings predominant in Kosovo’s traditional Ottoman-style mosques. This architectural enterprise was augmented by former Kosovar students, who returned from their studies in Saudi Arabian universities imbued with radical Wahhabi and Salafist ideas and began propagating them as imams in the mosques. When the moderate Islamic Society of Kosovo began expelling such radical imams, they continued with a semi-clandestine campaign. According to Gall, the goal of these radical Islamist groups was “to create conflict between people [because] this first creates division, and then hatred, and then [war] starts because of these conflicting ideas.”

As with the isolated terrorist attacks that occurred in Bosnia-Herzegovina, propaganda and disinformation from radical Islamist groups in Kosovo must be taken seriously. An attempt in 2015 by a homegrown radical Islamist group to poison the main dam supplying drinking water to Pristina — foiled by the Kosovo police — stands as a warning that such propaganda and disinformation are producing the intended effects.

**Macedonia** is also experiencing radical Islamist propaganda and disinformation activity. According to data from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as of March 2016 about 140 Macedonian soldiers had joined the Islamic State in Syria. Twenty were killed. As in the case of other Western Balkan countries, propaganda and disinformation is geared toward exploiting the grievances of ethnic groups of Muslim faith by adding a religious ingredient. The ethnic Albanian population, along with some smaller ethnic groups such as Bosniaks, Turks, Roma, Egyptians and Pomaks, constitute most of the Muslim population in Macedonia. Ethnic Albanians alone are about 25 percent (509,083) of the country’s total population, and as such have been the main target of radical Islamist groups.

Radical Islamist propaganda and disinformation was initially carried out by leveraging mosques and other Muslim religious entities, which were part of the Islamic Community in Macedonia (*Bashkësia Fetare Islame e Maqedonisë*, or BFIM, in Albanian, or *Islamska Verska Zaednica na Makedonija*, or IVZM, in Macedonian), a legal entity representing the Muslims in the country. As such, Wahhabi groups have engaged in infighting with moderate imams in a bid to take control of the BFIM/IVZM and leverage it for propaganda purposes. This strategy has resulted

in keeping the effects of radical Islamist propaganda and disinformation in Macedonia constrained within Muslim society and less influential in the socio-political developments of the country.

The situation in **Albania** is similar to that in other Western Balkans countries with a sizable Muslim population. It is estimated that about 90 fighters from Albania joined the Islamic State and that many of them were killed or went missing. As is the case with other countries of the region and their respective nationals, the number of Albanians going to war in Syria and Iraq has decreased dramatically over the past two years; no Albanian is known to have joined an Islamic terrorist group fighting in that region during this time.

The phenomenon of dissemination of Wahhabi and Salafist teachings in Albania is explained through socio-political developments during the transition from communist rule to democracy, dating to the early 1990s. According to Dronzina and Muça, the anti-religious policy of the Albanian communist regime, which in the 1960s culminated in the banning of all religions in the country, making it the first officially atheist country in the world, was key to enrooting Wahhabi and Salafist ideology among religious Muslim Albanians. They cite Ylli Gurra, a prominent Muslim cleric and mufti in Tirana, who stated: “Islam in Albania remained ‘exposed’ after a majority of the old Muslim clerics had passed away and no younger ones came to replace them. This spiritual vacuum was taken advantage of by foreign powers, such as religious organizations from Saudi Arabia, which invested in infrastructure and education of young Albanian Muslims in the spirit of Wahhabism.”

The influence of radical Islamist groups’ propaganda and disinformation is proving detrimental to Albania’s security, as indicated by a foiled terrorist attack in the city of Shkodra in 2016 aimed at the Israeli national football team, which was playing Albania in a World Cup qualifier. In a coordinated action, police from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia arrested 19 Kosovar and six Albanian and Macedonian nationals in connection to the planned attack.

## **COUNTERING PROPAGANDA, DISINFORMATION**

Western Balkan countries affected by the propaganda and disinformation of Russia and radical Islamist groups must find ways to thwart these efforts to stay on course for EU and NATO integration. Taken together, Russian- and radical Islamist-sponsored propaganda and disinformation — fueling existing interethnic tensions and/or seeking to add a religious ingredient — constitute a dangerous cocktail that, if not countered, could seriously disrupt the fragile regional peace and stability. Given that this is a threat to the Western Balkans as a whole, devising a comprehensive

strategy based on close and full regional cooperation is a necessary precondition. In addition, substantive and proactive engagement from the EU and NATO would be extremely beneficial.

Countering Russian propaganda and disinformation will require the creation of clear and well-elaborated objectives and goals, based on joint multilateral efforts by Western Balkan countries, and the EU and NATO. Each Western Balkan country must make an unequivocal commitment to full and unconditional EU and NATO integration. Some regional governments — Serbia, the Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina and until recently, Macedonia (during the government led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-People’s Party, or VRMO-NP) — espoused the “two-seat” policy, but it has to be abandoned. It entailed maintaining close relations with Russia while declaring support for integration with the EU.

Both the EU and NATO must take a more proactive role in supporting Western Balkan countries in thwarting Kremlin-sponsored propaganda and disinformation. In this regard, successful EU and NATO efforts to counter Kremlin activities should be used in the Western Balkans in close cooperation with regional governments. Platforms akin to the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, launched by Finland in 2017 with the support of the EU and NATO, might be introduced in the Western Balkans to provide training and research to respond to propaganda and disinformation, including cyber attacks. Such platforms could be extended to include nongovernmental organizations and think tanks, such as the Kremlin Watch Monitor, launched in 2015 and headquartered in Prague, Czech Republic, which engages in fact checking and analysis of Kremlin-backed propaganda and disinformation.

Countering radical Islamist propaganda and disinformation requires a strategy that employs both punitive measures and the reintegration of radicalized individuals. Enacting laws that criminalize the participation in foreign armed conflicts, augmented by harsher sentencing of violators, is the right approach. Following enactment of such laws in 2014-15, every affected country in the region experienced a dramatic decrease in citizens leaving to fight in Syria and Iraq.

Punitive measures must be augmented by awareness campaigns exposing the true nature and intentions of radical Islamic ideology, tailored according to the specifics of each affected Balkan country. Such campaigns must include all levels of society, down to the grassroots, by focusing on the younger generation, who are the main target of Islamist radicalization. Interviews, public speeches and public discussions with repentant former radicals, carried out by civil society groups, could be a powerful tool in exposing the true nature of jihadist ideology and how it is disseminated. □