



Balkan foreign fighters: from Syria to Ukraine

by Jelena Beslin and Marija Ignjatijevic

Although the phenomenon of foreign fighters is certainly not new, recent developments in Syria and Iraq have put this issue back on the European Union's security agenda. The Western Balkan region is not an exception to this trend. Violent extremism in the region is generally perceived through the lens of Islamist radicalisation and foreign fighters who joined Daesh or Al-Nusra in Syria and Iraq. Other forms of extremism, such as right-wing nationalism, if acknowledged at all, are regarded as a secondary concern.

Although national legislations recognise foreign fighting as a criminal act regardless of the destination, returnees from the Middle East face a robust security-based response in their countries of origin, whereas those returning from Ukraine usually remain exempt from prosecution and severe sanctions. This highlights the question of perception and treatment of foreign fighters by Western Balkan governments, particularly after an alleged coup attempt was foiled during Montenegro's general elections in late 2016, revealing the role of former Western Balkan combatants fighting alongside pro-Russian separatists in the Ukrainian conflict.

From importers to exporters

Yugoslavia's dissolution and the subsequent conflicts during the 1990s attracted a sizeable group

of foreign fighters from all around the world. Two decades later the region has found itself on the flip side of the coin, exporting foreign fighters to war zones in the Middle East and Ukraine.

The seeds of radical Islam were planted with the formation of the *El Mujahid* battalion within the Bosnian Army, comprised of extremist foreign fighters. After the war, charitable organisations funding mosques and educational establishments, based in or backed by Gulf states, started flourishing across the Balkans. Thus commenced the dissemination of the conservative Salafi interpretation of Islam, which resulted in a substantial outflow of foreign fighters to militant Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq.

Moreover, years of war fuelled by nationalistic rhetoric, and the proliferation of organised crime networks amidst the ruined economy of the region, had turned some fighters into 'dogs of war'. Despite the fact that former fighters from the Balkans occasionally fought on foreign battlefields, they were usually regarded as volunteers or 'seasoned soldiers' and did not face any penalties or wider societal condemnation. Only with the emergence of Balkan jihadists fighting for Daesh did the question of foreign fighters come under the spotlight in the region.



Although Western Balkan countries were affected by these phenomena in different ways, the contingents of foreign fighters reflected the region's fragmented ethnic and religious structures. Countries with large percentages of Muslims – Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania – are ranked among the top five European 'exporters' of foreign fighters to the Middle Eastern battlefields when measured against their population size. In total, estimates show that around 1,000 individuals originating from the Western Balkans have ended up among the ranks of different militant groups in Syria and Iraq, mostly Daesh and Al-Nusra Front.

When it comes to the war in Ukraine, the numbers are lower, however in comparison to Syria and Iraq, the conflict has attracted significantly fewer foreign fighters in general. Excluding Russia, Serbia has been among the principal providers of combatants fighting alongside pro-Russian separatists in the Ukrainian conflict, with approximately 100 men. Western Balkan foreign fighters joined both the self-proclaimed Novorossiia army and to a lesser extent the Ukrainian volunteer battalions, accounting for 150-200 individuals on the Ukrainian battlefield.

A unique motive or a single mobilising factor is hard to pinpoint; however, a certain socio-economic pattern or a mix of 'push and pull' factors can be identified.

The internal fragilities of the region coupled with jihadist propaganda emanating from the Middle East and empathy towards the oppressed 'Muslim brothers' in Syria have made Daesh's 'Caliphate' an alluring destination.

Apart from the internal shortcomings that nudged Balkan mercenaries into Ukraine, the feeling of the Donbass crisis hitting close to home and the need to 'repay' Russian/Ukrainian fighters for their involvement during the Yugoslav wars also played a significant motivational role.

Who are the Balkan foreign fighters?

'Balkan jihadists' are mostly young people, typically between 20 and 35 years of age, coming from remote rural areas, usually poor and unemployed, with little work experience or skills to offer. Being marginalised and stigmatised in deeply divided societies burdened with the legacy of war also accentuates the vulnerability of these individuals to Islamist propaganda.

'Balkan extremists', on the other hand, found themselves relegated to the status of underdogs after serving either in paramilitary groups, police or special forces during the 1990s wars. Attracted to radical right-wing ideology and usually affiliated with ultranationalist or even football hooligan groups, they openly express contempt for liberal democracy and the Euro-Atlantic orientation of their own countries. Instead, the notion of 'Slavic brotherhood' and historical and cultural ties with the Russian people tends to be glorified, especially among the ethnic Serbs. While the question of shared religion stands at the cornerstone of Serbo-Russian relations it did not, unlike with jihadists, represent a determining factor for mobilisation. It rather became a cover for other, primarily financial, motivational factors.

Pre-departure criminal records are a common characteristic of foreign fighters from the region. Numbers are markedly high among the Syrian foreign fighters, especially in the Kosovo contingent, where around 40% of fighters have prior criminal records. In Ukraine a number of foreign fighters engaged in the conflict to escape prosecution for criminal deeds in their countries of origin. A distinctive feature of Western Balkan Islamist radicals is the high percentage of women and children following them on their journey to Syria and Iraq.

When compared to the EU countries for instance, this proportion is high, reaching up to 36% in the case of Bosnian fighters, most probably due to the narrative shaped around *hijra* (migration to the Caliphate).

Islamic radicalisation and recruitment of Balkan foreign fighters was carried out both in person and via internet propaganda channels. The most prominent points of radicalisation and recruitment were certainly extremist 'hotbeds', secluded Muslim communities set in remote areas which operated under Sharia law, such as Ovše and Gornje Maoce in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Tutunzus mosque in Gazi Baba in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or Pogradec in Albania. Over the years, entire networks of underground mosques, charitable organisations and educational institutions aimed at spreading a conservative Salafi interpretation of Islam have taken root across the region. Along with Salafist ghettos, these facilities have served as covers for Islamic extremist recruitment and training. Online and social media radicalisation has not gained the same

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momentum as in Western European countries, but nonetheless, has played a significant role in targeting vulnerable individuals. Facebook and Twitter accounts have diligently shared various photos, videos and other Daesh propaganda material, even in local languages.

The enduring links forged during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s as well as the need for experienced combatants seem to be essential in the recruitment process of foreign fighters for the Ukrainian conflict. A case in point is the established connection with the Cossack Army, the channel which was used by the members of the so-called Serbian *Chetnik* movement to collectively reach Ukraine and participate in the insurgent actions. Recruitment unfolded through a variety of methods, including international ultra-nationalist organisations, social networks or through individuals from the region who would recruit and vouch for the people they bring in to the war zones.

The key difference between the two phenomena lies in the significant role of international private military companies (PMCs) in recruiting combatants for the Ukrainian battlefield, which indicates their status of mercenaries and discloses money as the principal motivating factor. Moreover, it recently came to light that PMC Wagner's mercenaries were hired to fight alongside the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass as well as in other war-zones where Russia is militarily engaged – Syria, for instance.

Inconsistent state responses

With the escalation of the conflict in Syria and Iraq followed by terrorist activities worldwide, the Western Balkan countries supported international efforts in addressing the problem of foreign fighters. As required by UNSC Resolution 2178 adopted in 2014, all of the Western Balkan countries have amended their criminal legislation, in order to outlaw foreign fighting. Kosovo has adopted an entirely new law to regulate the issue, whereas the other countries have added new provisions to the existing criminal codes. Punishments vary from 6 months to 15 years in prison for fighting in foreign wars, travelling to war zones, recruiting combatants or providing financial support to terrorist groups.

The outflow of foreign fighters to these conflict zones reached its peak between 2013 and 2015, after which the numbers dropped sharply. Prospective combatants were deterred from departing to Syria and Iraq mainly by the criminalisation of foreign fighting and fear of legal consequences,

but also by disillusionment with Daesh's brutal tactics as well as by the fact that there was less demand for combatants on the ground. However, the decline in numbers of foreign fighters in the Ukrainian conflict has had much less to do with the adoption of legal measures that sanction different types of involvement in foreign battlefields. On-the-ground developments followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the partial seizure of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions by the pro-Russian separatists as well as the adoption of the Minsk II agreement in February 2015 influenced the decrease in the numbers of foreign fighters on the eastern battlefield.

The adoption of national legislations not only had a different impact on the engagement of foreign fighters in remote battlefields but also did not result in equal treatment and prosecution of returnees from Syria and Ukraine. Prosecution of foreign fighters has itself turned out to be problematic and the implementation of the modified legislation challenging. In particular, it has been difficult to provide conclusive evidence of their activities in the foreign warzones, since they usually travelled to the regions under the pretext of educational or work assignments. A large share of foreign fighters in all of the Western Balkans countries returned in 2013 and 2014, and thus could not be prosecuted under the amended legislation. Nevertheless, there was a noticeable difference in treatment, as attested by the fact that Serbian officials encouraged the Ukrainian fighters to return before the amendments came into force, in order to avoid sanctions.

Accordingly, upon their return some of these fighters were interrogated and after admitting involvement in the Ukrainian conflict entered plea agreements with the Prosecutor's office. Only three persons out of 24 were sentenced, with the lowest penalty being 6 months of home detention while others got away with 2-3 years of probation. In contrast, Islamist foreign fighters were subjected to police raids and seizures and subsequently charged with various criminal acts related to terrorism. Most of the Syrian returnees have been under heavy surveillance or arrested and jailed with more severe sentences, while some are even tried *in absentia*.

A similar pattern of double standards can be discerned in the treatment of organisations involved in recruitment and the spread of extremist ideas. Whereas the governments of Western Balkans countries managed to clamp down on most extremist-led mosques or charities sponsored by Gulf states, some Russian-owned organisations

continued to operate freely and were not investigated by the states.

None of the countries has been efficient at producing counter-narratives whether through mainstream media or via Internet and social media channels. Conversely, media coverage of Islamist extremism has been marked by inflammatory rhetoric and sensationalism, whereas Ukrainian foreign fighters have occasionally even been portrayed in a positive light.

Western Balkans countries' response towards this phenomenon is closely related to the perception of the nature of conflicts taking place in Syria and Iraq or Ukraine. While all the Balkan countries are unanimously opposed to Daesh and participate in the Global Coalition against it, the foreign policy stance towards the conflict in Ukraine is much more complex. Even though all Western Balkan countries declaratively support Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea, three out of six – Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – refused to apply sanctions and restrictive measures on Russia for annexing the peninsula in 2014, for different reasons unrelated to the problem of foreign fighters.

The challenge of the returnees

The threat of terrorist attacks planned or inspired by Daesh in the Western Balkans should be neither exaggerated nor underestimated. Organised and coordinated attacks on 'soft targets' with a high number of civilian casualties, such as those perpetrated in Paris and Brussels, are unlikely to be carried out in the region. However, there is always a possibility of selective, small-scale attacks on state symbols such as the police, armed forces or religious institutions, like those that happened in Rajlovac and Zvornik in 2015. International targets might also be at risk, as was seen in November 2016, when a terrorist attack against the Israeli national football team in Albania was foiled in a massive regional police raid. Detainees were affiliated to different groups, some of them being returnees, all under the coordination of Lavdrim Muhaxheri, the well-known extremist and commander of the 'Albanian contingent' situated in Syria.

At the other end of the spectrum, the threat posed by right-wing extremism should not be neglected and brushed aside. The foiled alleged coup attempt in Montenegro on the day of the general elections in October 2016 drew attention to the possible magnitude of the right-wing extremism problem. The event indicated two things: prominent involvement of the Ukrainian returnees in

the organisation of the failed plot, including former mercenary and non-convicted Serbian returnee Aleksandar Sindjelic as an on-the-ground organiser of the criminal group. Secondly, the existence of strong post-combat bonds that could be exploited for covert subversive actions – in this case masterminded and initiated by two Russian intelligence officers, as was pointed out by the Montenegrin Special State Prosecutor's office. Even though much more subtle, clandestine and latent in nature than the threat of Islamic extremism, right-wing extremism could be one in the array of instruments Russia is applying in its hybrid tactics against the West.

Western Balkan countries primarily identify and categorise Islamist foreign fighters as terrorists, whereas Ukrainian fighters remain just 'ordinary extremists'. The lack of political will to tackle and condemn right-wing extremism is more than evident. The reasons are manifold and range from the broadly accepted notion of nationalism being enshrined in state policies, to tolerance of right-wing organisations and strategic calculations of national interest. Applying double standards can have negative effects, and even boost extremism. Right-wing foreign fighters can get the impression their ideology and actions are justified, and conversely, Islamist foreign fighters can be spurred by a sense of injustice and unequal treatment. Moreover, these two types of extremism can reinforce each other and fuel existing tensions in domestic politics or bilateral frictions between the Western Balkan countries.

The issue of Islamist and right-wing violent extremism represents a multi-faceted and complex threat, which requires a comprehensive response on the local, national and regional level. Simply criminalising foreign fighters and introducing repressive measures, without any prevention and de-radicalisation strategies in place, could prove to be counterproductive and perilous. Arrests and complicated legal proceedings need to be combined with preventive efforts made by local stakeholders, educational institutions, civil society and religious organisations in order to effectively counter and uproot radicalisation and violent extremism.

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