



**PREVENT**

INSTITUTI PËR SIGURI DHE REZILIENCË

## **RESEARCH REPORT**

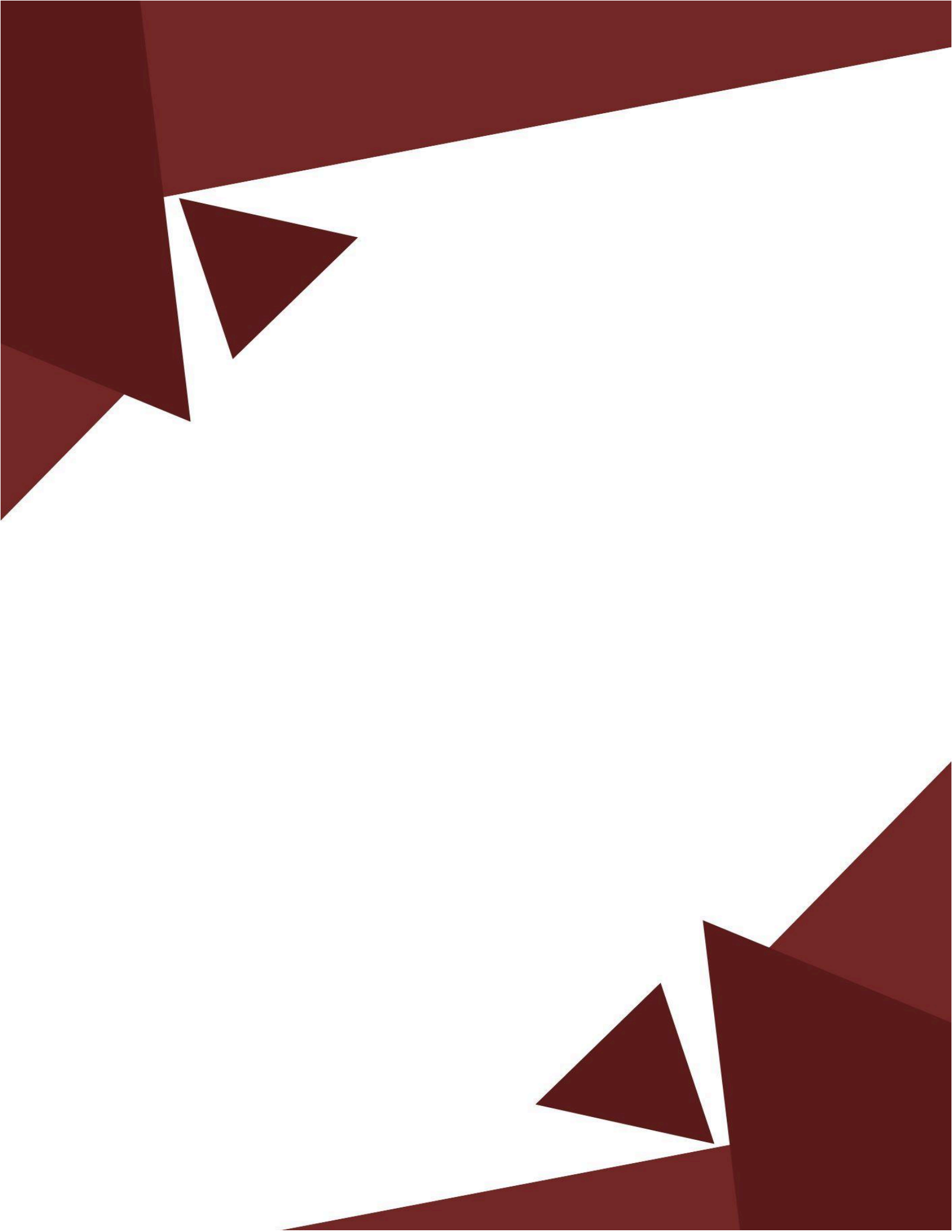
# **FROM SERBIAN DISINFORMATION TO FACTS KOSOVO'S RESPONSE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

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## **About Institute PREVENT**

Established in 2024, the Institute for Security and Resilience - PREVENT aims for a Kosovo where security, stability and the rule of law are maintained through innovative and collaborative approaches. By promoting resilience and inclusiveness, PREVENT strives to create a society where individuals, communities and institutions work together to address complex security challenges. The mission of the PREVENT Institute is to build sustainable communities by providing comprehensive support and expertise in public policy development, advocacy, and project implementation. PREVENT focuses on empowering marginalized groups, especially youth, through evidence-based research, capacity-building initiatives, and providing expertise by promoting sustainable development and actively countering violent extremism.

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**List of Abbreviations**

EULEX- European Rule of Law Mission

EUROPOL- European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation

INTERPOL- The International Criminal Police Organization

ISIS- Islamic State of Syria and Iraq

KFOR-NATO Mission in Kosovo

KLA- Kosovo Liberation Army

KP-Kosovo Police

LDK- Democratic League of Kosovo

MIA-Ministry of Internal Affairs

NATO-North Atlantic Treaty Organization

USA- United States of America

## Introduction

Serbia's efforts to portray Kosovo as a hotbed of Islamic extremism are neither accidental nor new. This narrative remains part of a broader Serbian state strategy, carefully designed and consistently reenacted for decades by Serbian state and non-state structures.<sup>1</sup> Since the period of the former Yugoslavia, Serbian and Yugoslav institutions consistently worked to link Kosovo's political movements for freedom and equality with elements of Islamic religious radicalism. Serbia has chosen this approach, systematically ignoring the fact that the political movements of Kosovo Albanians and their demands for freedom had an essentially political and social, rather than religious, character. These protest movements were based on demands for human rights, freedom and independence. The protests aimed to oppose the ethnic and political discrimination that was exercised against Kosovo Albanians. So, the movements for freedom and independence of Kosovo Albanians have never been linked to or based on radical or extremist agendas hidden under the Islamist religious guise.

In 1968 and 1981, when Kosovo Albanians and students took to the streets demanding equal status for Kosovo within Yugoslavia, Serbian propaganda branded these protests as “actions organized by Islamic radicals seeking to create a Muslim state in the heart of the Balkans.”. Thus, Serbia utilized this narrative to minimize the significance of the student protests, framing them as secondary to the primary objectives of the protests and the political movements of Kosovo Albanians.

The student protests organized in Kosovo were the first serious movements that shattered the existence of the former federal state of Yugoslavia. Although the demands of the protesters and students were crystal clear - such as the recognition of Kosovo as a republic with equal rights in the state federation and the guarantee of political and cultural rights for Albanians, Serbian propaganda attempted to distort these noble goals for equality and human rights, labeling them as attempts by “Islamic fanatics to destabilize Yugoslavia” and to spread radicalism and Islamist religious extremism in Kosovo and the region.

Similarly, during the 1990s, when Serbia increased repression against Kosovo Albanians, the peaceful movements led by Ibrahim Rugova encountered the same propaganda. Although Rugova and his political structures promoted civil disobedience and demands for independence through democratic means, Serbia sought to present this peaceful resistance as part of a broader Islamist agenda in Kosovo and the region. The peak of this strategy was observed during the Kosovo War (1997-1999), when Serbian political authorities and propaganda tried to regard Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as an “Islamic terrorist organization”, allegedly maintaining close ties to Islamist extremists, in order to open a conflict in Kosovo, under the guise of “jihadist movements” until then were known for countries such as Afghanistan, Algeria,

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<sup>1</sup> Radina Vučetić “Kosovo 1989: The (Ab)use of the Kosovo Myth in Media and Popular Culture ”[Comparative Southeast European Studies](#)

Palestine and different countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Kosovo successfully managed to run away from the Serbian and Russian propaganda and emerged triumphant in every initiative for freedom and independence. The success has been achieved thanks also to the support of Kosovo's traditional Western allies, who have helped Kosovo prevent the involvement of radical religious elements in the country's causes for freedom and independence. The endeavors of the Serbian state to declare Kosovo a haven for “Islamist terrorists” have not stopped even nowadays, starting since the declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008, up to the latest international geopolitical developments. Kosovo, with its serious efforts, and in coordination with its close international partners, has successfully managed to confront the Serbian and Russian propaganda and narratives, manifesting itself as a credible and serious partner in preventing and combating any form of violent extremism and radicalism.

This research aims to analyse and shed light on the ongoing Serbian propaganda strategy, which aims to present Kosovo as a hotbed of Islamic extremism. Through a historical and analytical approach, the study examines how Serbia has used distorted narratives to delegitimize the political movements of Kosovo Albanians, unfoundedly linking them to religious radicalism. The research identifies that since the period of the former Yugoslavia, Serbian institutions have pursued a well-planned strategy to tarnish the legitimate demands of Albanians for freedom, equality and independence. This propaganda has been used to justify the ongoing repression of Kosovo Albanians and to undermine their efforts for self-determination. In this context, the study also aims to emphasize the importance of Kosovo's Independence as a legitimate act and based on international law. Through support from Western allies and the building of strong democratic institutions, Kosovo has managed to prove itself as a credible international actor, committed to stability, rule of law and the fight against violent extremism. Kosovo's independence, declared on 17 February 2008, represents the culmination of the Albanians' historic struggle for freedom and self-government, challenging Serbian narratives that attempt to portray it as an insecure and dangerous entity for the region. This propaganda has accompanied Kosovo both in the process of declaring Kosovo's Independence, as well as in the process of its state-building.

### **The Kosovo War 1998-1999 and the Accusation on Terrorism**

During the ethnic cleansing campaign carried out by Serbia in 1998-1999, Serbia attempted to portray the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) not only as an illegal organization, but also as a terrorist group with radical Islamic dispositions. This propaganda, prepared and implemented in coordination with Russian state elements, made great efforts to link the liberation war of the people of Kosovo with jihadist movements in preventing the West from supporting Kosovo and its people. On many occasions, Serbian media and political leaders claimed that “Arab jihadists” were part of the war in Kosovo and that the war has nothing to do with the freedom and rights of Albanians, but it is about the creation of an “Islamic caliphate in the Balkans”, wherefore the

security of Europe would also be at risk.<sup>2</sup> These claims were completely baseless, as the KLA had no ideological or organizational ties to Islamist groups, and its fighters were motivated by nationalist elements, for national liberation, and not by any radical religious agenda.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the KLA, in close cooperation with the US and other partners, paid utmost care in preventing any attempt to infiltrate religious ideological elements into the KLA structures, and the efforts of the people of Kosovo for freedom and liberation.<sup>4</sup>

The Kosovo war, as well as its liberation efforts, have been written about by numerous Western academics, including Tim Judah, a British journalist and analyst known for his studies on the Balkans. Mr. Judah has covered the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in detail in his books and scientific articles. In his best-known work, "Kosovo: War and Revenge," he describes the KLA as a movement born under circumstances of long-standing oppression by Serbia and the lack of a political solution for the Albanians of Kosovo. According to Mr. Judah, in its inception, the KLA was a small and fragmented group, but due to brutal repression by Serbia and financial support from the Albanian diaspora, it quickly transformed into an organized force that gained widespread support in Kosovo and beyond. According to him, the KLA was the only alternative for freedom and independence for the people of Kosovo. Furthermore, he pointed out that the KLA was not a homogeneous or unique structure in organization, but consisted of individuals with different ideologies and profiles, who had strong nationalist roots and were oriented towards liberation from Serbian oppression. Judah notes that in the early stages, the West had an ambiguous attitude towards the KLA, viewing it with skepticism and as a group of rebels without a clear hierarchy. Nevertheless, he argues that as Serbian violence against Albanian civilians intensified, the international stance changed towards the KLA, and NATO considered military intervention inevitable to stop Serbian ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians.<sup>5</sup>

An important aspect of Tim Judah's analysis is the way he contests Serbian propaganda, which portrayed the KLA as a "terrorist organization with Islamic ties". He notes that Serbia had a vested interest in creating this narrative, attempting to equate the KLA with Islamic extremist groups, especially in the context of the global war on terrorism after the 2000s.<sup>6</sup> Judah witnessed, this propaganda effort was not based on reality on the ground, as the KLA did not have a religious platform, but a national one, which was an ethnically and nationalist-based movement, similar to liberation movements in other countries in the region in that time. He emphasizes that, unlike what Serbia claimed, KLA fighters were not motivated by religious

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<sup>2</sup> For further details see the book "War and Reven" Author: Judah, Tim, 1962- ; Published: New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000

<sup>3</sup> Ibid:

<sup>4</sup> For further details see the book "War and Revenge" Author: Judah, Tim, 1962- ; Published: New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000

<sup>5</sup> For further details see the book "War and Revenge" Author: Judah, Tim, 1962- ; Published: New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000

<sup>6</sup> Ibid:

ideology, but by nationalist motives, that is, by the aspiration for independence and national liberation.<sup>7</sup>

Various Western academics have recounted the KLA as a popular nationalist movement that fought for freedom and independence against Serbian and Yugoslav military and paramilitary forces. Academic Sir Noel Malcolm, a British historian and author of the book “Kosovo: A Short History,” narrates the KLA as a force that emerged as a result of Serbian repression and the failure of Ibrahim Rugova's peaceful strategy to bring a concrete change for Kosovo Albanians through peaceful resistance.<sup>8</sup> Malcolm emphasizes that “the KLA was not an Islamist or terrorist organization, but a nationalist movement that sought and fought for the independence of Kosovo.”<sup>9</sup> This internationally renowned expert has questioned Serbian propaganda that has attempted to link the KLA with terrorism or Islamic extremism. James Pettifer, another historian and Balkan expert, praised the role of the KLA in the liberation of Kosovo, emphasizing that it represented the aspirations of Albanians for freedom and independence. He claimed that although the KLA was initially considered a small guerrilla group, it quickly gained enormous support from the Albanian population, especially after the escalation of Serbian violence in Kosovo.<sup>10</sup> So, despite its efforts, Serbia has not been able to influence the West and associate the struggle of the people of Kosovo and the KLA with elements of terrorism and radicalism. Kosovo has managed to keep its struggle and liberation efforts pure and unadulterated and has prevented any attempt or infiltration of religious elements in its struggle for freedom and independence.

However, following NATO intervention and withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo, this propaganda was maintained but on a different form. Upon Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, Serbia began using this narrative, even more intensely, to damage the image of the new state – presenting it as a “new center for Islamic terrorism in Europe”. This propaganda intensified efforts to link Kosovo to international terrorist organizations, especially following rising global concerns about terrorism and violent extremism.

### **The Rise of Serbian Propaganda after Kosovo's Declaration of Independence**

Kosovo declared its independence on February 17, 2008, which was considered by Serbia as one of its biggest losses in recent decades. Serbia never accepted the fact that Kosovo was declared an independent and sovereign state, which has established stable state institutions, based on the best democratic standards. Serbian diplomacy, supported by states non-friendly to Kosovo, such

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid:

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm, Noel. Kosovo: A Short History. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm, Noel. Kosovo: A Short History. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Pettifer, James. The Kosova Liberation Army: underground ear to Balkan insurgency, 1948-2001. Columbia, 2012



as Russia, administered active diplomacy, attempting to convince various countries around the world to stop recognizing Kosovo as an independent and sovereign state. To drive this narrative, Serbia used various accusations, such as claims that the KLA committed crimes against humanity against the Serbian and Albanian population in Kosovo, or that the KLA engaged in organ transplants and trafficking during the Kosovo war. These accusations have been dismissed and were not even a part of the indictments of the Special Court, which was established to investigate alleged actions of the KLA committed during the war.<sup>11</sup>

Serbia has consistently employed a narrative that paints Kosovo as a hotbed of terrorism and Islamic extremism to undermine its reputation as a small, developing democracy. This accusation has been a staple of Serbian discourse in regional and international discussions involving disputes between Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>12</sup>

It has been frequently raised in important forums, including United Nations meetings, whenever issues concerning both nations are on the agenda.

In 2015, former Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, in a speech before the UN Security Council, declared that “Kosovo is not just a regional problem. It is a threat to the security of all of Europe. Jihadists from Kosovo have gone to Syria and Iraq, and when they return, no one will be safe.” These accusations are mainly related to developments in Syria and Iraq and the fact that thousands of fighters from all over the world joined radical extremist groups to fight in Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, President Aleksandar Vučić, in an interview with Russian television Russian Today in 2018, stated: “We have warned our partners in the West that the creation of an artificial state of Kosovo would have serious consequences.”<sup>13</sup> Look what has happened now: Kosovo has become a hotbed for Islamic radicals, full of ISIS fighters returning from the Middle East.”<sup>14</sup> Also, in this political statement by the Serbian president to the Russian media, Kosovo is accused of being a radical Islamist country, whose citizens have participated in foreign wars in Syria and Iraq. This element is being used by Serbian propaganda to accuse Kosovo of being an “Islamist and terrorist country”. However, the facts are quite different. In the war in Syria and Iraq, around 1,000 citizens from the Western Balkan countries have been involved, including individuals from Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. So, none of Western Balkan countries, or member states of the European Union,

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<sup>11</sup> For further details, see the indictment of the Specialist Chambers of the Special Court. <<https://www.scp-ks.org/sq/cases/hashim-thaci-dhe-te-tjeret>>

<sup>12</sup> For further details see: [FM: Terrorism makes Kosovo "special challenge" \(Dailies\)](#) accessed January 2025

<sup>13</sup> For more, see the minutes of the UN meeting. [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF99B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_pv\\_7637.pdf?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF99B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_7637.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>14</sup> For more, see Aleksandar Vucic's interview in the Financial Times. <[https://www.ft.com/content/286fadc4-5444-11e8-b3ee-41e0209208ec?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.ft.com/content/286fadc4-5444-11e8-b3ee-41e0209208ec?utm_source=chatgpt.com)>

have been exempt to the involvement of its citizens in the war in Syria and Iraq, as part of jihadist groups.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Kosovo has shown great maturity and seriousness in confronting the threat of religiously motivated violent extremism. In fact, Kosovo has been among the most active countries in the world in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism, taking concrete steps to address the issue of its citizens joining terrorist groups abroad. Kosovo was among the first countries in the region and Europe to adopt a law prohibiting its citizens from getting involved in foreign conflicts, approved by the Kosovo Assembly in 2015. Kosovo has also been a leader in the region in drafting the National Strategy against Terrorism, as well as the National Strategy against Violent Extremism of 2015. Kosovo also is in the forefront of prosecuting, arresting and convicting all those involved in foreign conflicts in Syria and Iraq, or those who have in one way or another supported organization that support violent extremism. Kosovo also is a leading country in the region in the organized return of its citizens from conflict zones. ~~From 2019~~ Kosovo was the first country in Europe to organize the return of its citizens from war zones. Numerous citizens have returned to Kosovo at various times and have been processed in accordance with the existing legislation.

In the process of addressing the challenges of violent extremism or radicalization, Kosovo has implemented a large number of rehabilitation and reintegration programs for citizens returning from foreign wars in Syria and Iraq. Deradicalization programs and counter-extremism measures have been used as a model by many other countries, for the way Kosovo has treated foreign fighters returning from conflict zones.<sup>16</sup> Rehabilitation and reintegration programs have influenced our citizens to fully integrate into society, oppose radical ideas, and significantly reduce the risk of violent extremism and radicalism.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, these efforts are not enough to stop the Serbian narrative, which continues to be used as a tool to harm Kosovo's image in the international arena. Through its state media and with the support of its allies like Russia, Serbia continues to present Kosovo as a threat to global security, using the “risk of Islamic terrorism in Kosovo” as a tool to prevent the recognition and affirmation of Kosovo as a sovereign and democratic state. In this manner, Serbian propaganda is not just a disinformation strategy, but a deliberate attempt to undermine Kosovo's stability and legitimacy in the international arena. Despite these efforts, Kosovo has managed to build strong

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<sup>15</sup> For further details see: GCERF Regional Strategy for Investment in the Western Balkan <<https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-Strategy-for-Investment-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>>

<sup>16</sup> Perteshi, S. and Ilazi, R. (2021). Unpacking Kosovo's Response to Returnees from the War Zones in Syria and Iraq. Kosovo Centre for Security Studies (KCSS): [https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremism-eng\\_978757.pdf](https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremism-eng_978757.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Avdimetaj, T. (2021). Trends of Radicalisation. De-Radicalisation in Europe and Beyond: Detect, Resolve, Reintegrate and Kosovo Centre for Security Studies (KCSS): <https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/trendet-e-radikalizimit-ne-kosove>

partnerships with Western countries and remain committed in the fight against extremism, challenging the propaganda coming from Serbia with facts and concrete actions.

### **Islamist extremism, propaganda and fake news**

Currently, we live in a period where fake news and disinformation have become key “weapons” employed by governments, media, and various actors to spread fear and panic among citizens, aiming to achieve their political goals. This phenomenon is becoming increasingly striking due to the great influence of various social media and platforms, such as electronic portals and newspapers, as well as communication platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. Encrypted communication platforms such as Telegram have also played an important role in this regard, where fake news and disinformation are often distributed.<sup>18</sup>

An example of this phenomenon is an article published on the Serbian-language online portal “Kosovo Online”, titled “Radical Islam in Kosovo: Misuse of Religion in the Service of Terrorism”.<sup>19</sup> This article contains misleading information and claims regarding the extent of danger and proliferation of violent Islamic extremism in Kosovo. This article cites Mr. Milovan Drecun, a former RTS journalist who reported from Serbian military trenches during the war and who currently serves as the Chairman of the Security Issues Committee in the Serbian Parliament. He asserts that “the network of radical Islamists in Kosovo has significantly expanded, estimating the presence of approximately 5,000 to 6,000 Islamic terrorists in Kosovo.”<sup>20</sup> This statement is inaccurate information, intended to damage the image of Kosovo. This statement that there are between 5,000 and 6,000 Islamic terrorists in Kosovo is not supported by real data and the achievements on the ground of the Kosovo authorities and international partners in the fight against violent extremism and radicalism. The same portal does not provide any arguments or sources from official Kosovo or international institutions to prove the existence of such a large number of “Islamic terrorists in Kosovo.”

Meanwhile, official data from Kosovo state authorities and international reports say the exact opposite. According to official reports from Kosovo security institutions, as well as international reports, over the past five years, there has not been a single case of a Kosovo citizen joining foreign fighting groups in Syria and Iraq, or joining Islamic terrorist organizations around the

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<sup>18</sup> Perteshi, S. (2018). Beyond the triggers: new threats of violent extremism in Kosovo. Retrieved from Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS): [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/violentextremism-eng\\_611603.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/violentextremism-eng_611603.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> For further details see the Serbian online portal “Kosovo Online” Islamic Radicalism in Kosovo - Misuse of Religion in the Service of Terrorism. <<https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/neës/analysis/radical-islam-kosovo-misuse-religion-service-terrorism-27-1-2025>>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid:

world.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the finding that there is a large presence of "Islamic terrorists" in Kosovo is contrary to the activities and interventions undertaken by the Kosovo state authorities and the international community to prevent extremism, by implementing many prevention and rehabilitation programs for individuals involved in foreign conflicts.

Moreover, the European Commission's 2024 annual report assessed Kosovo's progress in the fight against violent extremism and radicalism, highlighting the country's commitment to addressing these challenges. Furthermore, for its work against violent extremism and radicalism, Kosovo has also been praised by members of the Global Counter-Terrorism Coalition, a global initiative to combat ISIS, led by the US, of which Kosovo is a equal member of the coalition.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, Serbian media outlets have been disseminating misleading reports about the rise of Islamic terrorism in Kosovo. Over the recent years, they have tried to associate Kosovo's efforts from 2021 to 2024 to combat criminal groups and propaganda operating in northern Kosovo with elements of Islamist extremism.<sup>23</sup>

Another typical example of misinforming public opinion and attempting to damage Kosovo's image is the case of the terrorist attack on the Israeli embassy in Belgrade in June 2024, where a member of Serbia's security structures was seriously wounded. The terrorist attack was widely condemned by all sides, equally. However, Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić attempted to link this terrorist act to Kosovo, spreading propaganda and fake news that the perpetrator of the attack, Senad Ramović Bećan, had been helped to flee and hide in Kosovo.<sup>24</sup> This claim was false and aimed in harming Kosovo's image in the international arena, by portraying it as a country that supports terrorism. The truth was quite different. During raids by Serbian security forces, Senad Ramović Bećan was killed in the village of Hotovo, near Novi Pazar, Serbia, after a clash with Serbian authorities.<sup>25</sup> This instance is one among numerous cases demonstrating how Serbian state-controlled media and officials propagate false information and propaganda. Their objective is to portray Kosovo as a center of terrorism and Islamic extremism, purportedly backed by its citizens and state institutions.

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<sup>21</sup> For further details, see the National Strategy Against Terrorism 2023-2028, drafted by the Government of Kosovo.

<sup>22</sup> European Commission Report on Kosovo 2024 <[chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/c790738e-4cf6-4a43-a8a9-43c1b6f01e10\\_en?filename=Kosovo%20Report%202024.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/c790738e-4cf6-4a43-a8a9-43c1b6f01e10_en?filename=Kosovo%20Report%202024.pdf)>.

<sup>23</sup> For further details see the Serbian online portal "Kosovo Online" Islamic Radicalism in Kosovo - Misuse of Religion in the Service of Terrorism. <<https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/neës/analysis/radical-islam-kosovo-misuse-religion-service-terrorism-27-1-2025>>

<sup>24</sup> For further details, see the news "Wahhabi Senad Ramović Becan was killed in a conflict with the police" on the online portal "Vreme". Available in January 2025. <<https://vreme.com/en/vesti/u-sukobu-sa-policijom-ubijen-vehabija-senad-ramovic-becan/>>

<sup>25</sup> For further details, see the news "Wahhabi Senad Ramović Becan was killed in a conflict with the police" on the online portal "Vreme". Available in January 2025 <<https://vreme.com/en/vesti/u-sukobu-sa-policijom-ubijen-vehabija-senad-ramovic-becan/>>

On the contrary, in recent years, a significant number of Kosovo citizens, mainly from the Serbian community, also bearing Serbian citizenship have joined Russian separatist paramilitary organizations fighting in Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> These individuals, motivated by radical religious orthodox connections between Russian and Serbian extremist groups, along with ideological, political, and economic factors, have been recruited through various propaganda networks, including those run by Serbian and Russian state structures.<sup>27</sup> Their involvement in these radical organizations that are fighting alongside Russian forces poses a serious threat to regional security and testifies to the continued influence of Russia and Serbia in destabilizing the Balkan region, especially through the instrumentalization of Serbian communities outside Serbia's borders. This situation raises major concerns for Kosovo's national security and its relations with Western allies, given that these individuals could return and consequently pose a threat to the country's internal stability.

### **Kosovo as a credible partner in the fight against terrorism**

Kosovo seized important steps to combat terrorism, by investigating and dismantling violent extremist networks operating in the country. This has been achieved in close cooperation with Kosovo's international partners in the fight against terrorism, respectively US, the European Union, NATO, EUROPOL and INTERPOL.

Following legal reforms, institutional investments, international cooperation and reintegration programs, Kosovo has managed to establish itself as a reliable partner in global security efforts alongside democratic states led by the US and the EU. The empirical data of Kosovo's success countering terrorism from international reports, the actions of the Kosovo government against extremism, and joint police operations against terrorism have strengthened Kosovo as trusted and a credible, reliable partner in confronting terrorism. Kosovo has implemented one of the most rigorous anti-terrorism legislations in the region and beyond.

Kosovo authorities have prosecuted until 2024 dozens of individuals for direct involvement in terrorist activities, including recruitment and incitement to violence. Courts convicted individuals involved in terrorism and violent extremism cases at various times.<sup>28</sup>

Kosovo's gravity and commitment to combating violent extremism is also reflected in the country's commitment in repatriating process of its citizens involved in foreign conflicts in Syria

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<sup>26</sup> Balkan Insight “Serb Volunteers Answer call to fight in Ukraine:<  
<https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/08/serb-volunteers-answer-call-to-fight-in-ukraine/>>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid:

<sup>28</sup> Avdimetaj, T. (2021). Trends of Radicalization. De-Radicalization in Europe and Beyond: Detect, Resolve, Reintegrate and Kosovo Centre for Security Studies (KCSS):  
<https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/trendet-e-radikalizimit-ne-kosove>

and Iraq. Kosovo is one of the few countries in Europe that has taken bold measures to repatriate its citizens from conflict zones. In 2019, in cooperation with the United States, Kosovo organized the repatriation of 110 of its citizens, including 74 children and 32 women, while four men were immediately arrested and subjected to judicial proceedings. This operation, accompanied by specific rehabilitation and integration programs, proves that Kosovo is not only committed in countering terrorism, but also addresses the issue in a humane and responsible manner.<sup>29</sup> International cooperation is another strong indicator of Kosovo's credibility in counter-terrorism actions.

Kosovo's successes and credibility in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism have been assessed annually by international reports, such as the annual report of the US Department of State and the progress report of the European Commission, commending Kosovo's will, seriousness and success in confronting extremism and radicalism.<sup>30</sup>

Despite Kosovo's successes and willingness to combat and minimize the risk of violent extremism, Serbian state bodies, as well as Serbian state-controlled media, continued with propaganda to present Kosovo as a hotbed of Islamic extremism. These claims and propaganda by Serbia are not supported by reports from international institutions such as the US State Department, EUROPOL, the European Commission and various academic institutes, which have recognized Kosovo as a committed partner in global security.

### **Inter-religious clashes in Kosovo**

Religious coexistence in Kosovo has historically been a key aspect of its society, with Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam having coexisted for centuries. As author and scholar Noel Malcolm notes in *Kosovo: A Short History* (1998), religious identities were fluid under Ottoman rule, with Albanians converting to Islam for social and economic reasons, while still maintaining ties to Christian communities. Despite religious differences, ethnic unity prevailed over sectarian divisions. This secular nationalism fostered peaceful coexistence, especially during the National Awakening of the 19th century and during Yugoslav rule and is still present today. This long-inherited religious coexistence has been very well embodied among Albanians, and has managed to survive, even though the country has faced various challenges throughout history.

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<sup>29</sup> Avdimetaj, T. (2021). Trends of Radicalization. De-Radicalization in Europe and Beyond: Detect, Resolve, Reintegrate and Kosovo Centre for Security Studies (KCSS): <https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/trendet-e-radikalizimit-ne-kosove>

<sup>30</sup> European Commission Report on Kosovo 2024<[chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/c790738e-4cf6-4a43-a8a9-43c1b6f01e10\\_en?filename=Kosovo%20Report%202024.pdf](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/c790738e-4cf6-4a43-a8a9-43c1b6f01e10_en?filename=Kosovo%20Report%202024.pdf)>.



Kosovo is one of the few countries in the world where, for years, no violent incidents related to religious or interfaith motives have been reported. In recent years (2021-2025), Kosovo state institutions and international organizations have consistently reported on stable religious coexistence in the country. Official reports of Kosovo institutions, as well as those of international organizations, have concluded that between 2021-2025, there were no reported incidents of violence related to religious motives in Kosovo. These data are evidence of the resilience and commitment of Kosovo citizens against all forms of violence and extremism, including religious extremism.<sup>31</sup> In 2021, Kosovo Police recorded 87 cases, an increased number from 57 incidents reported in 2020, mainly of the nature of vandalism and theft. Furthermore, according to the US State Department, between January and November 2023, there were 73 incidents, an increased number comparing to 64 in 2022, affecting religious sites of the Muslim, Serbian Orthodox, and Catholic faiths. Although these acts of theft have primarily targeted religious sites, they have been classified as vandalism and theft, and not as religiously motivated attacks.<sup>32</sup> . Despite these developments, which support the values of Kosovar society such as diversity, religious coexistence and harmony between communities, Serbia has continued with propaganda portraying the Albanian people as Islamist extremists and accusing them of having plans to create a radical state in the heart of the Balkans.

### **Good- managing of the problem of Islamist extremism**

Kosovo continues to be considered a role model by developed democratic countries for the manner how it has addressed challenges related to violent extremism and radicalism. The challenges of 2013 and 2014, experiencing frequent cases of Kosovo citizens joining foreign wars in Syria and Iraq, required rapid and effective responses. Kosovo state institutions managed to immediately adopt legislation and strategic documents regulating the prosecution and rehabilitation of those involved in terrorist activities and Islamist radicalism. With the support of civil society organizations and international partners, Kosovo institutions implemented awareness-raising projects against violent extremism and radicalization, calling for the repatriation of citizens involved in these activities. As a result of these interventions, Kosovo has managed to return dozens of its citizens involved in foreign conflicts. The returnees were subject of rehabilitation and reintegration programs and are now fully integrated into society, posing minimal risk to the country's security. The rate of recidivism of former foreign fighters in Kosovo is minimal, almost negligible, and this is mainly because of the activities implemented

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<sup>31</sup> REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: KOSOVO 2022-2024. U.S. Department of State Reports.

<<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/441219-KOSOVO-2022-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid:

by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), civil society, international partners, the Kosovo Correctional Service, the community and the media.<sup>33</sup>

To confront in the best manner, the phenomenon of violent extremism and radicalism, the Government of Kosovo has implemented a bottom-up approach, including the community, at the local level, civil society and religious communities as important actors in preventing and combating various forms of violent extremism. Religious communities, from the local level, the media, and civil society have been involved in almost every activity and event, including the drafting of legislation and strategic documents against terrorism.<sup>34</sup> This comprehensive approach by Kosovo created opportunities for all state and non-state actors to be involved in preventing and confronting violent extremism and radicalism, creating greater social resilience against various forms of extremism and terrorism.

Kosovo is one of the few countries in the world that has managed to build a general social and national platform where everyone agreed that violent extremism poses a threat to the country. In this regard, each of the stakeholders implementing interventions against terrorism and violent extremism has listed activities that need to be undertaken to address this anomaly. Furthermore, Kosovo has managed to build a national action plan<sup>35</sup> where each central and local institution, NGO, religious community, and media have anticipated their activities, the timeframe when they should be implemented, and the expected results in confronting forms of violent extremism and radicalism. This approach has raised awareness within society about extremism and radicalism, addressing this problem in the long term and strengthening national resilience against terrorism and violent extremism.<sup>36</sup>

In this context, Kosovo's activities against violent extremism and radicalism have significantly contributed to countering Serbian propaganda that attempted to present Kosovo as an unsafe ground for peace and stability. Kosovo has managed to prove that it is a country that has seized strict and sustainable measures to prevent and combat all forms of extremism and radicalism. In this way, it directly opposes attempts to portray it as a country incapable of fighting terrorism and extremism. This is a strong and firm response to Serbia's attempts to exploit this issue to undermine Kosovo's image and security in the international arena.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Perteshi, S. (2018). Beyond the triggers: new threats of violent extremism in Kosovo. Retrieved from Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS): [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/violentextremism-eng\\_611603.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/violentextremism-eng_611603.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid:

<sup>35</sup> National Action Plan for the implementation of the counter-terrorism strategy 2023-2028

<sup>36</sup> Decision of the Government of Kosovo on the establishment of the Oversight Committee of the Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

<sup>37</sup> Perteshi, S. (2018). Beyond the triggers: new threats of violent extremism in Kosovo. Retrieved from Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS): [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/violentextremism-eng\\_611603.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/violentextremism-eng_611603.pdf)



## Religious and ethno-nationalist extremism in Kosovo

The dynamics of violent extremism and radicalization in Kosovo sustained significant changes in recent years. Until 2018, Islamist extremism was one of the most prominent and dangerous forms of extremism in the country. However, the trends and nature of this phenomenon have evolved. Currently, the greatest terrorist threats in Kosovo arise from individuals and groups of ethno-nationalist extremism, which are supported and led by organized crime and smuggling networks that have operated in the northern part of Kosovo for many years. Extremist ethno-nationalist groups are enjoying support by formal and informal structures of countries such as Serbia and Russia. These groups are often trained and financed by Serbian state institutions, as is the case with the support, financing and training of terrorist organizations such as the “Civil Protection” or the “North Brigade” declared terrorist organizations by the Government of Kosovo in 2023.<sup>38</sup>

In recent years, Kosovo encountered an increasing number of terrorist attacks that have resulted in injuries, fatalities, and significant material damage. This has been especially true in the last four years, with over 17 terrorist attacks recorded in Kosovo, most of which have been orchestrated by extremists affiliated with organizations such as the “Civil Protection” and the “North Brigade.”<sup>39</sup> Despite Serbia's efforts to spread fake news and propaganda aimed at portraying Kosovo as a country that supports and harbors Islamic terrorism, the situation on the ground appears completely different, which is related to the support and financing of terrorism by Serbian state structures.<sup>40</sup>

Between 2021 and 2024, members of organizations such as the “Civil Protection” and the “North Brigade” carried out over 17 terrorist attacks, including attacks on Kosovo institutions, KFOR, EULEX, ~~the Kosovo Police~~, the civilian population, and critical and strategic assets of the state. Three of these attacks were identified as posing a very high risk. The first major terrorist attack occurred in 2022, during organized protests, with firearms were used against KFOR soldiers, injuring over 90 soldiers of the KFOR peacekeeping mission. Another major terrorist attack occurred in September 2023, known as the “Banjska attack”, where one KP police officer was killed, and another was injured. This attack was orchestrated by Milan Radojčić, then Vice-president of the Srpska Lista and an individual who maintains strong ties to Serbian state

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<sup>38</sup> For further details, see the research report “Invisible Dangers: Transforming the Drivers of Terrorism in Kosovo and the Region” PREVENT Institute. July 2024 <Invisible Dangers: Transforming the Drivers of Terrorism in Kosovo and the Region <https://www.preventks.org/rreziqet-dhe-kercenimet-nga-terrorizmi-ne-kosove-dhe-rajon/>

<sup>39</sup> For more, see the article by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: Kosovo declares “Civil Defense” and “North Brigade” terrorist organizations”. <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/mbrojtia-civile-dhe-brigada-e-veriut-shpallen-organizata-terroriste-/32482051.html>

<sup>40</sup> For further details, see the research report “Invisible Dangers: Transforming the Drivers of Terrorism in Kosovo and the Region” PREVENT Institute. July 2024 <Invisible Dangers: Transforming the Drivers of Terrorism in Kosovo and the Region <https://www.preventks.org/rreziqet-dhe-kercenimet-nga-terrorizmi-ne-kosove-dhe-rajon/>

structures and the Serbian government. The attack on the Kosovo Police patrol in the village of Banjska in 2023 led to armed clashes between the armed terrorist group and the Kosovo Police, causing casualties among members of the armed terrorist group.<sup>41</sup> Another major attack occurred in November 2024, when an explosive weighing up over 20 kilograms was used in an attack at the Ibër Lepenci water canal, which supplies water to a major portion of Kosovo's population and is used for cooling the Kosovo A and Kosovo B power plants.<sup>42</sup> This attack has caused significant damage to Kosovo's critical energy and water infrastructure, and has jeopardized the water supply for nearly half of Kosovo's population. The attack was intended to cut off drinking water supplies to the population and to block water supplies to the country's thermal power plants, which are the main sources of electricity for Kosovo.<sup>43</sup>

These attacks, organized by individuals affiliated with groups such as the "Civil Protection" and the "North Brigade", have caused not only casualties and injuries, but also major economic damage and damage to the state's critical infrastructure, posing a serious threat to the stability and security of Kosovo. The tensions caused by these attacks are visible and appear to be creating ongoing insecurity for the citizens of Kosovo and its institutions, while support from Serbia continues to remain a key factor in the spread of these terrorist activities.

As you can see in the graph below, in the last four years, the number of terrorist attacks of an ethno-nationalist nature has been very high, in contrast to no attacks of a religious nature that have occurred in Kosovo. On the one hand, the prevention of terrorist attacks of a religious nature is an indicator of Kosovo's success and seriousness in the fight against Islamist extremism, while the increase in terrorist attacks of an ethno-nationalist nature carried out by ethno-nationalist extremists is an indicator that Serbia has actively supported terrorist and extremist groups to carry out attacks in Kosovo and to destabilize Kosovo. Moreover, the increase in violent attacks by ethno-nationalist extremist groups is an indicator that Kosovo and its partners such as KFOR and EULEX have been hesitant to confront this phenomenon for many years, due to the sensitive security situation that has prevailed in northern Kosovo for many years.

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<sup>41</sup> Aljazeera News Agency "Kosovo to start trial for Banjska attack by Serb group: Why it matters" <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/8/kosovo-to-start-trial-for-banjska-attack-by-serb-group-why-it-matters?>>

<sup>42</sup> Reuters News Agency "Explosion damages canal feeding Kosovo's main power plants" <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/explosion-damages-canal-feeding-power-plants-northern-kosovo-2024-11-29/>>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid:

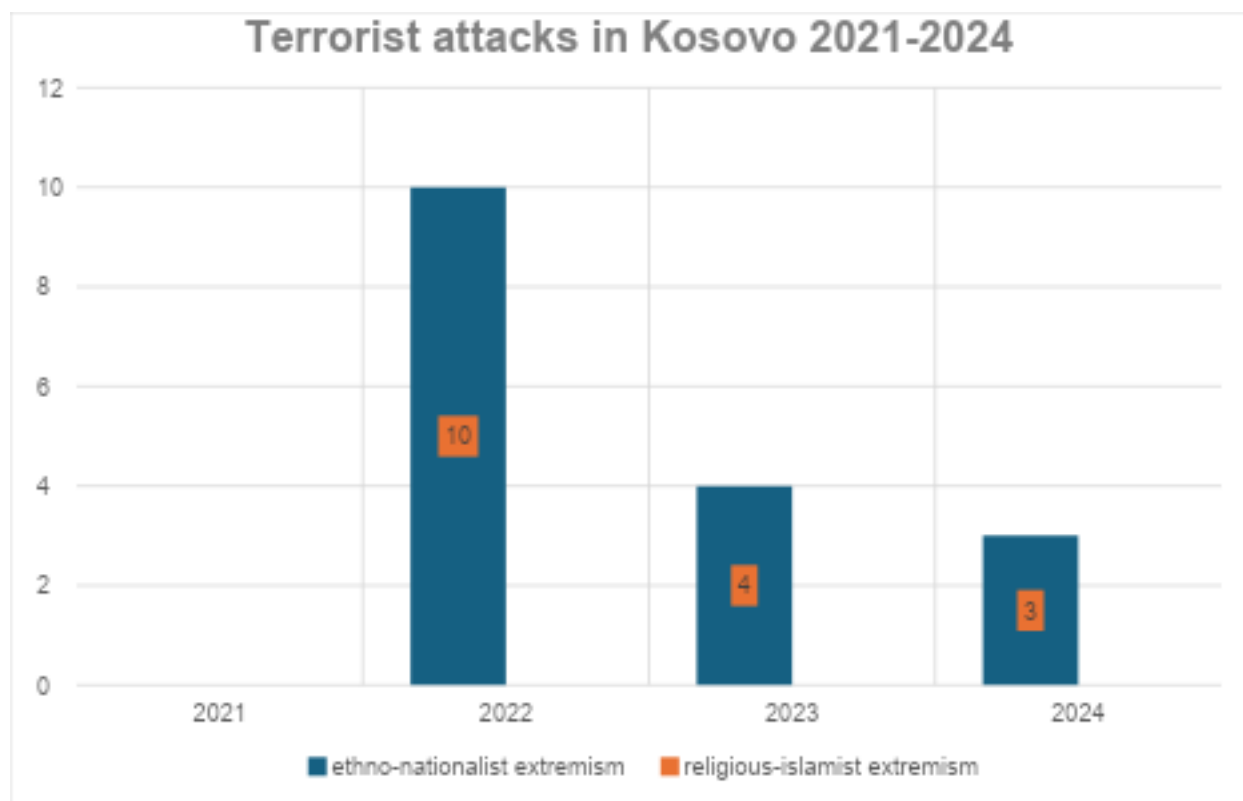


Fig 1. List of terrorist attacks in Kosovo for the period of 2021-2024

### The use of propaganda by Serbia throughout the temporal and political context

Countries that are not friendly to Kosovo have consistently used "Islamic terrorism" in Kosovo as a source of propaganda hampering Western support for Kosovo, as well as to prevent the country's Euro-Atlantic integration process. So, Serbia and Russia, at specific moments of geopolitical developments, have coordinated and activated to spread propaganda, and to proclaim Kosovo as a "source country of Islamic terrorism." Such propaganda has been organized during important international developments for Kosovo, attempting to undermine Western support for Kosovo. After the end of the war in Kosovo, following NATO's intervention in 1999, Serbia and Russia intensified their propaganda efforts, portraying the intervention as unjust and Kosovo Albanians as extremists. Moreover, Russia tried to offer arguments that Western support for Kosovo would create a source country for Islamic terrorists, as was the case with the state of Chechnya in the 1990s, a country with which Russia had a long conflict.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Russia, Islam, and the War on Terrorism: An Uneasy Future  
 <chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcapjcgclcfndmkaj/https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/10-4\_Cohen.PDF>

According to the Russians, the West should work more with Russia to address these challenges and prevent the creation of a “safe haven for Islamic terrorists” in Kosovo.<sup>45</sup>

A similar venture to employ propaganda, linking Kosovo to Islamic terrorism, also occurred following the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11, 2001. Serbia and Russia took advantage of the period of the “Global War on Terrorism”, a global military campaign against terrorism, launched by the United States and its allies after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Serbia attempted to link the war and ethnic cleansing against Kosovo carried out in 1999, retroactively, with the fight against Islamic terrorism, exploiting the global campaign against terrorism that began after 2001. Researchers Armen Erjavec and Zala Volčić have also written about this, in their article “The War on Terrorism as a Discursive Battlefield: Serbian Recontextualization of the Discourse of Former US President George W. Bush and the Global War on Terrorism”, arguing how Serbian intellectuals tried to recontextualize the US discourse on the 'war on terrorism', in order to retroactively legitimize Serbian violence against the citizens of Kosovo and Bosnia during the period 1990-1999, presenting it as a war against terrorists and Islamists.<sup>46</sup> Thus, as the world worked on stepping up security measures against terrorism after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Serbia tried to take advantage of this momentum, spreading propaganda about Kosovo's connection to Islamic terrorism.

A similar campaign of spreading propaganda was undertaken by Serbia during and after Kosovo's declaration of independence. At this time, Serbia and Russia attempted to spread the narrative that an independent Kosovo could become a center for radical Islamism in Europe. This rhetoric was part of a strategy undertaken by official Belgrade to influence international public opinion, imposing the fear of Islamic extremism as a means to hinder Kosovo's international recognition and consolidation. This propaganda was particularly aimed at states that had concerns about Islamic radicalization and terrorism, including those in Europe and other Western countries.<sup>47</sup> A typical case of this strategy is a statement by former Serbian President Boris Tadić, given to the Serbian newspaper “Blic” in 2008, stating that “**an independent Kosovo is a threat to the stability of the region and will become a base for Islamic radicalism in Europe.**” This statement was intended to hinder the process of recognizing the new state of Kosovo, shaping serious accusations against Kosovo as a source of Islamic terrorism. However, this narrative of Serbia and Russia did not have much success, thanks to the strong support that Kosovo received from its international partners, including the United States of America, Turkey, Great Britain, Germany, France and most of the European Union countries.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid:

<sup>46</sup> Armen Erjavec and Zala Volčić “War on terrorism' as a discursive battleground: Serbian recontextualization of G.W. Bush's discourse” <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42889112>

<sup>47</sup> For further details, see the article “Moscow's stance hardens on Kosovo” published on February 25, 2008< <https://www.france24.com/en/20080225-moscow-stance-hardens-kosovo-medvedev-serbia>>

<sup>48</sup> For further details, see the article “Moscow's stance hardens on Kosovo” published on February 25, 2008< <https://www.france24.com/en/20080225-moscow-stance-hardens-kosovo-medvedev-serbia>>

Serbia has exploited the rise of Islamophobic sentiment in Europe, particularly among the growing right-wing party groups in Europe, shaping a narrative that presents Kosovo as a threat or supporter of “Islamic extremism”. By highlighting the Muslim majority in Kosovo, Serbia has attempted to link it to Islamic radicalism and has reinforced its image as a defender of European Christian values. Serbia is trying to use this stance to build alliances with right-wing states and political parties in Europe that are concerned about migration and the expansion of the European Union, especially those states that are skeptical about Kosovo's admission into international institutions and the EU itself.

## **Conclusion**

Kosovo has managed to establish a strong resilience against these threats, demonstrating capabilities in protecting its national integrity and the security of its citizens. Close cooperation with international partners, including NATO, the US and the European Union, is a key factor that has enabled the prevention of several attacks and has contributed to building Kosovo's internal capacities to counter violent extremism.

Despite Serbia's efforts to defame and manipulate Kosovo's image as a hotbed of Islamic terrorism, the reality is the opposite. Kosovo has successfully fought for its freedom and independence, avoiding any attempt to allow the ideological elements of religious extremism to infiltrate the liberation movement. Kosovo's efforts to assist in the reintegration of individuals returning from conflict zones, as well as its efforts to preserve the unity of its people, are evidence of this state's rooted commitment to creating a sustainable and peaceful future.

However, challenges persist, and the threat of ethno-nationalist extremism remains a significant risk. Attacks organized by groups linked to Serbian structures are evidence of another dimension of hybrid warfare, where Serbia continues to support and orchestrate the destabilization of Kosovo. This requires a sustained and coordinated response from Kosovo to preserve and strengthen its stability and security. Furthermore, it is important for Kosovo to continue to build strong relationships with international partners, intensify security measures, and develop policies that address all forms of radicalism, while preserving the values of democracy, peace, and social cohesion.

