



# **Global Violent Right-Wing Extremism: Mapping the Threat and Response in the Western Balkans, Turkey, and South Africa**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper maps the threat landscape in three local case studies where violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) extremism has proliferated significantly – the Western Balkans region, Turkey, and South Africa.

As a threat and response mapping, this paper seeks to explore what the dominant ideological influences and drivers of VRWE are in each location, as well as identifying how these local concerns are connected to the transnational VRWE landscape. These three case studies present significantly different contexts and social and political dynamics, which each in their own way impact the spread of VRWE.

In the Western Balkans, defining what is meant by VRWE is challenging given the historical and political landscape of the region. VRWE narratives in this region are mainly based on ethno-nationalism, with regional and global connections that centre around linguistic, ethnic, and religious ties. Unresolved disagreements over border arrangements, official languages, and similar issues continue to threaten the stability of the region.

In Turkey, the dominant VRWE ideological context is not directly comparable to VRWE in Europe, North America, or Australasia. The Turkish version of VRWE is represented in the political mainstream and largely centres around a form of exclusive nationalism, which has its roots in victimhood identity and resentment against the West linked to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

In South Africa, especially compared to the previous two case studies, VRWE is not part of the political mainstream, but it is strongly linked into the international VRWE environment and is driven domestically through fear of government land reform programmes and targeted farm murders. It is ideologically based in white supremacy and the separation of races, deeply rooted in apartheid policies and Afrikaner nationalism, which seeks to protect the Afrikaner identity and status against other ethnic groups.

The paper also maps the European Union's (EU) response, including through examination of current EU counter-terrorism (CT) policy and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming in these countries.

Based on the threat and response mapping, as well as on observation of EU practices and knowledge sharing procedures throughout the course of this research, this paper integrates knowledge gained and existing CT and P/CVE lessons learned to make recommendations for how the EU's response to the VRWE threat could be tailored and strengthened.<sup>1</sup> Understanding VRWE as an interconnected global phenomenon with locally contextualised and partially cross-cutting ideas, narratives, and activities will ultimately enable the implementation of more effective and sustainable EU responses to VRWE.

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<sup>1</sup> See RUSI reviews at: RUSI, "Prevention Project," RUSI, n.d., <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/prevention-project>; and, RUSI, "Review of CT and P/CVE Activity Effectiveness," RUSI, n.d., <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/review-of-ct-and-p-cve-activity-effectiveness>.

## Recommendations

1. Solidify the positioning of the EU on VRWE. There needs to be a central definition of VRWE to inform policy and programme design.<sup>2</sup> This is especially true due to the difference of Member State perceptions around VRWE and its extremely politically sensitive nature, often bordering and intersecting with mainstream political and social discourse. As the external facing departments of the EU begin to shift priority to VRWE, often the key role they will be able to play is to hold dialogues with local governments to sensitise them to the VRWE threat. A central EU definition of VRWE is needed to guide these discussions and to allow a level of priority to be assigned to them.
2. Consider VRWE-related legal frameworks as essential to CT and P/CVE. Discrimination (e.g., racial, gender-based, ethnic, etc.) is a core component of VRWE and the established legal frameworks around hate crime need to be working in cooperation with frameworks established to prevent, counter, and prosecute VRWE. Additionally, legal discrepancies between how perpetrators of VRWE offences versus other types of VE offences need to be reconsidered and aligned – for example, consideration of VRWE actors returning from Ukraine as foreign fighters and jihadist actors returning from Syria and Iraq as foreign terrorist fighters, with corresponding and significant differences in prosecution and punishment. In many cases, this requires improved understanding and reform of legal practices, where political pressure, inadequate knowledge, and other influencing factors may be impacting legal interpretations and rulings.
3. Improve internal EU information sharing and handover processes. As rotation of EU staff is a regular occurrence, there need to be established processes in place to govern and require knowledge transfer between former and current position holders, as well as transfer between the various EU departments. There are currently gaps where knowledge of VRWE is limited to certain individuals or knowledge hubs and not being effectively disseminated back and forth between the wider departments of the EU that might be in contact with VE issues and challenges, including the related and extremely locally contextual political, cultural, religious, development, etc. discussions that orbit and impact VE.
4. Increase multi-stakeholder engagement in assessment of the VRWE threat. Increasing the role of RAN and other similar types of knowledge-sharing programmes improves the knowledge base from which researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are working.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, encouraging multi-stakeholder engagement brings in a wider array of professionals with different perspectives and helps to challenge and improve approaches.<sup>4</sup> It may be especially effective in the case of VRWE to rely on EU MS who have dealt more extensively with this threat to offer guidance for other less-experienced EU MS or external parties. This should include working with security practitioners, such as Europol.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Glazzard, Martine Zeuthen and Jessica White, “Executive Summary and Recommendations: A Systematic Literature Review of Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Activities,” *Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and RUSI*, February 2021, 4, [https://english.iob-evaluatie.nl/binaries/iob-evaluatie-eng/documents/sub-studies/2021/02/01/literature-studies-%E2%80%93-93-counterterrorism-and-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism/Rusi\\_Summary\\_and\\_recommendations\\_202102.pdf.pdf](https://english.iob-evaluatie.nl/binaries/iob-evaluatie-eng/documents/sub-studies/2021/02/01/literature-studies-%E2%80%93-93-counterterrorism-and-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism/Rusi_Summary_and_recommendations_202102.pdf.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Annelies Pauwels, “Contemporary Manifestations of Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the EU: An Overview of P/CVE Practices,” *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, April 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran\\_adhoc\\_cont\\_manif\\_vrwe\\_eu\\_overv\\_pcve\\_pract\\_2021\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran_adhoc_cont_manif_vrwe_eu_overv_pcve_pract_2021_en.pdf); For more information, see also the RAN webpage at, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran_en).

<sup>4</sup> Pauwels, “Contemporary Manifestations of Violent Right-Wing Extremism.”

<sup>5</sup> For example, within the framework of the EU-funded “Partnership against Crime and Terrorism” project in the Western Balkans (WB PaCT), CEPOL and Europol today hosted the first Strategic Cooperation Forum (SCF) to discuss the training priorities in the key security

5. Support evidence-based threat assessment and response. Currently programme design and funding are based on information gathered across multiple EU bodies, including meetings with local European External Action Service delegations and the EU CT Coordinator. There are regional network meetings held regularly to disseminate information on main trends, council meetings, and working group outputs.<sup>6</sup> However, this process could be more systematically supported by local-, national-, and regional- level research and practitioner inputs. There is an opportunity, as attention to VRWE is still in a relatively early stage at the EU level, to assess the threat based on new research, especially for areas in which VRWE is under-researched.<sup>7</sup> For example, before developing responses it is necessary to support more research into the drivers of VRWE in respective countries and regions – design of programming should be based on local context. Largely, research that currently exists on drivers of VE focuses on Islamist VE. Therefore, new assessments need to be conducted on drivers of VRWE.
6. Rely on local expertise and practitioners. Additionally, it is important, to the extent possible, to listen to local practitioners on what works and what does not in specific local contexts. Local civil society organisations already working in this space should be supported wherever possible, over large-scale, donor-driven models. Relatability of and trust in intervention providers impacts successfulness.<sup>8</sup> This can be supplemented, where needed, through bringing in of comparative expertise.
7. Invest in competency-based programming and development of the knowledge base.<sup>9</sup> Effectively implementing a multi-disciplinary approach to programme design and implementation can not only allow for increased effectiveness and impact of the programme, but it can also allow unique and diverse knowledge generation opportunities. However, donors must be willing to publish successes and failures, as both present equally good learning opportunities.
8. Apply a gender lens. One of the recurring themes across all three case studies was the gendered nature of VRWE, often manifesting with very strong misogynist and anti-feminist under- or over-tones (e.g., gender-based and anti-LGBTQ+ violence were common themes across all three cases). Use of a gender lens in threat and response analysis is essential to knowledge generation and effective programme development.<sup>10</sup>
9. Investigate opportunities to apply P/CVE programming in a wider social context. There is a current global trend of extreme polarisation of politics and society. The online environment provides an effective platform for spreading VRWE and generally hateful narratives. This phenomenon has been spurred on by global events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which not only provided

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threat areas with the long-term objective to strengthen the strategic cooperation in the region. See also: CEPOL, “First Strategic Cooperation Forum Brings Together High-Level Law Enforcement Officials from the Western Balkans to Discuss Key Security Threats and Related Training Needs,” *EU Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL)*, 31 May 2021, <https://www.cepol.europa.eu/media/news/first-strategic-cooperation-forum-brings-together-high-level-law-enforcement-officials>.

<sup>6</sup> Interviewee 12, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Jones, Claudia Wallner and Emily Winterbotham, “Lessons for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: An Evidence-Based Approach,” *RUSI*, 7 September 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/lessons-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-evidence-based-approach>.

<sup>9</sup> Glazzard, Zeuthen and White, “Executive Summary and Recommendations,” 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

narrative content but also encouraged people into online engagement. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how programming or alternative narratives can reach a wider social base, rather than just targeted groups of those more at risk of radicalisation or recruitment into VRWE,<sup>11</sup> as well as how the online space can be converted into a more positive social space for responsible civic discourse.

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<sup>11</sup> Pauwels, "Contemporary Manifestations of Violent Right-Wing Extremism."

## I. INTRODUCTION

The globalisation of violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) is evident in the analysis of the perpetration and the aftermath of several of the high-profile right-wing terrorist attacks in recent years, including the attacks in New Zealand and Norway. However, much of the research and analysis on VRWE in recent years has focused on Western Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand, while escalating VRWE activities in other parts of the world, including South Africa, Turkey, the Western Balkans, India, Brazil, Myanmar, Japan, and Israel, have been largely ignored.<sup>12</sup> Although the global extreme right-wing remains a heterogeneous movement with distinct local ideological agendas, motivations, and recruitment and organisational strategies, VREW movements in different parts of the world often share core elements of their ideologies and narratives and VRWE groups and actors across the world have formed strong transnational links through a variety of online and offline channels.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, exploring such trends in these countries through the lens of VRWE could provide valuable insights into the similarities and differences that exist in the global VRWE landscape. This could then provide a basis for the application and adaptation of policy and programming lessons from countries that have been dealing with VRWE threats for a long time to countries where such trends have only recently started developing or where they have been ignored in the past.

To begin filling these research gaps, this paper maps the threat landscape in three local case studies where VRWE extremism has proliferated significantly – the Western Balkans region, Turkey, and South Africa. This mapping seeks to explore what the dominant ideological influences and drivers of VRWE are in each location, as well as identifying how these local concerns are connected to the transnational VRWE landscape. The paper then maps the European Union’s (EU) response, including through examination of current EU counter-terrorism (CT) policy and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming in these countries. There is also a brief analysis of how much local governments and the wider donor community are currently responding to VRWE concerns in these geographic locations. On the basis of this mapping, the paper analyses the adequacy of current EU CT and P/CVE measures in responding to the threat of VRWE in these countries. This is supplemented with observation of EU practices and knowledge sharing processes, as well as by drawing on lessons from recent reviews of P/CVE programming. Combining these three elements, the paper makes recommendations for how P/CVE programming responses to this threat could be tailored, as well as how they could be strengthened by transferring and adapting programming lessons from other contexts. Understanding VRWE extremism as an interconnected global phenomenon with locally contextualised and partially cross-cutting ideas, narratives, and activities will ultimately enable the implementation of more effective and sustainable EU responses to VRWE.

### Methodology

The case study locations for this paper were chosen by the authors, in consultation with the funder. Once the case-study locations were designated, data collection comprised of a targeted, purposive review of the available contextual literature, focusing on peer-reviewed, high-quality grey and academic English and German-language literature. This review investigated the designated locations, exploring both literature on the types of VRWE present in those locations as well as a review of what programming exists there and its approaches. The literature review is supplemented by 24 interviews with EU representatives and researchers.<sup>14</sup> All interviews are anonymised, due to the sensitivity of discussing security concerns and threats. Each interviewee is assigned a number and identified

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<sup>12</sup> Pietro Castelli Gattinara, Eviane Leidig, and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, “What Characterizes the Far Right Scene in Europe and Beyond?,” *C-REX - Center for Research on Extremism*, published on 7 September 2020; last modified on 15 November 2020, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/compendium/what-characterizes-the-far-right-scene-in-europe-and-beyond.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Holbrook, “Deconstructing the Extreme Right,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague (ICCT)*, 15 January 2021, <https://icct.nl/publication/deconstructing-the-extreme-right/>.

<sup>14</sup> Of the 22 interviews: nine focused on the Western Balkans region (in one of these interviews there were two participants present), four focused on Turkey (in one of these interviews there were six participants present), seven focused on South Africa, and two with EU representatives focused generally on CT.

generally by affiliation. The content of the literature and the interviews are analysed thematically to identify trends in the findings.

### Definitions

The VRWE spectrum consists of many sub-variants of right-wing ideology; however, the landscape consists of actors who are – to varying degrees – “right of” centre on the political spectrum. A Centre for Research on Extremism (C-REX) report clearly explains how the right-wing spectrum holds that inequalities and superiority are natural states, which allow for, and inform, the nativist and authoritarian views of society that some of them adhere to.<sup>15</sup>

Nativism (i.e., a policy of favouring native inhabitants) is often based on either biological racism, from which white supremacism promotes racial interpretations of ethnic superiority, or ethnic nationalism, from which an ethno-cultural understanding of the nation is used to challenge pluralism, promote xenophobia, and stoke anti-immigration sentiment.<sup>16</sup>

While “law and order” are essential to maintaining the natural hierarchy and societal system on the right-wing spectrum, the extent to which this can be achieved within democratic means varies across the spectrum.<sup>17</sup> At the extreme end of the spectrum, scholars have often distinguished between those hostile to liberal democracy and those strictly in opposition to democracy by referring to them as the radical right and extreme right respectively.<sup>18</sup>

Radical right individuals and organisations often seek to obtain the support of the people and outwardly condemn the use of violence – this variant of right-wing politics is widespread globally and applies to right-wing parties represented across Europe (e.g., the Sweden Democrats and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)), as well as further afield globally (e.g., the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP)) in Turkey, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party)).<sup>19</sup>

Extreme right individuals and organisations typically reject democracy and support a system ruled by individuals who are natural leaders, often inspired by Fascism or National Socialism.<sup>20</sup> They oppose any kind of ethnic or cultural diversity and are often open to the use of violence to achieve political goals (e.g., contemporary examples include the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn in Greece, the paramilitary organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Organization) in India, and the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan in the US).<sup>21</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on the extreme right, where there is VRWE action or professed intent, or actions or narratives that might lead to or encourage others into violence. This remains a very difficult and complex ideological context to determine in many cases, and can centre around political goals as indicated above, or around wider ideological perspectives such as misogyny, etc. However, it is important to note that gender-based violence (e.g., misogynist, anti-LGBTQ+, etc.) and other discriminatory acts of violence (e.g., racist, anti-immigrant, etc.) are often labelled as hate crimes, rather than violent extremism (VE) or terrorism.

The right-wing spectrum comprises of and is influenced by everything from political parties and organisations to social movements, as well as the media and intellectual organisations. Often the line

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<sup>15</sup> Gattinara, Leidig, and Ravndal, “What Characterizes the Far Right Scene.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Gattinara, Leidig, and Ravndal, “What Characterizes the Far Right Scene.”; and, Jens Rydgren, “The Sociology of the Radical Right,” *Review of Sociology* 33, no. 1 (2007): 243, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131752>.

<sup>19</sup> Gattinara, Leidig, and Ravndal, “What Characterizes the Far Right Scene.”

<sup>20</sup> Cas Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Gattinara, Leidig, and Ravndal, “What Characterizes the Far Right Scene.”

between mainstream and extreme is very blurry, with some right-wing groups combining political participation and sometimes-violent forms of activism and expression. The current global political and social climate, including the escalating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, has encouraged the spread of and mainstreaming of this threat, as well as the nebulous use of political speech, left-wing causes, and pop cultural symbols.<sup>22</sup> Governments and international bodies are increasingly recognising the threat posed VRWE, both at national and international levels.<sup>23</sup>

Transnational VRWE is truly a global concern. While the dominant force of research has focused on the Western European and North American context, VRWE threats spread across the Global North and South (e.g., North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia). A Counter Extremism Project (CEP) report highlights how national politics often remain a primary channel of engagement; however, international linkages offline and online allow for increasingly strong connections to be formed across borders. While the transnational connection of VRWE elements is not a new phenomenon, in recent years VRWE elements are often linking transnational movements through apocalyptic narratives (e.g., the ‘Great Replacement’ and ‘white genocide’) and are drawn together through music, violent sport, money, and violence.<sup>24</sup> There are also many instances of ideological convergences across borders.<sup>25</sup> However, while there is an extremely robust online VRWE community that embraces and encourages violence, it does not equally translate into either online or offline operational capabilities for action.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, the conflict in Ukraine has played an extremely significant role in galvanising action from the modern VRWE movements, drawing in a global range of foreign fighters.<sup>27</sup> Europol stated in its 2020 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report that “[r]ight-wing extremists maintain international links and mutual exchange and are influenced by key treatises and emblematic personalities worldwide”.<sup>28</sup>

## EU CT and P/CVE Policy

Internally, the current EU CT Agenda (2020) brings together existing and new strategies and strands of work to combat and prevent terrorism and indicates that the “EU remains on high terrorist alert” and that “[t]hreats from violent right and left-wing extremists are on the rise”.<sup>29</sup> Since the EU first published a CT strategy in 2005,<sup>30</sup> its CT policies have always been ideologically blind (i.e., ideological motivation does not impact the definition of a terrorist attack). However, EU Member States (MS) define and implement EU strategy according to their own interpretations.<sup>31</sup> For example, the EU and its MS consider those who travelled to join ISIL/Da’esh as Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs), due to the designation of ISIL/Da’esh as a terrorist organisation. However, in practice, the EU and most MS do

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Michelle Nichols, “White Supremacy a ‘Transnational Threat’, U.N. Chief Warns,” *Reuters*, 22 February 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-rights-idUSKBN2AM0NX>.

<sup>24</sup> David Ibsen et al., “Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures,” *Counter Extremism Project (Germany)*, November 2020, [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study\\_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism\\_Nov%202020.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism_Nov%202020.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> ISD, “Trans-Atlantic Journeys of Far-Right Narratives Through Online-Media Ecosystems,” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)*, 1 December 2020, [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/TransAtlanticJourneysOfFar-RightNarratives\\_v4.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/TransAtlanticJourneysOfFar-RightNarratives_v4.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Ibsen et al., “Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism.”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid; Yassin Musharbash, “The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism: An Investigative Report,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:6, July/August 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-globalization-of-far-right-extremism-an-investigative-report/>; and, The Soufan Center, “White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement,” *The Soufan Center – Research Report*, 27 September 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Report-by-The-Soufan-Center-White-Supremacy-Extremism-The-Transnational-Rise-of-The-Violent-White-Supremacist-Movement.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Europol, “European Union (EU) Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2020,” Europol, 22 June 2021, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2021-tesat>.

<sup>29</sup> European Union: European Commission, *Communication from The Commission to the European Parliament, The European Council, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond*, 9 December 2020, COM(2020) 795 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0795&from=EN>. Published in the EU’s Security Union Strategy. See: Commission Communication on the EU Security Union Strategy, 24 July 2020, COM(2020) 605 final.

<sup>30</sup> Council of the European Union, *The European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, 30 November 2005, 14469/4/05 REV 4, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST%2014469%202005%20REV%204/EN/pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Interviewee 20, EU Representative, 27 September 2021.

not consider those who travelled to participate in the Ukrainian conflict as FTFs, because the parties in the Ukrainian armed conflict have not been designated as terrorist organisations. Thus, the latter are referred to as foreign fighters.<sup>32</sup>

While preventing VE is considered a key pillar of the CT strategy, there is still lack of definition for this concept.<sup>33</sup> Historically there has been resistance to work on non-violent expressions of extremism. However, to work in the prevention space, the definition of VE must include expressions of extremism that could lead to violence or are on the trajectory towards violence.<sup>34</sup> The EU began addressing the issue of VRWE in 2019 and have been working on a proposal for a legally non-binding definition, due to the political sensitivity around securing agreement across all EU MS on a legally binding definition.<sup>35</sup> A number of EU MS working jointly within a Project Based Collaboration on VRWE have elaborated the following: “Violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) are acts of individuals or groups who use, incite, threaten with, legitimise or support violence and hatred to further their political or ideological goals, motivated by ideologies based on the rejection of democratic order and values as well as of fundamental rights, and centred on exclusionary nationalism, racism, xenophobia and/or related intolerance.”<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, there is potential for governments to strengthen ‘hate crime’ legislation and prosecution as it can be part of the trajectory towards VRWE. However, the existence of a ‘hate crimes’ category precludes certain countries from categorising attacks under this label as terrorism.<sup>37</sup> Also, hate crimes can be particularly difficult to navigate under different national criminal legal codes. Many of these are improving, but there are still significant gaps and limbo areas where crimes cannot be classified as such.<sup>38</sup> While often not considered the dominant EU internal VE threat, VRWE attacks and hate crimes are on the rise, and are being fed by the current climate of conspiracy theories.<sup>39</sup>

Externally, “[t]he EU’s approach to external security within the framework of the common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) will remain an essential component of EU efforts to countering terrorism and violent extremism in order to strengthen stability and protect European security interests.”<sup>40</sup> The EU has already started working on VRWE outside the EU, with activities potentially beginning soon.<sup>41</sup> However, VRWE can be challenging for the EU to address abroad in locations where radical right-wing ideology is seen as legitimate. Often these ideologies are deeply rooted within law enforcement, judiciary processes, and local governmental levels, making programming which relies on local-level institutional support unviable.<sup>42</sup>

Across the globe, the EU has many different types of engagement with different externals. In the case of South Africa, for example, the EU raised the country to the level of ‘Strategic Partner’ in 2007 and

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<sup>32</sup> This is without prejudice to the possibility that courts determine EU citizens involved in the conflict in Ukraine are to be considered as terrorists, as happened in the Czech Republic. Interviewee 19, EU Representative, 7 October 2021.

<sup>33</sup> European Union: European Union Global Strategy – European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy*, EUGS and EEAS, 28 June 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Interviewee 20, EU Representative, 27 September 2021.

<sup>35</sup> The EU has debated definitions and determined that, for instance, racially and ethnically motivated terrorism (REMVE) would not be applicable to the EU because the term ‘ethnically motivated terrorism’ could also be used to refer to separatist terrorist organisations like Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA). The EU does not wish to include in their definition of this form of violent extremism and terrorism groups that, in the European understanding of REMVE, could be interpreted as including ETA and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Interviewee 20, EU Representative, 27 September 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Interviewee 23, EU Representative, 17 December 2021.

<sup>37</sup> As indicated by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights’ (ODIHR) monitoring of EU MS hate crimes records and reporting, the overall approach of EU MS to recording and reporting of hate crimes is incredibly varied, as well as the likelihood of victims to report hate crimes. Interviewee 20, EU Representative, 27 September 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Interviewee 19, EU Representative, 7 October 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Interviewee 20, EU Representative, 27 September 2021.

<sup>40</sup> European Commission, *A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond*, COM(2020), 795 final, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Interviewee 20, EU Representative, 27 September 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Interviewee 19, EU Representative, 7 October 2021.

this loosely includes cooperation on peace and security issues such as CT.<sup>43</sup> In other relationships, such as with Turkey, the EU indicates its priorities through joint CT dialogues.<sup>44</sup> These are often regular exchanges. However, when political tensions arise these dialogues can be cancelled, essentially ending any EU influence on CT priorities for that country – this can lead to a more openly critical stance from the EU.<sup>45</sup> The Western Balkans region presents another type of engagement and is the only region in the world where the EU has proactively included VRWE in dialogues and support programs.<sup>46</sup> The EU is coordinating the implementation of a “Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans” with the six countries that make up the region, both on a regional basis and with each country bilaterally.<sup>47</sup> As of recently, there has been more engagement on VRWE in this context for multiple reasons, including that there is more evidence of a larger-scale threat throughout that region; the EU has supported a significant amount of P/CVE programming in the region and thus developed a dialogue on the issue; and, the Western Balkans countries are candidates for accession to the EU, which obliges them to work with the EU on areas of concern.<sup>48</sup>

## Structure

This paper is broken down into five main chapters, the first being this introduction. The next three chapters each delve into one of the three locational case studies – assessing what types of VRWE are present in the Western Balkans region, Turkey, and South Africa. Analysis within the case studies looks at the supporting ideologies and influencing dynamics (e.g., ethnic, religious, political, etc.), and identifies the outgroups or individuals targeted by VRWE in these contexts. These case study chapters also explore the links between domestic groups and their global counterparts, while highlighting how these transnational links can translate strategically and operationally, both offline and online. Finally, the paper concludes by drawing on what has and has not worked in the past for CT and P/CVE approaches to make some recommendations for addressing VRWE. This mapping of policy and programming response and the development of recommendations takes into consideration observations of EU practices and knowledge sharing processes, as well as the political sensitivities around VRWE when engaging with countries where right-wing populist parties hold local and/or national political positions. It also considers the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the spread of conspiracy and hate related to Covid-19 online during this period, as well as the interactions between these new narratives and existing VRWE narratives and ideologies.

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<sup>43</sup> European Union: European Commission, “EU–South Africa Summit: Strengthening the Strategic Partnership,” *European Commission Press Corner*, IP/18/6368, 15 November 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_18\\_6368](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_18_6368).

<sup>44</sup> Republic of Turkey, “Joint Turkey - EU Press Release: Turkey - EU Counter Terrorism Dialogue, 8 June 2016,” *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 8 June 2016, [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-turkey\\_-eu-press-release\\_-turkey\\_-eu-counter-terrorism-dialogue\\_-8-june-2016.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-turkey_-eu-press-release_-turkey_-eu-counter-terrorism-dialogue_-8-june-2016.en.mfa); and, European Union: European Commission, “Joint Statement Following the High-Level Political Dialogue Between the EU and Turkey,” *European Commission Press Room*, STATEMENT/16/156, 25 January 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/STATEMENT\\_16\\_156](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/STATEMENT_16_156).

<sup>45</sup> European Union: European Commission, “Key Findings of the 2021 Report on Turkey,” *European Commission Press Room*, QANDA/21/5282, 25 January 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_21\\_5282](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_5282).

<sup>46</sup> The Western Balkans region, for the purposes of this paper, includes: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

<sup>47</sup> European Union: European Commission, *Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans*, European Commission and European Union Migration and Home Affairs, 5 October 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2018-10/20181005\\_joint-action-plan-counter-terrorism-western-balkans.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2018-10/20181005_joint-action-plan-counter-terrorism-western-balkans.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Interviewee 20, EU Representative, 27 September 2021; European Union: European Commission, “Enhanced EU Engagement With the Western Balkans,” *European Commission: Enlargement Policy*, accessed on 22 November 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/enhanced-eu-engagement-western-balkans\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/enhanced-eu-engagement-western-balkans_en); and, European Union: European Commission, “Prevention of Radicalisation: The Commission Steps up Support in the Western Balkans With a New €1.55 Million Project,” *EU Migration and Home Affairs*, 19 April 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/prevention-radicalisation-commission-steps-support-western-balkans-new-eu155-million-project\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/prevention-radicalisation-commission-steps-support-western-balkans-new-eu155-million-project_en).

## II. WESTERN BALKANS

This chapter explores the case study of the Western Balkans region. It looks first at the VRWE threat, including the background and its contextual development, then at the transnational connections of the threat, and wraps up with an overview of the responses to VRWE in the region.

### VRWE Threat Picture

Defining what is meant by VRWE in the context of the Western Balkans is challenging given the historical and political landscape of the region. Scholarship on VRWE often addresses a number of different radical and extreme right ideologies, including neo-fascist, neo-Nazi, anti-immigrant, and neo-populist ideas.<sup>49</sup> There are shared characteristics across many VRWE groups in the Western Balkans, including demands for border realignments based on common themes of animosity toward other ethnic groups, sexual minorities, and liberalism.<sup>50</sup> However, lines between the left and the right cannot always be drawn neatly when it comes to political ideologies.<sup>51</sup> For example, many of the groups in the region that espouse nationalist values simultaneously hold traditionally left-wing positions on economic policies or support certain former-Yugoslavian communist policies.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, given the close ties between the political mainstream and movements that are typically characterised as VRWE, distinctions need to be made between right-wing radicalism that operates within the constitutional frameworks of these countries and right-wing extremism that exists outside the constitutional frameworks.<sup>53</sup> The mainstream nature of radical right-wing sentiment can make it particularly difficult to outline and combat extremism on the trajectory to VRWE. In line with Cas Mudde's definition that was adopted in Věra Stojarová's analysis of the far-right in the Balkans, VRWE in the context of this region is conceptualised to include both extreme and radical right-wing extremism and a combination of nationalism, xenophobia, law and order, and a strong state.<sup>54</sup>

### Historical Context

More than two decades after the end of the wars and conflicts that led up to, and resulted from, the breakup of former Yugoslavia, the socio-political context of the Western Balkans continues to be defined by their legacy.<sup>55</sup> According to Valery Perry, there is an 'unresolved culture of extremism' in the region that hinders any potential efforts to address the drivers of all kinds of violent extremism.<sup>56</sup> The two most prominent manifestations of VE in the region are militant Islamism and right-wing nationalism and extremism. As the number of FTFs from the region who travelled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIL/Da'esh in the mid-2010s was relatively high, the attention of international actors and domestic law enforcement has been largely focused on Islamist ideologies.<sup>57</sup> However, while Islamist extremism and the reintegration of returning FTFs continues to pose a challenge for the region, ethno-nationalist and other manifestations of VRWE are also presenting an increasing threat with multiple violent incidents over recent years.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Věra Stojarová, *The Far Right in the Balkans* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Luke Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism in the Western Balkans," *K4D Helpdesk Report for the UK Institute of Development Studies*, 4 June 2019, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d309f7aed915d2fe9ea6aec/620\\_Western\\_Balkans\\_far\\_Right.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d309f7aed915d2fe9ea6aec/620_Western_Balkans_far_Right.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> Stojarová, *The Far Right in the Balkans*.

<sup>52</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."

<sup>53</sup> Interviewee 18, Western Balkans Researcher, 12 October 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Stojarová, *The Far Right in the Balkans*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Valery Perry, "Defining, Framing and Contextualizing Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: An Introduction to the Volume," in *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, ed. Valery Perry (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press/Columbia University Press, 2019), 13.

<sup>57</sup> Perry, *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia*.

<sup>58</sup> Leonie Vrugtman, "Future Challenges of Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," *The Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM)*, 18 February 2019, <https://idmalbania.org/future-challenges-of-violent-extremism-in-the-western-balkans-february-2019/>.

Given the continuous presence of nationalism in the post-war climate, this type of VRWE is largely normalised in the region, making it difficult to address.<sup>59</sup> Unresolved ethnic conflicts and border issues remain a security challenge for the entire region, though not all six Western Balkans countries are affected by these issues equally.<sup>60</sup> However, most of the ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups that are present in the region demand some form of change to the borders or exchange of territories.<sup>61</sup> VRWE groups advantageously leverage a combination of historical revisionism, ethnic victimisation associated with the drawing of borders, as well as widespread disappointment with the West especially due to foreign interventions – including the EU, the United States (US), the United Nations (UN), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (e.g., the involvement of NATO in the wars).<sup>62</sup> In terms of generational divides, narratives related to the Balkan wars of the 1990s (e.g., views on war crimes, etc.), as well as World War II (e.g., the Croatian Ustaša movement) are as popular with younger people as they are with the older generation.<sup>63</sup> However, neo-Nazi and white supremacist ideologies appear to be less common with younger generations than they were among previous generations – particularly in Serbia.<sup>64</sup>

### ***Narratives and Outgroups***

Another reason for this increasing distrust toward the West is the strong relationship Russia has built up with the Orthodox populations in the region. Russia presents itself as the protector of Serbs in particular, but also of other Orthodox groups in the Western Balkans.<sup>65</sup> By emphasising historical and cultural ties, both online and offline through economic, cultural, and political channels, Russia continues to promote a sense of shared Slavic identity and ‘Eurasian values’ that stand in clear contrast to European and ‘Western’ values.<sup>66</sup> One particularly prominent issue of concern in this area are LGBTQ+ rights, which are framed by VRWE groups in the region, as well as by Russia, as being directly linked to Western European values.<sup>67</sup> Groups across the region portray the LGBTQ+ population as a threat to national identities, ‘traditional family values’, and the patriarchal order.<sup>68</sup> There have even been violent clashes at Pride marches in the region.<sup>69</sup>

Due to the region’s complex demographics, VRWE ideologies and narratives tend to correspond to linguistic lines.<sup>70</sup> While a blend of ethno-nationalist and religious narratives and tropes are present in VRWE movements in both Albanian and Slavic-language communities, extremist groups and movements in other linguistic areas tend to have distinct repertoires of narratives and links to VRWE groups outside the region.<sup>71</sup> In Albanian speaking areas, VRWE has been largely overshadowed by Islamist extremism, with limited policy and research attention given to other forms of extremism. However, existing research points to anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments among some groups

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<sup>59</sup> Perry, *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia*.

<sup>60</sup> Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021.; See also: Vrugtman, “Future Challenges of Violent Extremism.”

<sup>61</sup> Karčić and Turčalo, “The Far Right in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

<sup>62</sup> Chua et al., “Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans.”; and, Loïc Tregoures, “Kosovo, the Global Far Right, and the Threat to Liberalism,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 11 July 2019, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_kosovo\\_the\\_global\\_far\\_right\\_and\\_the\\_threat\\_to\\_liberalism/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_kosovo_the_global_far_right_and_the_threat_to_liberalism/).

<sup>63</sup> Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021; Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021; Interviewee 18, Western Balkans Researcher, 12 October 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Sead Turčalo, “Bosnia Must Counter Russia’s Cultivation of Far-Right Extremists,” *Balkan Insight/the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)*, 26 August 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/08/26/bosnia-must-counter-russias-cultivation-of-far-right-extremists/>.

<sup>66</sup> Chua et al., “Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans.”

<sup>67</sup> Isidora Stakic, “Securitization of LGBTIQ Minority in Serbian Far-right Discourses: A Post-structuralist Perspective,” *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, no. 1 (March 2015): 183-206, <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v1i1.17>; Dzombic, “Rightwing Extremism in Serbia.”; Ejodus and Jureković, ed., *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*.; and, Kelly, “Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism.”

<sup>68</sup> Stakic, “Securitization of LGBTIQ Minority in Serbian Far-right Discourses.”

<sup>69</sup> Kelly, “Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism.”

<sup>70</sup> Milo Comerford and Simeon Dukic, “Think Globally, Attack Locally: How Online Extremism Adapted to the Western Balkans,” *ISD – Digital Dispatches* (blog), 26 November 2020, [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/think-globally-attack-locally-how-online-extremism-adapted-to-the-western-balkans/](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/think-globally-attack-locally-how-online-extremism-adapted-to-the-western-balkans/).

<sup>71</sup> Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021.

in Albanian-speaking and predominantly Orthodox and Catholic parts of the region, as well as anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and, more recently, conspiracy theories around the Covid-19 pandemic as part of VRWE ideological narratives.<sup>72</sup> In Slavic-speaking regions, on the other hand, VRWE narratives tend to be linked to the war, revolving around issues such as the segmented administration of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the enduring tensions between Serbia and Kosovo.<sup>73</sup>

Another prominent feature of VRWE ideologies across the region is a sense of Islamophobia, which is partly linked to the historical opposition to Ottoman rule in the region.<sup>74</sup> Since 2015, this narrative has been fuelled by the increase in migrants traveling from North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia through the so-called 'Balkan route' to the EU.<sup>75</sup> There are perceived feelings from right-wing groups that Muslims, who are viewed as foreigners, are taken care of by NGOs, the government, and the international community, while other local communities are not granted the same treatment. The Islamophobia present in VRWE ideologies in the Western Balkans corresponds to the popular narrative in various Western VRWE movements of a 'Great Replacement' (i.e., the feared replacement of white European Christians with Muslim 'invaders,' which necessitates violent actions to defend the 'Western civilisation').<sup>76</sup> This idea was coined by the French neo-fascist Renaud Camus in 2010 in reference to Ratko Mladić and the Bosnian Genocide he orchestrated.<sup>77</sup>

### **Country-Specific Context**

In Serbia, like in other parts of the region, VRWE is deeply rooted in historical narratives and grievances. Serbian VRWE ideologies are characterised by historical revisionism, related to the war crimes committed by Serbian military and paramilitary forces during the wars in the 1990s, which present Serbs as the main victims of the Yugoslav wars.<sup>78</sup> As there was no distinct break from nationalism after the Milošević regime ended, nationalism continues to feature prominently in the narratives of Serbian VRWE groups.<sup>79</sup> At the core of this nationalism is the cause of 'Greater Serbia' which, in the current context of the region, includes the fight to keep Kosovo and possibly the Republika Srpska in Serbian territory.<sup>80</sup> VRWE narratives are relatively normalised in the political mainstream and they do not face strong opposition from the government, most of the political parties, or the media.<sup>81</sup> For example, the Serbian Radical Party (Srpska Radikalna Stranka, SRS), whose party programme is based on the heritage of the Serb ultra-nationalist Chetniks and characterised by xenophobia and ideas of a 'Greater Serbia',<sup>82</sup> is regularly represented in parliament though it currently holds no seats in the National Assembly. However, in light of Serbia's open view on integration into the EU, President Vučić aims to distance himself from groups on the extreme end of the VRWE spectrum, such as the Serbian People's Movement (SNP) 1389.<sup>83</sup> According to police data from 2011, some 5,000 individuals were involved in around 30 VRWE groups in Serbia, including Obraz, the Serbian National Movement (SNP or Naši), Dveri Srpske, Blood and Honour, or the National Alignment, which is officially banned.<sup>84</sup> Since 2011, and particularly in the last two to three years, these numbers

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<sup>72</sup> Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Vrugtman, "Future Challenges of Violent Extremism."

<sup>74</sup> Ejodus and Jureković, ed., *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*.

<sup>75</sup> Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021.; and, Chua et al., "Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans."

<sup>76</sup> Tregoures, "Kosovo, the Global Far Right, and the Threat to Liberalism."

<sup>77</sup> Jasmin Mujanović, "The Balkan Roots of the Far Right's 'Great Replacement' Theory," *New Lines Magazine*, 12 March 2021,

<https://newlinesmag.com/essays/the-balkan-roots-of-the-far-rights-great-replacement-theory/>.

<sup>78</sup> Filip Ejodus and Predrag Jureković, ed., *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans: 31st Workshop of the PFP Consortium Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe* (Vienna: Austrian Federal Ministry of Defence and Sports, 2016).

<sup>79</sup> Jelena Dzombic, "Rightwing Extremism in Serbia," *Race & Class* 55, no. 4, (March 2014): 106-110,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396813519943>.

<sup>80</sup> Interviewee 18, Western Balkans Researcher, 12 October 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021; See also: Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."

<sup>82</sup> Věra Stojarová, *The Far Right in the Balkans* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).; and, Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."

<sup>83</sup> Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021; Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."; Ejodus and Jureković, ed., *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*.; and, Dzombic, "Rightwing Extremism in Serbia."

have increased significantly, with both old groups re-emerging and new groups forming.<sup>85</sup> Some of the new movements that have gained in popularity since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic include the People's Patrols (Narodne Patrole) and Levijatan, which presents itself externally as an animal rights organisation.<sup>86</sup> This rise in VRWE has also been accompanied by an increase in violent incidents, ranging from incidents involving football hooligans<sup>87</sup> to attacks against LGBTQ+ events,<sup>88</sup> and against Roma settlements and Albanians.<sup>89</sup> In addition, between 70 and 300 Serbs have reportedly joined the conflict in Ukraine on the side of Russia since the beginning of the conflict.<sup>90</sup>

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the literature on extremism and terrorism largely focuses on Islamist groups. However, the VRWE studies that do exist focus around the Serb population in Republika Srpska where neo-Chetnik groups are active<sup>91</sup> and VRWE rhetoric, such as the denial of the genocide of Bosniak Muslims in Srebrenica, is frequently used by Serb representatives in the country.<sup>92</sup> Investigations by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) indicated that a total of 16 neo-Chetnik associations are officially registered in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the Ravna Gora movement, which was, among other things, connected in criminal trials with the funding of Serb volunteers to travel to the conflict zone in Ukraine.<sup>93</sup> However, there is also increasing frustration among the Bosniak population regarding the segmented administration of the country.<sup>94</sup> VRWE among the Bosniak population is mainly concentrated in the Bosniak Movement of National Pride (Bosanski pokret nacionalnog ponosa, BPNP), which has a small membership with an increasing online presence, and promotes neo-Nazism, as well as anti-Croat, Serb, Roma, and communist narratives.<sup>95</sup> In addition, Croat VRWE groups and neo-Ustaše groups are active in the country, in particular the region bordering Croatia.<sup>96</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina's main neo-Ustaše group, whose website is registered in Germany, provides its own version of wartime history as well as sections on 'proven Serbian lies' and the Independent State of Croatia.<sup>97</sup>

In Montenegro, VRWE does not pose a major security threat; although, subregional VRWE groups are active in the country, such as Albanian groups aiming for a 'Greater Albania' and Serb groups seeking to establish a 'Greater Serbia'.<sup>98</sup> In the case of the population of Serbs in Montenegro, the Serbian Orthodox church and its Russian Orthodox counterpart also exert significant influence on VRWE narratives, particularly when it comes to the question of Montenegrin Orthodoxy.<sup>99</sup> The Russian influence in Montenegro, which extends outside the Orthodox church, has also led to five Montenegrins joining Russian forces in Ukraine.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Marina Lazetić, "Migration, Extremism & Dangerous Blame Games: Developments & Dynamics in Serbia," *RESOLVE Network*, November 2021, <https://doi.org/10.37805/wb2021.1>.

<sup>87</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Perry, *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia*, 41.

<sup>91</sup> Alberto Testa, "Making Sense of Extremism in the Bosnian Football Terraces: An Initial Analysis," *Security Science Journal* 1, no. 1, (July 2020): 21-34, <https://doi.org/10.37458/ssj.1.1.2>.

<sup>92</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."; and, Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021.

<sup>93</sup> Albina Sorguc and Haris Rovcanin, "Serb Chetniks' Link to War Criminals and Extremists Uncovered," *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*, 5 February 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/02/05/serb-chetniks-links-to-war-criminals-and-extremists-uncovered/>.

<sup>94</sup> Arlinda Rrustemi, "Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe: The Influences of Russia, Croatia, Serbia and Albania," *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS)*, 18 February 2020, <http://www.istor.org/stable/resrep24202>.

<sup>95</sup> Hikmet Karčić and Sead Turčalo, "The Far Right in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Historical Revisionism and Genocide Denial," *Balkan Insight*, August 2021, [https://balkaninsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Far-Right-in-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina\\_preview\\_without-IRL-logo.pdf](https://balkaninsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Far-Right-in-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina_preview_without-IRL-logo.pdf); and, Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."

<sup>96</sup> Karčić and Turčalo, "The Far Right in Bosnia and Herzegovina."; and, Testa, "Making Sense of Extremism in the Bosnian Football Terraces."

<sup>97</sup> Sven Milekic, Marija Ristic, Maja Zivanovic and Denis Dzidic, "Far-Right Balkan Groups Flourish on the Net," *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*, 5 May 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/05/05/far-right-balkan-groups-flourish-on-the-net-05-03-2017/>.

<sup>98</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."; Interviewee 16, EU Representative, 5 October 2021.

<sup>99</sup> Interviewee 16, EU Representative, 5 October 2021; Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021; Interviewee 18, Western Balkans Researcher, 12 October 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."; and, Rrustemi, "Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe."

In Albania, while most of the literature centres around Islamist extremism, ethno-nationalist forms of VRWE are identified as present in the country, including among Albanian populations in Serbia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and northern Greece (e.g., the Albanian National Army (ANA)).<sup>101</sup> These movements strive for the formation of a 'Greater Albania', with Kosovo being a particularly emotive issue due to Albania seeing itself as Kosovo's 'mother state'.<sup>102</sup> VRWE tendencies are also present in the Greek minority in the south of Albania, where some violent incidents were reported between Greek and Albanian groups in 2018 and 2019.<sup>103</sup>

In North Macedonia, ethno-nationalist expressions of VRWE are present among Macedonians, mainly focused on the question of the country's name and on revising the borders with Greece and Bulgaria, as well as among Albanians, who strive for autonomy within North Macedonia or a 'Greater Albania'.<sup>104</sup> While ethno-nationalism is present in the political mainstream, with VMRO-DPMNE (North Macedonia's main centre-right party) and the more radical splinter party VMRO-NP promoting Macedonian nationalism and the minimisation of Albanian presence in the country, more extreme right movements (e.g., neo-Nazi groups and football hooligans) have a presence in the country as well.<sup>105</sup> Russia's influence and support for VRWE identity through social media proxies,<sup>106</sup> religious institutions, as well as through local chapters of groups such as the Night Wolves has reportedly contributed to anti-Albanian, and anti-EU and NATO sentiments.<sup>107</sup>

In Kosovo, the focus over the last few years has mainly been on Islamist extremism and the return of FTFs from Syria and Iraq.<sup>108</sup> However, Albanian and Serbian VRWE groups also have a presence in Kosovo, with Albanians calling for greater links with Albania and Serbs aiming for the re-integration of Kosovo into Serbia.<sup>109</sup> Similar to other countries in the region with Orthodox populations, Russia also exerts influence on the Serbian Orthodox population of Kosovo, promoting ethno-nationalist identity in opposition to Western influences such as the EU.<sup>110</sup>

### **Current Threat Level**

Acts of violent extremism and terrorism, both inspired by Islamist and VRWE ideologies, have been rare in the Western Balkan region in recent years. However, with smaller-scale VRWE incidents, there are also questions around how incidents are classified, depending on how much information is available about the motives and how far, or close, the motives are from the political mainstream. The incidents that have been reported in recent years in the context of VRWE motivations include the case of an alleged member of a Greek right-wing movement who fired at police forces in Albania and was subsequently killed during a stand-off with police.<sup>111</sup> In Serbia, there have been several attacks on Pride parades and other LGBTQ+ events.<sup>112</sup> In 2020, VRWE groups in Serbia tried to disrupt a cultural festival organised by youth groups from Serbia and Kosovo, weeks after similar groups had threatened

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<sup>101</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."

<sup>102</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."; Rrustemi, "Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe."; and, Interviewee 16, EU Representative, 5 October 2021.

<sup>103</sup> Interviewee 16, EU Representative, 5 October 2021.

<sup>104</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."; Nermina Kuloglija, Milica Stojanovic, Fatjona Mejdini, Samir Kajosevic, and Bojan Stojkovski, "Balkan States Failing to Address Threat from Far-Right Extremism," *Balkan Insight/the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)*, 29 January 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/01/29/balkan-states-failing-to-address-threat-from-far-right-extremism/>; and, Interviewee 18, Western Balkans Researcher, 12 October 2021.

<sup>105</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism."

<sup>106</sup> Shenyi Chua et al., "Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," *Center for Global Affairs at the School of Professional Studies at New York University*, 20 May 2020, [https://www.sps.nyu.edu/content/dam/spss/academics/departments/center-for-global-affairs/pdfs/NYU\\_Report\\_on\\_Western\\_Balkans.pdf](https://www.sps.nyu.edu/content/dam/spss/academics/departments/center-for-global-affairs/pdfs/NYU_Report_on_Western_Balkans.pdf).

<sup>107</sup> Rrustemi, "Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe."

<sup>108</sup> Interviewee 13, EU Representative, 30 September 2021.

<sup>109</sup> Kelly, "Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism;" and, Interviewee 13, EU Representative, 30 September 2021.

<sup>110</sup> Rrustemi, "Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe."

<sup>111</sup> Vrugtman, "Future Challenges of Violent Extremism.;" and, Interviewee 16, EU Representative, 5 October 2021.

<sup>112</sup> Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021.; and, Dzombic, "Rightwing Extremism in Serbia."

artists in a theatre play about the massacre in Srebrenica.<sup>113</sup> In Montenegro, a Serbian returnee from the Ukraine conflict and two Russian intelligence officers were reportedly involved in an alleged foiled coup attempt in 2016.<sup>114</sup>

In line with the absence of large-scale acts of extremist violence in the region in the recent past, the threat of large-scale terror attacks inspired by VRWE ideologies is arguably quite low. However, even small-scale acts of violence in the context of the unresolved ‘frozen’ conflicts in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and other parts of the Western Balkans could act as the ignition point for regional destabilisation.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, even if no mass-casualty terrorist attacks are being committed in the region, the presence of VRWE narratives on the fringes of the mainstream social ideological spectrum as well as in the political mainstream nevertheless contribute to the legitimisation of violence and hate crimes against minorities and outgroups.<sup>116</sup>

### **Transnational Connections**

**Narrative:** Like VRWE groups in other parts of the world, the groups and movements that are active in the Western Balkans region are also engaging in regular transnational exchanges with those who share similar ideologies. Firstly, there is a lively regional exchange of extremist narratives that are relevant to the historical, cultural, and political context of the region enabled by the diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic links across the Western Balkans.<sup>117</sup> Also enabled by these linguistic and religious links, Russia has been able to exploit the political realities in the region to further societal polarisation and, in turn, VRWE radicalisation through narratives that are locally relevant. A key component of these narratives is exposing and amplifying the already existing general disappointment toward the West.<sup>118</sup>

**Physical:** This influence is manifesting in the forms of humanitarian assistance and investments in the promotion of Russian culture, literature, language, and religious exchanges through the Orthodox church.<sup>119</sup> It also extends to the presence of Russian nationalist organisations, such as the Night Wolves and Cossacks Motorcycle Clubs.<sup>120</sup> Russia also reportedly provides weapons and training to police forces in Republika Srpska<sup>121</sup> and offers ‘youth patriotic camps’ for youth from the Western Balkans in Serbia and Russia.<sup>122</sup> In addition, Russian-owned media outlets also play a role in influencing local discourse and VRWE narratives in the region.<sup>123</sup>

As mentioned earlier, one of the effects of the strong connection between Slavic populations in the Western Balkans and Russia was the participation of large numbers of individuals from the Balkans in the conflict in Ukraine on the Russian side.<sup>124</sup> However, while Russia continues to play a significant role in VRWE narratives in the Western Balkans advocating itself as a model for an alternative society,

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<sup>113</sup> AP News Wire, “Serb Police Block Right-Wing Disruption of Event with Kosovo,” *The Independent*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/serb-police-block-rightwing-disruption-of-event-with-kosovo-kosovo-extremists-riot-police-serbia-belgrade-b1231817.html>.

<sup>114</sup> Jelena Beslin and Marija Ignjatijevic, “Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine,” *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) Brief*, no. 20, 16 June 2017, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/balkan-foreign-fighters-syria-ukraine>.

<sup>115</sup> Interviewee 18, Western Balkans Researcher, 12 October 2021.

<sup>116</sup> Karčić and Turčalo, “The Far Right in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

<sup>117</sup> Milo Comerford and Simeon Dukic, “Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans,” *RESOLVE Network*, July 2020, <https://doi.org/10.37805/pn2020.7.wb>; and, Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021.

<sup>118</sup> Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021.

<sup>119</sup> Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021.

<sup>120</sup> Edina Bećirević and Sead Turčalo, “Russian Influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina: How Russia’s Support for Anti-NATO Forces Could Reshape the Country and the Region,” *Democracy and Security in Southeastern Europe* 7, no. 1 (2020): 7-21, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=873355>; and, Karčić and Turčalo, “The Far Right in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

<sup>121</sup> Murtaza Hussain, “Rise of Europe’s Far Right Emboldens Serb Extremists and Threatens a Fragile Peace in Bosnia,” *The Intercept*, 15 November 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/11/15/rise-of-europes-far-right-emboldens-serb-extremists-and-threatens-a-fragile-peace-in-bosnia/>.

<sup>122</sup> Turčalo, “Bosnia Must Counter Russia’s Cultivation of Far-Right Extremists.”

<sup>123</sup> Hussain, “Rise of Europe’s Far Right Emboldens Serb Extremists.”

<sup>124</sup> Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021; See also: Beslin and Marija Ignjatijevic, “Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine.”

VRWE groups have, in the last few years, evidently tried to extend their international ties to VRWE in the West – allowing them to showcase their role in establishing a broader alternative to the global order.<sup>125</sup> This includes visits to and participation in events, conferences, and podcasts with VRWE groups in the EU, exchanges with VRWE groups in the US, including an (unsuccessful) attempt by an American to open a Western Balkan branch of *Generation Identity*, and media training provided by a British VRWE activist to groups in Serbia to improve their website and social media presence.<sup>126</sup> Similarly, the UK-based *Knights Templar International* have produced videos in Serbian and Croatian languages to warn of the ‘Islamification’ of Europe and also engaged with the region offline, by providing military-grade hardware to groups based in Kosovo.<sup>127</sup>

Online: In addition to physical links, the internet also acts as an important connection mechanism for VRWE in the Western Balkans, as they increasingly use English-language search terms and engage with narratives that are popular in similar movements around the world.<sup>128</sup> Online engagement allows VRWE actors in the Western Balkans to both connect to international narratives and counterparts, as well as to absorb global narratives. Additionally, the history of the Western Balkans is increasingly being used to justify extremist violence around the world.<sup>129</sup> Events such as the Bosnian Genocide have become ‘staples’ in the international VRWE discourse, alongside the Third Reich, the Confederacy, and the South African Apartheid regime.<sup>130</sup> In the context of the ‘Great Replacement’ theory, international extremists are framing the Western Balkans as a ‘front line in a clash of civilisations between the Christian and Islamic worlds’,<sup>131</sup> a role they believe the region already played in the 1990s under Slobodan Milošević, as well as in 1389 against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>132</sup>

A prominent example of a large-scale VRWE attack that was inspired by narratives revolving around the Western Balkans was the 2019 Christchurch attack. In his manifesto, the attacker references the ‘Great Replacement’ theory and criticises US and NATO involvement in various Western Balkan conflicts, having allegedly visited several countries in the region himself.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, his rifles and munitions were covered in the names of historical figures from Serbia and Montenegro and before opening fire, the attacker played a Serb nationalist song glorifying Radovan Karadžić and the Bosnian Genocide.<sup>134</sup> Similarly, the perpetrator of the 2011 Norway attack made nearly 1,000 mentions of the Yugoslav Wars in his manifesto, including praise for Karadžić and his role in the Srebrenica genocide.<sup>135</sup> Also, referring to the Christchurch attack as well as the ‘Great Replacement’ theory, the manifesto of the 2019 El Paso terrorist took inspiration from the Western Balkans, even if his attack was directed against Latino rather than Muslim populations.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.

<sup>126</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.; Kelly, “Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism.”; and, Jelena Cosic, Lawrence Marzouk and Ivan Angelovski, “British Nationalist Trains Serb Far-Right for ‘Online War’,” *Balkan Insight/the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)*, 1 May 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/01/british-nationalist-trains-serb-far-right-for-online-war-04-30-2018/>.

<sup>127</sup> Milo Comerford, “The Christchurch Attack and the Far Right’s Obsession With the Western Balkans,” *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, 19 March 2019, <https://institute.global/policy/christchurch-attack-and-far-rights-obsession-western-balkans>.

<sup>128</sup> Moonshot CVE, “Far-Right Extremist Searches in Bosnia & Herzegovina,” *Moonshot Investigation Report*, 21 October 2020, <https://moonshotteam.com/tracking-far-right-extremist-searches-in-bosnia-herzegovina/>; and, Comerford and Dukic, “Think Globally, Attack Locally.”

<sup>129</sup> Comerford, “The Christchurch Attack and the Far Right’s Obsession With the Western Balkans.”; and, Comerford and Dukic, “Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans.”

<sup>130</sup> Hussain, “Rise of Europe’s Far Right Emboldens Serb Extremists.”

<sup>131</sup> Comerford, “The Christchurch Attack and the Far Right’s Obsession With the Western Balkans.”

<sup>132</sup> Tregoures, “Kosovo, the Global Far Right, and the Threat to Liberalism.”

<sup>133</sup> Rrustemi, “Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe.”; and, Comerford, “The Christchurch Attack and the Far Right’s Obsession With the Western Balkans.”

<sup>134</sup> Jasmin Mujanović, “The Balkan Roots of the Far Right’s ‘Great Replacement’ Theory,” *New Lines Magazine*, 12 March 2021, <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/the-balkan-roots-of-the-far-rights-great-replacement-theory/>.

<sup>135</sup> Hussain, “Rise of Europe’s Far Right Emboldens Serb Extremists.”

<sup>136</sup> Mujanović, “The Balkan Roots of the Far Right’s ‘Great Replacement’ Theory.”

## Responses to VRWE

Responses to VRWE in the Western Balkans are multifaceted, including the local-, national-, and regional- governmental levels, as well as engagement from foreign governments, donors, and the international community.

### **Government Responses**

VRWE in the region can be challenging given the political mainstreaming in some of the Western Balkan countries (e.g., Serbia) of certain views and narratives shared with VRWE groups, including ethno-nationalism and historical revisionism.<sup>137</sup> Nevertheless, certain VRWE groups and activities have been banned in the region. For example, public display of neo-Nazi or (neo-)fascist emblems is forbidden, and groups including *Obraz* and *Nacionalni stroj* were banned in Serbia, though the Constitutional Court decided against banning other VRWE groups, such as *SNP Naši* and *SNP 1389*.<sup>138</sup> However, in countries including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania, general bans on the display of neo-Nazi or fascist symbols do not exist yet.<sup>139</sup>

Foreign fighting, with regard to those who participated in the conflict in Ukraine, was criminalised in all of the Western Balkan countries, but conviction rates and penalties for those who joined the conflict in Ukraine are much lower than those for FTFs returning from Syria and Iraq (e.g., many receive suspended sentences).<sup>140</sup> This is in part due to the fact that the former were generally categorised as foreign fighters, while the latter were classified as FTFs.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, some governments reportedly gave the fighters in the Ukraine a chance to return to their countries of origin before relevant laws came into force.<sup>142</sup>

Hate crime legislation and anti-discrimination laws exist across the region, requiring higher sentences for criminal offenses that were motivated by hatred based on race, religion, national or ethnic affiliation, sex, and sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>143</sup> However, implementation of such laws has been slow, with sentencing under hate crime legislation remaining relatively low.<sup>144</sup> For example, in 2020, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which compiles an OSCE-wide annual hate crime reporting database, included only 103 hate crimes recorded by the police in the six countries included in the Western Balkans region and only 9 sentences for such crimes.<sup>145</sup> In contrast, in the UK, which has a population of around 3.8 times the size of that of the Western Balkans, 125,848 hate crime incidents were reported by police and 9,510 people were sentenced for hate crimes in the same period.<sup>146</sup>

Aside from laws prohibiting the public display of extremist symbols or emblems, crimes inspired by VRWE ideologies are also partly covered by hate crime legislation. However, in addition to a general reluctance to apply hate crime legislation in the region, some interviewees also indicated that following some efforts by national governments (particularly in Serbia) to bring some of the more active VRWE groups and football hooligans under control (e.g., their violence against the LGBTQ+ population and other outgroups) there is a general sense that such crimes no longer present a

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<sup>137</sup> Ejodus and Jureković, ed., *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Kuloglija, Stojanovic, Mejdini, Kajosevic, and Stojkovski, "Balkan States Failing to Address Threat."

<sup>140</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.

<sup>141</sup> Interviewee 15, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>142</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.

<sup>143</sup> Ejodus and Jureković, ed., *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*.

<sup>144</sup> Chua et al., "Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans.,"; Karčić and Turčalo, "The Far Right in Bosnia and Herzegovina.,"; and, Interviewee 18, Western Balkans Researcher, 12 October 2021; Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021.

<sup>145</sup> "2020 Hate Crime Data," *OSCE Hate Crime Reporting*, 2020, <https://hatecrime.osce.org/hate-crime-data?year=2020>.

<sup>146</sup> "United Kingdom," *OSCE Hate Crime Reporting*, 2020, <https://hatecrime.osce.org/united-kingdom?year=2020>.

threat.<sup>147</sup> Nonetheless, certain groups remain marginalised and vulnerable to attacks across the region, including LGBTQ+ persons, Roma, and other national and religious minorities.<sup>148</sup>

### **Donor Responses**

Efforts to prevent and counter VE in the region have become a growing focus area for donors, who were already active in the region in the context of post-war reconstruction, reconciliation, and democratisation efforts over the last two decades.<sup>149</sup> External actors (e.g., the EU, the UNDP, the OSCE, as well as countries like the US, the UK, and Germany, and organisations like Save the Children, Hedayah, the Westminster Foundation, and the British Council) are active in the P/CVE space in the region.<sup>150</sup> This has led to the field becoming somewhat overcrowded in the last five years, particularly in countries like Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which struggled with high numbers of citizens who left to fight, or live, in Syria and Iraq.<sup>151</sup> To coordinate the abundance of internal and external actor's involved in the field of P/CVE in the region, the IISG (Integrative Internal Security Governance) has been mapping P/CVE needs in the region and matching them with programming and expertise.<sup>152</sup>

In cooperation with the international donor community, local governments have also adopted national P/CVE strategies and action plans for the implementation of these strategies.<sup>153</sup> Established in response to the departure of large numbers of citizens from the region to Syria and Iraq, the main focus of these strategies and action plans and their associated programming has been on Islamist extremism.<sup>154</sup> However, since these strategies were set up, the threat situation in the Western Balkans has changed and violence associated with VRWE has become a more prominent challenge.<sup>155</sup> Therefore, as many of the P/CVE strategies and action plans are about to be renewed, there is an opportunity to include VRWE as well as other emerging violent extremist threats, in addition to the remaining threat posed by Islamist violent extremism and returning FTFs and their families.<sup>156</sup>

While national strategies have thus far focused on Islamist extremism, some programming and awareness does already exist in the region when it comes to VRWE. This includes the work of media outlets and investigative journalists,<sup>157</sup> as well as research efforts on ethno-nationalism, such as initiatives implemented by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights<sup>158</sup> and the 'Prevention of Ethnonationalism and Violent Extremism in Bosnia' project, supported by the Netherlands through the MANTRA programme.<sup>159</sup>

**Role of the EU:** The EU is one of the key actors in the P/CVE space in the Western Balkans region.<sup>160</sup> While enthusiasm in the region about the prospect of integration into the EU has faded in the decades since the option was first discussed, given how slow the process has been, the EU is still able to exert

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<sup>147</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021; Interviewee 15, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>148</sup> Stakic, "Securitization of LGBTIQ Minority in Serbian Far-right Discourses."; Interviewee 16, EU Representative, 5 October 2021; Kuloglija, Stojanovic, Mejdini, Kajosevic, and Stojkovski, "Balkan States Failing to Address Threat."; and, Karčić and Turčalo, "The Far Right in Bosnia and Herzegovina."

<sup>149</sup> Perry, *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia*, 47.

<sup>150</sup> Bečirević et al., "Preventing Violent Extremism, the Balkans: Policy Brief Summarising the EU and Other Stakeholder's Prevention Strategy Towards Violent Extremism in the Region – The Balkans," in *PREVEX Preventing Violent Extremism: the Balkans*, ed. Diana Mishkova and Simeon Evstatiev, 31 December 2020, <https://www.prevex-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/D5.1-Policy-brief-the-Balkans-1.pdf>.; and, Perry, *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia*.

<sup>151</sup> Perry, *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia*, 49.

<sup>152</sup> Interviewee 12, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>153</sup> Chua et al., "Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans."

<sup>154</sup> Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021; Interviewee 12, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>155</sup> Kuloglija, Stojanovic, Mejdini, Kajosevic, and Stojkovski, "Balkan States Failing to Address Threat."

<sup>156</sup> Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021.

<sup>157</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.

<sup>158</sup> Ejodus and Jureković, ed., *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*.

<sup>159</sup> Majda Halilović and Nejra Veljan, "Exploring Ethno-Nationalist Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Atlantic Initiative*, July 2021, <https://atlanticinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Exploring-ethno-nationalist-extremism-in-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina.pdf>.

<sup>160</sup> See 'Enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans': [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/enhanced-eu-engagement-western-balkans\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/enhanced-eu-engagement-western-balkans_en).

influence on P/CVE policies in the region through the setting of expectations and norms and the funding of certain efforts.<sup>161</sup> The EU strategy for the Western Balkans in the area of P/CVE is contained in the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans, which came into effect in 2018.<sup>162</sup> As part of the ongoing dialogue over counter-terrorism and P/CVE with the six countries in the region, the EU hosts meetings twice a year to discuss the needs of each partner country, as well as their progress in the implementation of the six bilateral counter-terrorism arrangements that were agreed upon between the EU and the Western Balkans countries.<sup>163</sup> These meetings provide a good opportunity to address the EU's priorities, such as the inclusion of all forms of VE in strategy documents, programming, and enforcement efforts.<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, they provide an opportunity for national P/CVE coordinators to convince their colleagues from the region to accept that VRWE is a legitimate challenge that should not be ignored.<sup>165</sup>

In addition to the ongoing dialogue with the region as part of the Joint Action Plan, the EU also engages with the region through the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which has recently expanded its activities to the Western Balkans, with its network of 6,000 academics and policy-makers aiming to transfer the knowledge that has been gained from their exchanges in and with the EU for the last ten years to the region.<sup>166</sup> Yet, despite these extensive engagements with the region's countries, the EU is in a difficult position in the region given the increasing anti-EU rhetoric in the Western Balkans, spread by VRWE and mainstream actors, which is also further reinforced through Russian influence. While the economic aspects of EU integration as well as the freedom of movement face little opposition, there is a widespread view in the region that 'liberal' European values should not replace more conservative values in the Orthodox parts of the region.<sup>167</sup> Additionally, there are questions of whom the EU should support, for example, in confrontations between protesters demanding democratisation vis-à-vis authoritarian, anti-democratic regimes in the region.<sup>168</sup>

P/CVE Programming Recommendations: In order to effectively address the emerging threat of VRWE in the region, the EU and other actors involved in counter-terrorism and P/CVE in the region should first focus on supporting efforts to properly understand and research the problem in the context of the Western Balkans reality and local and geopolitical considerations.<sup>169</sup> As programming aimed at Islamist extremism cannot simply be copied and pasted to fit VRWE, a thorough understanding of the multiplicity of causes leading individuals to violence inspired by VRWE is needed.<sup>170</sup> This includes research into the drivers of VRWE radicalisation and recruitment in comparison with what is already known about these processes in the context of violent Islamist extremism in the region, as well as research into the Balkan-specific narratives, disinformation, and hate speech circulating online.<sup>171</sup> It also includes building up an understanding of how responses need to be adapted (e.g., programming for FTFs returning from Iraq and Syria compared to fighters returning from Ukraine).<sup>172</sup>

In addition to supporting research, there should also be a focus on supporting local civil society organisations and other actors who know the local needs and challenges, rather than imposing a

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<sup>161</sup> Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021; Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021.; and, Bećirević et al., "Preventing Violent Extremism, the Balkans."

<sup>162</sup> Bećirević et al., "Preventing Violent Extremism, the Balkans."

<sup>163</sup> Interviewee 12, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.; and, Bećirević et al., "Preventing Violent Extremism, the Balkans."

<sup>164</sup> Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021.

<sup>165</sup> Interviewee 15, EU Representative, 25 October 2021; Interviewee 18, Western Balkans Researcher, 12 October 2021.

<sup>166</sup> Bećirević et al., "Preventing Violent Extremism, the Balkans."; and, Interviewee 12, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>167</sup> Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021.

<sup>168</sup> Chua et al., "Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans."; and, Interviewee 18, Western Balkans Researcher, 12 October 2021.

<sup>169</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021; Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021.

<sup>170</sup> Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021.

<sup>171</sup> Comerford and Dukic, "Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans."; and, Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.

<sup>172</sup> Interviewee 17, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 October 2021.

P/CVE agenda that is in line with the interests and priorities of external donors such as the EU.<sup>173</sup> Achieving a balance between local, nation-wide, and region-wide programming that is well-coordinated and relevant to the local context and politically sensitive is a delicate effort.<sup>174</sup> However, meaningfully including local and regional actors is necessary to address the complex issue of VRWE in the region with the necessary nuance and local buy-in.<sup>175</sup>

More broadly, to provide a basis for effective programming addressing VRWE in the region, the underlying conflicts in the region need to be addressed, including the border dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, the administrative division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the calls of Albanian actors for a 'Greater Albania'.<sup>176</sup> This also includes strengthening the rule of law and democracy in the region, possibly with the support of 'neutral' international actors (as opposed to the EU, given the EU's difficult choice between prioritising either stability or democracy in the Western Balkans).<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Interviewee 21, Western Balkans Researcher, 4 November 2021.

<sup>174</sup> Comerford and Dukic, "Think Globally, Attack Locally."

<sup>175</sup> Comerford and Dukic, "Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans."

<sup>176</sup> Interviewee 18, Western Balkans Researcher, 12 October 2021.; and, Rrustemi, "Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe."

<sup>177</sup> Rrustemi, "Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe."

### III. TURKEY

This chapter explores the case study of Turkey. It looks first at the VRWE threat picture, including the historical context and prominent groups and actors, then at the transnational connections and role of the diaspora community, and wraps up with an overview of the current responses to VRWE.

#### VRWE Threat Picture

VRWE in the Turkish context is not directly comparable to VRWE in Europe, North America, or Australasia. Rather than being defined by white supremacism, it is mainly defined by a form of exclusive nationalism that is not based on a positive definition of what it means to be Turkish, but instead on clearly defined enemies and outgroups.<sup>178</sup>

Unlike in many other countries, VRWE in Turkey does not manifest clandestinely in autonomous groups directly opposed to the government and the state, but it is integrated into the structures of the state, and it represents narratives and views that are widespread in mainstream society – including attitudes regarding Kurds, Greeks, Cypriots, Armenians, and Asians, among others.<sup>179</sup> VRWE in Turkey is not located on the fringes of the political and societal spectrum, rather VRWE standpoints are, at times, publicly supported by leading political figures – notably after the AKP entered into a coalition with a nationalist right-wing coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), following the last elections in 2018.

While Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) gained political capital in the past by creating a sizable middle class in the country, the current economic crisis in combination with the migration crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic have led to dwindling numbers in the polls, necessitating the support of coalition parties to stay in power.<sup>180</sup> Erdoğan, who promised to root out VRWE networks in military, police, and the judiciary when he first came to power two decades ago, has since had to reverse his course.<sup>181</sup> Not only does he seem to tolerate VRWE now, but his government even replaced several civil servants, police officers, and military officials accused of being followers of the Gülen movement after the 2016 coup attempt with AKP loyalists and members of the MHP – including some members of the VRWE group the Grey Wolves.<sup>182</sup>

The state's tolerance for VRWE views and actors has also extended to the activities of Turkish mafia boss Alaattin Çakıcı, who was recently released from prison, having terrorised political rivals for decades – including his alleged involvement in at least 41 political murders.<sup>183</sup> Çakıcı was also connected to Mehmet Ali Ağca (the terrorist who shot and nearly killed Pope John Paul II in 1981), having helped him escape from a Turkish jail following his arrest for allegedly killing a newspaper editor.<sup>184</sup> Since Çakıcı's release from prison, he has issued a death threat to opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu on Twitter.<sup>185</sup> Nevertheless, Çakıcı has met with MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli and is not currently facing any consequences for his actions. Similarly, mafia leader Kürşat Yılmaz, who was initially sentenced to 66 years for activities including the establishment of a crime organisation as well

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<sup>178</sup> Ihsan Yılmaz and Eviane Leidig, "Webinar on the Far Right in Turkey," *C-REX - Center for Research on Extremism*, 4 August 2021, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/events/2021/global-perspectives-on-the-far-right/0804-yilmaz-turkey.html>.

<sup>179</sup> Interviewee 8, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>180</sup> Interviewee 10, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>181</sup> Thomas Rammerstorfer, *Graue Wölfe: Türkische Rechtsextreme und ihr Einfluss in Deutschland und Österreich* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2018), 49.

<sup>182</sup> Arsu, Popp and Schneider, "Joining the Wolves."

<sup>183</sup> Arsu, Popp and Schneider, "Joining the Wolves."; and, Fikret Asland and Kemal Bozay ed., *Graue Wölfe Heulen Wieder: Türkische Faschisten und ihre Vernetzung in Deutschland* (Münster: Unrast Verlag, 2012), 169.

<sup>184</sup> Martin A. Lee, "Turkish Dirty War Revealed, but Papal Shooting Still Obscured," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 April 1998, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-apr-12-op-38664-story.html>.

<sup>185</sup> Arsu, Popp and Schneider, "Joining the Wolves."

as robbery and released after his sentence was reduced after a re-trial, also visited Bahçeli following his release from prison.<sup>186</sup>

### **Historical Context**

Turkish VRWE ideology has its roots in anti-Western resentments, which fosters a victimhood identity alongside a collective trauma connected to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Treaty of Sevres. The insecurity and fears related to the suggested division of the Ottoman Empire between European Powers, following its defeat in World War I, and the occupation of large swathes of Anatolia by Western Powers led to the rebuilding of the state as a secular and homogenous entity, with the aim of avoiding future external attempts to divide the country.<sup>187</sup> This, in turn, meant that minorities such as the Jews, Alevites, or Azeris were marginalised and suppressed – forced into a homogenous Turkish nation with little room to practice their own religions, cultures, or speak their own languages.<sup>188</sup>

Turkey has a long history of fighting against VE and terrorism, including its fight against the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), which aimed to force Turkey into acknowledging its responsibility for the genocide against the Armenians between the 1970s and 1991, and its struggle with the Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary People's Liberation Front (DHKP-C), which still exists today.<sup>189</sup> The Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karekera Kurdistan or PKK), which has been active since 1984 and aims to achieve the establishment of a Kurdish state, is currently classified by the Turkish government as the most significant terror threat inside the country, and is listed as a terrorist organisation by the US and the EU.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the 12th president of Turkey in 2014 representing the AKP. Following the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, Gülenists (i.e., the followers of Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, who Erdoğan blamed for the coup) have been accused of membership in a terrorist organisation labelled the 'Fethullah Terrorist Organisation' (FETÖ). This has led to the detention of tens of thousands suspected Gülenists, as well as the dismissal of around 150,000 civil servants.<sup>190</sup>

In recent years, Islamist groups (most notably ISIL/Da'esh) have also been significant concerns, with large numbers of FTFs passing through Turkey into neighbouring Iraq and Syria. Additionally, ISIL/Da'esh has claimed responsibility for several terrorist attacks on Turkish soil.<sup>191</sup> Aside from ISIL/Da'esh – al-Qaeda, Turkish Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas, are also active in the country.<sup>192</sup> While left-wing and Islamist VE organisations are acknowledged by the Turkish government as a threat, no groups associated with VRWE are on the country's designation list or VE radar.

### **Prominent Groups and Actors**

The MHP does not have a monopoly on VRWE beliefs in Turkey, sharing many of its narratives with other small VRWE and Islamist parties, as well as with parts of the wider population – particularly on suspicions against minorities, hostility toward the West (including the EU), and anti-Kurdish views.<sup>193</sup> However, the party and its informal youth-wing are currently the most prominent supporters of VRWE in the country. Compared to VRWE parties and groups in Europe and elsewhere, the MHP is a relatively

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<sup>186</sup> DuvaR.english, "Turkish mafia boss Kürşat Yılmaz visits MHP leader Bahçeli after release from prison," 3 November 2021, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-mafia-boss-kursat-yilmaz-visits-mhp-leader-bahceli-after-release-from-prison-news-59424>.

<sup>187</sup> Yılmaz and Leidig, "Webinar on the Far Right in Turkey."

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Göktuğ Sönmez, "Radicalisation, Violent Extremism, and Turkey's Fight," *Orta Doğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM)/The Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies*, Report no. 202, May 2017, <https://icare4all.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/209eng2.pdf>.

<sup>190</sup> "Turkey: Extremism and Terrorism," *Counter Extremism Project (CEP) Country Report*, n.d., <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/turkey>.

<sup>191</sup> CEP Country Report, "Turkey."

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Yılmaz and Leidig, "Webinar on the Far Right in Turkey."

young party, founded in 1965 by Alparslan Türkeş, a colonel who was involved in a coup against the Turkish government in 1960.<sup>194</sup> Especially in the 1970s, the party and its militant youth wing, the Ülkü Ocakları (Idealist Hearths) or Grey Wolves, founded in 1968, were involved in violence and murder campaigns against journalists, activists, leftists, members of the Alevite community, Kurds, and other perceived enemies of the movement – resulting in the deaths of around 6,000 people in the 1970s alone.<sup>195</sup> When the Turkish army seized power in 1980, the MHP was banned temporarily.

After the death of Türkeş, the current leader Devlet Bahçeli took over and tried to reinvent the party in a more centrist image, downplaying ultra-nationalist and extremist views and distancing himself and the party from violence.<sup>196</sup> While scattered acts of violence directed at outgroups remain common among followers of different parts of the Grey Wolves and other VRWE groupings,<sup>197</sup> Bahçeli aims to prevent large-scale acts of violence against refugees and other groups.<sup>198</sup> Therefore, the Grey Wolves currently do not have a strong role in Turkey and they do not typically participate in demonstrations or other public events as a separate entity, but they are represented on the political level under the umbrella of the MHP.<sup>199</sup>

Seeing how successful the outreach of the MHP youth wing was, President Erdoğan also started to focus on youth outreach to recruit future AKP supporters – setting up youth clubs and organisations modelled after the Grey Wolves.<sup>200</sup> This prominently includes the Ottoman Hearths (Osmanlı Ocakları), which grew to around 2 million members in Turkey and included outposts in countries that host large Turkish diaspora communities. The Ottoman Hearths became essential in the AKP's suppression of dissidents in anti-government protests.<sup>201</sup>

People's Special Operations (Halk Özel Harekat) is another group that is informally linked to the AKP and ready to support Erdoğan against political opponents, as could be seen during the 2016 coup attempt. Both the People's Special Operations and the Ottoman Hearths were involved in fighting against those staging the coup.<sup>202</sup>

### ***Narratives and Outgroups***

Fear for the survival of the state and concerns about a world conspiracy to divide Turkey further after the fall of the Ottoman Empire come into play in the context of anti-Western attitudes that are part of Turkish VRWE – and, to some extent, mainstream views.<sup>203</sup> This perspective of the Turkish nation directly translates into VRWE narratives that focus on Turkish supremacy – in line with Hitler supporter and MHP founder Alparslan Türkeş' credo 'the Turkish race above all others'.<sup>204</sup> In its more extreme expressions, this idea of Turkish supremacy also translates into the pan-Turkish dream of the great

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<sup>194</sup> Gamze Avci, "The Nationalist Movement Party's Euroscepticism: Party Ideology Meets Strategy," *South European Society and Politics* 16, no. 3, (August 2011): 435-447, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2011.598359>.

<sup>195</sup> Kemal Bozay, "Türkischer Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland - Die Grauen Wölfe: Antisemitisch, Rassistisch und Demokratiefeindlich," *American Jewish Committee Berlin Ramer Institute*, 27 April 2021, [https://ajcgermany.org/system/files/document/AJC-Berlin\\_GrauenWolfe-Broschuere-RGB-A4.pdf](https://ajcgermany.org/system/files/document/AJC-Berlin_GrauenWolfe-Broschuere-RGB-A4.pdf); and, Fawzi Al Ghazali, "The Grey Wolves: Erdoğan's extremist arm in Europe," *TRENDS Research & Advisory Insights*, 25 November 2020, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/the-grey-wolves-erdogans-extremist-arm-in-europe/>.

<sup>196</sup> Avci, "The Nationalist Movement Party's Euroscepticism."

<sup>197</sup> Daniel Derya Bellut, "Xenophobia Flares Up in Ankara as Mob Attacks Syrian Shops," *InfoMigrants*, 13 August 2021, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/34308/xenophobia-flares-up-in-ankara-as-mob-attacks-syrian-shops>; and, Interviewee 11, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>198</sup> Interviewee 8, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>199</sup> Interviewee 10, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>200</sup> Suat Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey," *Small Wars Journal*, 3 March 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/rise-paramilitary-groups-turkey>.

<sup>201</sup> Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey."

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Interviewee 8, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>204</sup> Lee, "Turkish Dirty War Revealed."

empire 'Turan', which some hope will unite all Turkish populations stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia and into the autonomous Xinjiang region in China.<sup>205</sup>

Consequently, minorities including Jews, Alevites, and Azeris, but also Armenians, Kurds, Greeks and Cypriots, as well as LGBTQ+ individuals are portrayed as clear outgroups for Turkish VRWE groups and individuals.<sup>206</sup> Similarly, political dissidents and political opponents (including Gülenists) are also deemed to be antithetical to the idea of true Turkishness.<sup>207</sup> In the last few years, VRWE groups in Turkey have also capitalised on economic instability and the arrival of around 4 million refugees, directing xenophobic narratives as well as sporadic outbursts of violence at refugees mainly from Syria and Afghanistan.<sup>208</sup> Rather than being inspired by Islamophobic sentiment, as is the case in other parts of the world, anti-migrant sentiments in Turkey are mainly based on national identity and paired with deep economic anxiety to feed xenophobic narratives.

Religion, in this context, plays an ambivalent role, with some parts of the Turkish VRWE scene representing an Islamic Turkish nationalism, while others (including the original base of the MHP) are more in line with a Kemalist, secular concept of the Turkish state.<sup>209</sup> However, with group splits and changes in the domestic political landscape, the relationship between nationalism and religion has arguably changed, with some nationalists becoming more religious and some Islamists becoming more nationalistic.<sup>210</sup> For example, the Turkmen – ethnic Turkish populations that have lived in the Turkmen mountain area in Syria, Iraq and Iran since the 11<sup>th</sup> century – formed rebel groups (e.g., the Syrian Turkmen Brigades, the Jabal al-Turkman Brigade, etc.) to fight against the Syrian regime alongside opposition groups such as the Nusra Front and the Islamist Ahrar al-Sham. They simultaneously espouse Turkish nationalist and Islamist ideologies, and many Turkmen rebels, including prominent group commanders, are affiliated with the Grey Wolves.<sup>211</sup> In contrast to the largely secular base of the MHP in Turkey, offshoots of the Grey Wolves in diaspora communities in the EU are often closely linked to religious organisations or Turkish-Islamic cultural associations.<sup>212</sup> As a result, the Grey Wolves have an indirect influence on the prevailing interpretation and understanding of Islam in large parts of the Muslim communities in some European countries.<sup>213</sup>

### **Current Threat Level and the Role of Diaspora Communities**

Through the Grey Wolves, Turkish VRWE ideologies are strongly represented in most of the countries where large Turkish diasporas live. For example, in France, the Grey Wolves have reportedly infiltrated the Islamic communities, thus exerting influence over religious Turkish diaspora communities.<sup>214</sup> Often, this is done with the aim of preventing their assimilation into the host countries, to secure their

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<sup>205</sup> Hansjörg Friedrich Müller, "Ein Instrument in Erdogans Werkzeugkasten": Die Grauen Wölfe Reden von Einer Türkischen Herrenrasse und Wollen in der Deutschen Politik Fuss Fassen," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 26 April 2021, <https://www.nzz.ch/international/deutschland/ein-instrument-erdogans-tuerkische-rechtsextreme-in-deutschland-ld.1613536?reduced=true>; Bozay, "Türkischer Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland."; MENA Research and Study Center, "One of Erdogan's Instruments: Turkish Right-Wing Extremists in Germany," *MENA Research and Study Center*, 2 June 2021, <https://mena-studies.org/one-of-erdogans-instruments-turkish-right-wing-extremists-in-germany/>; Asland and Bozay ed., *Graue Wölfe Heulen Wieder*, 130.; and, Emre Arslan, *Der Mythos der Nation im Transnationalen Raum: Türkische Graue Wölfe in Deutschland* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009), 120.

<sup>206</sup> Bozay, "Türkischer Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland."; Mona Flaskamp, "The Blatant Antisemitism of the Turkish Grey Wolves in Germany," *American Jewish Committee Berlin Ramer Institute*, 24 June 2021, <https://ajcgermany.org/en/comment/blatant-antisemitism-turkish-grey-wolves-germany>; and, Interviewee 22, Turkey Researcher, 19 November 2021.

<sup>207</sup> Interviewee 8, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.; and, Rammerstorfer, *Graue Wölfe: Türkische Rechtsextreme*.

<sup>208</sup> Bellut, "Xenophobia Flares Up in Ankara."; Interviewee 11, EU Representative, 25 October 2021; and, Interviewee 8, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>209</sup> Müller, "Ein Instrument in Erdogans Werkzeugkasten."; Bozay, "Türkischer Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland."; and, Interviewee 22, Turkey Researcher, 19 November 2021.

<sup>210</sup> Müller, "Ein Instrument in Erdogans Werkzeugkasten."; MENA Research and Study Center, "One of Erdogan's Instruments."; and, Rammerstorfer, *Graue Wölfe: Türkische Rechtsextreme*.

<sup>211</sup> BBC News, "Who are the Turkmen in Syria?" BBC, 24 November 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34910389>; Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey's nationalist 'Gray Wolves' enter Syrian fray," *AL-Monitor*, 3 February 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/02/turkey-syria-grey-wolves-emerge-as-jihadists.html>.

<sup>212</sup> Bozay, "Türkischer Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland."

<sup>213</sup> MENA Research and Study Center, "One of Erdogan's Instruments."

<sup>214</sup> Interviewee 10, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

ties to the Turkish state as well as their political support back home.<sup>215</sup> Offshoot organisations of the Grey Wolves are more closely aligned with the daily lives and opinions of Turkish people in Europe and elsewhere than those living in Turkey.<sup>216</sup> These groups take a different format than they do in the Turkish context, where they do not have a strong street presence given their close ties to the political leadership.<sup>217</sup>

Given the increasingly close relationship between the MHP and the AKP in Turkey, the Grey Wolves are arguably 'one of the instruments in Erdogan's toolkit when it comes to influencing the diaspora'. In addition, authorities in Germany, for example, have accused the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) of using 6,000 informants on German territory to pressure opponents of the Turkish government in Germany.<sup>218</sup> There is no clear evidence that the Grey Wolves are linked with Turkish intelligence services.<sup>219</sup> However, they do share the intelligence services' interest in taking action against political opponents, Armenians, and other outgroups, so they are likely supportive of these efforts – possibly helping them by providing information about opponents and taking matters into their own hands by threatening or attacking them.<sup>220</sup>

It should be noted that only a minority of Grey Wolves' group membership in Turkish diaspora communities are involved in violent acts. However, attacks against some of the traditional 'enemies' of VRWE groups in Turkey have been on the rise over the last few years, particularly in Europe. In Germany, this includes the murder of a Kurd in 2020 by a perpetrator who was associated with the Grey Wolves;<sup>221</sup> attacks and threats against Armenians in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict;<sup>222</sup> and threats against German Green Party MP Cem Özdemir, who regularly speaks out against the Grey Wolves in public.<sup>223</sup> In France, several people were injured in October 2020 in clashes between Turkish nationalists associated with the Grey Wolves and Armenians protesting over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>224</sup> Also, in Austria, the Grey Wolves were involved in violent clashes against Kurdish and leftist groups in the summer of 2020.<sup>225</sup>

Separate from the Grey Wolves, the Turkish ultranationalist group Osmanen Germania (which was banned in Germany in 2018) was also involved in violent crimes, attempted murders, and extortion, among other crimes.<sup>226</sup>

In response to these violent incidents, several European countries have discussed or implemented bans of the Grey Wolves or signs and symbols associated with it. Turkey reacted to these bans with threats of countermeasures, appealing to the freedom of assembly and expression of Turkish diaspora communities.<sup>227</sup> Contradictorily, the Turkish Foreign Ministry claimed that 'it is known that there is no such movement called Grey Wolves', while at the same time denouncing the ban of the group's wolf salute.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Interviewee 10, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>216</sup> Interviewee 8, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>217</sup> Interviewee 10, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>218</sup> Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey."

<sup>219</sup> Interviewee 10, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>220</sup> Susana Santana, "Angriffe auf Journalisten-Erdogan-Kritiker fürchten um ihr Leben," *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*, 9 July 2021, <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/gewalt-journalisten-tuerkei-deutschland-100.html#xtor=CS5-21>.

<sup>221</sup> MENA Research and Study Center, "One of Erdogan's Instruments."

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Müller, "Ein Instrument in Erdogans Werkzeugkasten."

<sup>224</sup> Ezel Sahinkaya, "Shadowy Turkish Ultra-Nationalist Group Under Scrutiny in Europe," *VOA News*, 8 December 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch-shadowy-turkish-ultra-nationalist-group-under-scrutiny-europe/6199344.html>.

<sup>225</sup> Bernhard Ichner and Michael Pekovics, "Graue Wölfe Gegen Linke: Erneut Ausschreitungen in Favoriten," *Kurier*, 27 June 2020, <https://kurier.at/chronik/wien/graue-woelfe-gegen-linke-erneut-ausschreitungen-in-favoriten/400954298>.

<sup>226</sup> Burcu Ozcelik, "Germany's 'Gray Wolves' and Turkish Radicalization," *New Lines Magazine*, 23 June 2021, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/germanys-gray-wolves-and-turkish-radicalization/>.

<sup>227</sup> Richard Connor, "German Lawmakers Urge Ban on Extreme-Right Turkish Gray Wolves," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, 7 November 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-lawmakers-urge-ban-on-extreme-right-turkish-gray-wolves/a-55528032>.

<sup>228</sup> Sahinkaya, "Shadowy Turkish Ultra-Nationalist Group."

Despite these bans and the violence associated with some of these groups, membership in groups associated with the Grey Wolves is on the rise among Turks living in Europe and beyond. In Germany, where the political and youth wings of the MHP have been represented since 1973, an estimated 18,000 people belong to the Grey Wolf scene – making it one of the largest VRWE movements in the country, with more than three times the membership of the NPD.<sup>229</sup>

What makes these groups attractive to many Turkish migrants in Germany and other European countries is a combination of narratives that are popular among comparable groups in Turkey and narratives that are directly relevant for them as migrants. For example, the hatred of Armenians and the opposition to acknowledging the Armenian genocide, as well as the hatred of Kurds, are as prevalent among Turkish diasporas as they are in Turkey. However, depending on which group is most represent or most active in their host countries, their targets might be slightly different. For example, in France, where large numbers of Armenians live, violence by the Grey Wolves tends to be directed against those groups.<sup>230</sup> However, in Austria or Germany, where many Kurds live, Kurdish groups are often the target of VRWE narratives and violence.<sup>231</sup>

Simultaneously, the Grey Wolves also take advantage of locally relevant dynamics in their recruitment narratives, such as anti-immigrant sentiments in the respective host countries. Overt or subtle forms of xenophobia and discrimination, in combination with sometimes limited educational opportunities and career prospects for Turkish migrants in host countries, can intensify questions of belonging and provide a fertile ground for romanticised stereotypes of the Turkish homeland and their Turkish heritage, which can positively affect the appeal of VRWE groups.<sup>232</sup> This also exemplifies the ambivalent relationship between Turkish VRWE movements, such as the Grey Wolves, and international VRWE groups, which are stoking anti-Turkish and anti-migrant sentiments in Europe and beyond – even while they are happy to partner with the Grey Wolves on an ad-hoc basis against Kurds and other shared targets.<sup>233</sup>

### ***Transnational Connections***

As indicated above, and in contrast to VRWE groups and movements in other countries, Turkish VRWE groups and ideologies are not as linked into international VRWE movements and narratives. While they do pick up certain topics of debate that are popular among other VRWE groups around the world, such as anti-migrant sentiments or scepticism regarding Covid-19 vaccines, they do not seem to engage in regular exchanges with their international counterparts.

However, that does not mean that their narratives are limited to the Turkish context only. For example, dialogues between the MHP leadership and other VRWE parties in Europe did take place at some point in time. Most notably, in the 1970s, MHP founder Alparslan Türkeş emphasised the close relationship between the ideologies of the MHP and the neo-Nazi German National Democratic Party (NPD), who also publicly supported the MHP, following the principle of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ (given the shared outgroups and political enemies of the two parties).<sup>234</sup> Anti-Semitism, in particular, acts as a bridge between the otherwise moderately different political ideologies of the two movements. In 1977, Türkeş even publicly thanked the NPD for their ‘generous financial support’ of MHP political campaigns – support that was allegedly given in exchange for military training for members of the NDP by the MHP.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> MENA Research and Study Center, “One of Erdogan’s Instruments.”; and, Bozay, “Türkischer Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland.”

<sup>230</sup> Interviewee 10, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>231</sup> Interviewee 22, Turkey Researcher, 19 November 2021.

<sup>232</sup> Özcelik, “Germany’s ‘Gray Wolves’ and Turkish Radicalization.”; and, Asland and Bozay ed., *Graue Wölfe Heulen Wieder*, 256.

<sup>233</sup> Bozay, “Türkischer Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland.”

<sup>234</sup> Bozay, “Türkischer Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland.”; and, Rammerstorfer, *Graue Wölfe: Türkische Rechtsextreme*.

<sup>235</sup> Rammerstorfer, *Graue Wölfe: Türkische Rechtsextreme*, 61.

Such direct cooperation between VRWE groups or parties is much rarer now, with cooperation only happening on an ad-hoc basis, such as the cooperation between German VRWE groups and members of the Grey Wolves in demonstrations against the Kurdish PKK in Nürnberg in 2016,<sup>236</sup> or the involvement of individuals flying MHP flags in the 2020 attempt of VRWE and other groups to storm the German Reichstag.<sup>237</sup> At the same time, however, European VRWE groups and parties have also acted in opposition to and spoken out against the Grey Wolves in some instances. For example, members of the European Parliament's right-wing Identity and Democracy group have requested the inclusion of the Grey Wolves on the EU list of terrorist groups.<sup>238</sup> Similarly, a members of the Austrian right-wing party FPÖ have spoken out against the Grey Wolves, referring to them as an 'ultranationalist group that is one of the main enemies of our democracy'.<sup>239</sup>

## Responses to VRWE

Responses to VRWE in Turkey are relatively non-existent, due to political sensitivities around the definition of VRWE in the country.

### Government Response

Given the close ties between the government and VRWE movements in Turkey, VRWE inspired violence is not a priority for the government. Instead, the majority of government CT capacity is focused on pursuing the Gülenist movement, the PKK, and Islamist groups such as ISIL/Da'esh or al-Qaeda.<sup>240</sup> While the PKK is also recognised as a terrorist organisation in the EU, Turkey arguably applies terrorism charges in relation to the PKK quite loosely, similar to the labelling of political opponents as members of FETÖ (which is not recognised as a terrorist organisation in the EU or elsewhere).<sup>241</sup> More than 80,000 individuals were arrested or imprisoned for alleged links to FETÖ in Turkey since the 2016 coup attempt.<sup>242</sup> In contrast, responses to violence inspired by VRWE ideologies have been lacking in Turkey.<sup>243</sup>

Hate crime legislation also has limited use in response to incidents inspired by VRWE ideologies in Turkey, especially given that this legislation is still not in line with international standards. For example, hate speech, hate crime, and anti-discrimination laws do not include provisions protecting gender identity, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.<sup>244</sup> Provisions in the Turkish penal code against the incitement of hatred against individuals can partly apply to the hate crime context, however, they are rarely applied to such cases in practice – often, instead, it is being applied in cases where people speak out against the government.<sup>245</sup> Turkey has signalled some general willingness to engage on human rights and equality issues, but this willingness does not extend to issues relating to the rights and protection of LGBTQ+ people, who are often the victims of VRWE threats and attacks in Turkey.<sup>246</sup>

### Donor Responses

CT and P/CVE activities in Turkey are almost exclusively directed by the Turkish state – either through the Turkish National Police, which is engaged in social projects and training activities for officers and

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<sup>236</sup> Bozay, "Türkischer Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland."

<sup>237</sup> Interviewee 10, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>238</sup> Sahinkaya, "Shadowy Turkish Ultra-Nationalist Group."

<sup>239</sup> Kevin Kada, "Rechtsextreme "Graue Wölfe" in Gänserndorf Anzeigt," *Kurier*, 16 February 2021, <https://kurier.at/chronik/niederosterreich/rechtsextreme-graue-woelfe-in-gaenserndorf-angezeigt/401189830>.

<sup>240</sup> Interviewee 10, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>241</sup> Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey."

<sup>242</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Turkey," *U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism*, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/turkey/>.

<sup>243</sup> Yilmaz and Leidig, "Webinar on the Far Right in Turkey."

<sup>244</sup> Interviewee 8, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>245</sup> Interviewee 8, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>246</sup> Interviewee 8, EU Representative, 8 October 2021; Interviewee 22, Turkey Researcher, 19 November 2021.

teachers; the Ministry of Justice, which implements rehabilitation and reintegration programmes;<sup>247</sup> or Turkey's Religious Affairs Presidency (Diyanet), which addresses VE inspired by Islamist ideologies.<sup>248</sup> For the most part, the Turkish CT approach consists of deterrence-based, repressive policies, with P/CVE measures only being introduced recently.<sup>249</sup> Additionally, the Turkish government does not distinguish between different ideological influences for VE and terrorism, their programmatic approaches remain the same across the board (e.g., for affiliates of ISIL/Da'esh, the PKK, FETÖ, or ultra-leftist militant groups).<sup>250</sup>

External actors are only minimally involved, for example in the form of dialogue through the OSCE expert meetings on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation that Lead to Terrorism (VERLT) or through the inclusion of Antalya in the Strong Cities Network.<sup>251</sup>

Role of the EU: The EU was involved in this space through a Foreign Policy Instrument-funded project focusing on the management of terrorist offenders in penitentiary institutions, implemented together with Spain. However, this programme was hampered by the different understandings of what constitutes terrorism in Turkey and the EU, with the head of the implementing partner organisation being arrested on terrorism charges soon after the programme started.<sup>252</sup> Currently, the Foreign Policy Instrument is funding an ongoing project on terrorism and its political and ideological roots.<sup>253</sup>

Any debates or actions around VRWE, both in Turkey and in Turkish diaspora communities in the EU, are very difficult to untangle from the context of the generally unstable and sensitive relationship between Turkey and EU. Turkey is both a NATO member and important ally, as well as being a party in the migration pact with the EU, which creates sensitivities and complications in many other areas.<sup>254</sup> Conflicts and disagreements on issues such as migration have already derailed scheduled CT dialogues between the EU and Turkey in the past, in addition to sensitivities over discrepancies on the understanding of terrorist designations whenever low-level dialogues did happen.<sup>255</sup>

An issue that further complicates the relationship between Turkey and the EU is the reaction of individual EU MS to VRWE violence related to the Grey Wolves in their countries. Even though a blanket ban of the organisation in individual MS or across the EU is highly unlikely to be implemented – given the legal burden in attributing violence directly to the Grey Wolves<sup>256</sup> – existing bans of Grey Wolf symbols and the proposed inclusion of the Grey Wolves on the EU list of terrorist organisations<sup>257</sup> nevertheless act as irritants to the Turkey-EU relationship.

P/CVE Recommendation: A more diplomatic way of engaging with Turkey on the issue of VRWE violence in the EU associated with the Grey Wolves would be helpful. Confrontational actions (such as bans and designations) are only going to antagonise Turkey, especially while Erdoğan's AKP maintains its close relationship with the MHP and its youth wing. Therefore, political dialogue at the technical-, strategic-, and high- political levels would be a first step in the right direction.<sup>258</sup> This can be done bilaterally, involving member states who have relatively good relationships with Turkey. It should also

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<sup>247</sup> U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Turkey, "Country Reports on Terrorism for 2017," *U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Turkey*, 21 September 2018, <https://tr.usembassy.gov/country-reports-on-terrorism-for-2017/>.

<sup>248</sup> Sönmez, "Radicalisation, Violent Extremism, and Turkey's Fight."

<sup>249</sup> Serdar San, "Counter-Terrorism Policing Innovations in Turkey: A Case Study of Turkish National Police CVE Experiment," *Policing and Society* 30, no. 5 (December 2018): 583-598, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2018.1561697>.

<sup>250</sup> International Crisis Group, "Calibrating the Response: Turkey's ISIS Returnees," Report No. 258 Europe and Central Asia, 29 June 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/258-calibrating-response-turkeys-isis-returnees>.

<sup>251</sup> U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Turkey, "Country Reports on Terrorism for 2017."

<sup>252</sup> Interviewee 8, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>253</sup> Interviewee 24, EU Representative, 17 December 2021.

<sup>254</sup> Interviewee 11, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>255</sup> Interviewee 11, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>256</sup> Interviewee 11, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

<sup>257</sup> Sahinkaya, "Shadowy Turkish Ultra-Nationalist Group."

<sup>258</sup> Interviewee 11, EU Representative, 25 October 2021.

involve the MHP directly on the Turkish side. Given that the party has been able to exert influence on the groups that are informally linked to the MHP to reduce violence in Turkey, there is a good chance that this leverage could also be extended to the EU.<sup>259</sup> However, such a dialogue would have to be handled with caution, given the sensitivity of the topic – but, it nonetheless has the chance of yielding more productive results than a confrontational approach.

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<sup>259</sup> Interviewee 19, EU Representative, 7 October 2021.

## IV. SOUTH AFRICA

This chapter explores the case study of South Africa. It looks first at the VRWE threat picture, including the historical development and prominent actors in this context, then at the transnational connections of the threat, and wraps up with a brief overview of the responses to VRWE in the country.

### VRWE Threat Picture

Compared to the previous two case studies, VRWE in South Africa is not part of the political mainstream and its general idea and narratives correspond more closely to the Western concept of VRWE. The ideology revolves around white supremacy and the separation of races, deeply rooted in apartheid policies and Afrikaner nationalism, centred around the protection of Afrikaner identity and status against other ethnic groups, including other white groups.<sup>260</sup>

What makes the South African expression of VRWE different from most other cases is that the white Afrikaner population represents a minority of the South African population. While VRWE narratives in other cases tend to revolve around narratives highlighting the perceived threat of a minority group 'invading' or 'taking over' a certain territory or region people/groups feel entitled to, VRWE in the South African case is mainly concerned with a sense of oppression and victimhood narratives, paired with the aim to 'take back' control over the country.<sup>261</sup>

In addition to white supremacist forms of VRWE, also 'Afrophobia', a type of ethno-nationalist hatred of other African people, among black South Africans is present in the country.<sup>262</sup> The periodic xenophobic attacks against other African migrants are a matter of concern.

### Historical Context

Having ruled over two Boer republics in today's territory of South Africa, Afrikaners (an ethnic group in South Africa descended from Dutch settlers) were defeated by the British in the Anglo-Boer War in 1902.<sup>263</sup> This defeat and the resulting imposition of British rule over the Union of South Africa that was established in 1910 boosted ethnic mobilisation on the basis of Afrikaner nationalism and eventually resulted in the formation of the Afrikaner National Party (NP) in 1914, which came into power in 1948 and implemented wide-ranging racial laws and a system of apartheid policy.<sup>264</sup>

In the early 1990s, VRWE groups were involved in significant acts of violence, including over 50 acts of terrorism inspired by VRWE in the year 1990.<sup>265</sup> The apartheid system remained in place for 40 years, concentrating all political and economic power in white hands, before it collapsed in 1994. Race relations have remained tense in the decades since the fall of the apartheid system, providing the basis for racially-based violence, including hate crimes as well as (planned or realised) large-scale terrorist attacks.<sup>266</sup> In the run-up to the first democratic elections in 1994, members of the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, AWB) orchestrated a series of deadly bomb attacks on targets including the party offices of the ANC and NP and Johannesburg International Airport.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> It is worth noting that these VRWE elements of Afrikaner nationalism may be more dominant in online narratives and closed-group chats than in public political discourse. Martin Schonteich, "The Emerging Threat? South Africa's Extreme Right," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (2004): 757-776, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095465590884368>.

<sup>261</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>262</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021; Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>263</sup> Wessel Visser, "Labour and Right-Wing Extremism in the South African Context - A Historical Overview," *ITH-Tagungsberichte, 42nd Linz Conference: Labour and Right-Wing Extremism*, 2007, <http://academic.sun.ac.za/geskiedenis/downloads/wvisserlabour.pdf>.

<sup>264</sup> Schonteich, "The Emerging Threat? South Africa's Extreme Right."

<sup>265</sup> Visser, "Labour and Right-Wing Extremism."

<sup>266</sup> Raeesah Cassim Cachalia and Albertus Schoeman, "Violent Extremism in South Africa: Assessing the Current Threat," *Institute for Strategic Studies*, May 2017, <https://media.africaportal.org/documents/sareport7-v2.pdf>.

<sup>267</sup> Visser, "Labour and Right-Wing Extremism."

Though VRWE activities went down following the 1994 election, they did not cease completely.<sup>268</sup> For example, in 1996, a series of bombs were placed at a shopping centre and a mosque, killing four and injuring dozens, by the Boere Aanvals Troepe (Boer Attack Troops), who demanded an independent, sovereign territory for Afrikaners.<sup>269</sup> In 2002, alleged members of the previously unknown Boeremag VRWE group were responsible for eight bomb blasts in the black township of Soweto on the outskirts of Johannesburg that led to significant damage of buildings and infrastructure, as well as the death of one person.<sup>270</sup> Significantly, out of the two dozen alleged members of this group that were arrested following the explosions, three were serving officers of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) at the time of the attacks.<sup>271</sup> During the course of the trials of the Soweto attacks, it was also uncovered that members of Boeremag had planned the assassination of Nelson Mandela, with the aim of staging a military coup in the chaos that would ensue.<sup>272</sup>

Given that all aspects of life in South Africa used to be divided along racial lines, political ideology remains a proxy for race, and topics around race, to this day. The black population tends to fall either into a tribal form of conservatism or in the camp that is centre, or left-of-centre, which is primarily defined by a historical collectivist social struggle.<sup>273</sup> On the other hand, the portion of the white population that falls on the right of the political spectrum tends to identify with a sense of victimhood and marginalisation, grounding their grievances (legitimate or perceived) in a feeling of being ignored by the current political leadership.<sup>274</sup> The South African version of VRWE has traditionally been centred around Afrikaner nationalism – a form of white ethno-nationalist extremism, which aims to establish a nation-state based on a shared Calvinist religion, language, and history, and calls on white South Africans to take up arms and regain their apartheid privileges by force.<sup>275</sup>

### **Prominent Groups and Actors**

South Africa's history of racial domination and violence makes it a fertile breeding ground for VRWE groups. Individuals subscribing to VRWE ideologies, or parts thereof, exist on a spectrum ranging from non-violent conservatives to those involved in clandestine groups plotting violent attacks.<sup>276</sup> Through various online platforms including Telegram and WhatsApp, those engaging with non-violent US-style libertarian content often gradually get exposed to increasingly extremist and violent content.<sup>277</sup> For example, one might start engaging with AfriForum, a group that advocates for the rights of the Afrikaner minority in the country and is largely based around local South African issues,<sup>278</sup> and move gradually toward embracing narratives around 'white genocide' and supporting violent actions to prevent it from happening.<sup>279</sup>

On the more violent end of the spectrum, the most prominent South African VRWE group is the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (AWB), which was involved in planning terrorist attacks in the early 1980s and carried out a series of lethal attacks in the lead-up to the 1994 elections under the leadership of ex-policeman Eugène Terre'Blanche.<sup>280</sup> While the movement boasted a membership of

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<sup>268</sup> Interviewee 3, South Africa Researcher, 28 September 2021.

<sup>269</sup> Schonteich, "The Emerging Threat? South Africa's Extreme Right."

<sup>270</sup> Schonteich, "The Emerging Threat? South Africa's Extreme Right."; and, Cachalia and Schoeman, "Violent Extremism in South Africa."

<sup>271</sup> Schonteich, "The Emerging Threat? South Africa's Extreme Right."

<sup>272</sup> Cachalia and Schoeman, "Violent Extremism in South Africa."

<sup>273</sup> Interviewee 6, South Africa Researcher, 30 September 2021.

<sup>274</sup> Interviewee 3, South Africa Researcher, 28 September 2021.

<sup>275</sup> Cachalia and Schoeman, "Violent Extremism in South Africa."

<sup>276</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>277</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>278</sup> Anita Powell, "White Nationalism Moves Into South African Mainstream Politics," *VOA News*, 12 July 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/africa-white-nationalism-moves-south-african-mainstream-politics/6171701.html>.; and, Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>279</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>280</sup> Cachalia and Schoeman, "Violent Extremism in South Africa."; and, Rosa Lyster, "The Rise and Fall of South Africa's Far Right," *The Outline*, 30 October 2017, <https://theoutline.com/post/2433/the-rise-and-fall-of-south-africa-s-far-right>.

up to 15,000 in the past,<sup>281</sup> its numbers were significantly diminished as a result of vast infighting throughout the last few decades. It is now a fringe group which lacks the mass appeal it used to entertain during the times of apartheid and, thus, has a significantly reduced impact on political and public debate.<sup>282</sup>

More recently, members of the National Christian Resistance Movement (NCRM), also known as the 'Crusaders', were arrested in 2019 for plotting attacks against strategic national locations, shopping malls, and informal settlements (which are mostly inhabited by poor, black South Africans).<sup>283</sup> In contrast, groups like the Suidlanders, a survivalist militia that is preparing for an impending 'race war', are not currently involved in extremist violence. However, they are organising self-defence training camps, in line with their 'prepper' mentality, anticipating some form of violent clash between the races in the future.<sup>284</sup>

Separatist movements represent yet another facet of the VRWE spectrum in South Africa. While they are not all violent or even extremist, they advocate for the establishment of separate independent territories for the South African Afrikaner population (e.g., the proposed Volkstaat, a white 'homeland' in the Northern Cape province with Orania as its capital) to protect and preserve Afrikaner culture and language.<sup>285</sup> Similarly, the Western Cape Independence movement advocates for the independence of the Western Cape province, which encompasses white Afrikaners and English-speaking populations as well as Xhosa and 'coloured' people (a group with mixed black African, Asian, European, and Khoisan ancestry).<sup>286</sup> While this movement and the groups that support it (including the Cape Independence Party and the CapeXit campaign) claim their efforts are not motivated by racial issues or racism, the movement is accused by its critics of promoting veiled racism and an ethno-nationalist agenda, in addition to providing a precedent for white Afrikaners to demand their own ethno-state.<sup>287</sup> So far, the movement has not received significant electoral support and, in the last municipal elections, the Cape Independence Party (CIP) won only one seat in the City of Cape Town.

Lastly, as mentioned before, VRWE narratives are also represented in small political parties. For example, the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) party (which won 2.4% of the votes in the last general elections in 2019) advocates for the right of Afrikaners to self-determination, as well as for land reforms benefitting white Afrikaners,<sup>288</sup> which makes the party popular in places like the white Northern Cape enclave of Orania.<sup>289</sup>

### ***Narratives and Outgroups***

The narratives that are spread by South African VRWE groups and actors often revolve around the alleged murder of white farmers and the seizure of white-owned land, all of which are closely linked to the 'white genocide' and 'great replacement' tropes that are popular among VRWE movements in

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<sup>281</sup> Visser, "Labour and Right-Wing Extremism."

<sup>282</sup> Christopher McMichael, "The Persistence of the Far-Right," *Mail & Guardian Online*, 1 January 2020, <https://mg.co.za/article/2020-01-01-00-the-persistence-of-the-far-right/>.

<sup>283</sup> Thuso Khumalo, "Supremacists no Real Threat to South Africa, Analyst Says," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, 2 December 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3U6A9>; and, John Campbell, "Transnational White Supremacist Militancy Thriving in South Africa," *Council on Foreign Relations (Blog)*, 17 September 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/transnational-white-supremacist-militancy-thriving-south-africa>.

<sup>284</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021; Interviewee 6, South Africa Researcher, 30 September 2021.

<sup>285</sup> Lyster, "The Rise and Fall of South Africa's Far Right."; and, Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

<sup>286</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021; Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>287</sup> Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>288</sup> Lyster, "The Rise and Fall of South Africa's Far Right."; and, Steven Friedman, "Fears of Extremism Live in the Minds of South Africans, Not in Reality," *The Conversation*, 16 May 2019, <https://theconversation.com/fears-of-extremism-live-in-the-minds-of-south-africans-not-in-reality-117212>.

<sup>289</sup> Carien du Plessis, "'White people want equal treatment' – Pieter Groenewald at FF Plus manifesto launch," *Daily Maverick*, 5 March 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-03-05-white-people-want-equal-treatment-pieter-groenewald-at-ff-plus-manifesto-launch/>.

the West.<sup>290</sup> This is further rooted in fears related to the loss of status as the ‘master race’, combined with a mix of legitimate grievances and disinformation narratives.<sup>291</sup> South African VRWE narratives are composed of a number of distinct but partly overlapping narratives, with some groups and individuals subscribing to a single narrative, while others endorse multiple narratives simultaneously.

One of the core narratives relates to land expropriation and proposed land reforms that would include the confiscation of land from white farmers, who still own much of the country’s farmland, without compensation.<sup>292</sup> Even though the proposed amendment to the constitution that would have allowed expropriation without compensation failed to meet the two-thirds threshold needed to pass through parliament in December 2021,<sup>293</sup> land rights continue to be a powerful and emotive issue that provides a fertile breeding ground for VRWE recruitment.<sup>294</sup>

Related to the fears around farmland are fears of white farmers being disproportionately targeted by criminals, often resulting in the murder of farmers – which VRWE groups interpret as an orchestrated effort to force white farmers off their land.<sup>295</sup> Given the remote locations of most farms, it often takes a long time for police to arrive at crime scenes.<sup>296</sup> This has diminished the trust of some farmers in the police, leading them to adopt exorbitant protective measures and, at times, to take the law into their own hands.<sup>297</sup> It should be noted that white farmers are not more likely to be murdered than black farmers or black people living in townships, for example, but these claims of orchestrated attacks provide emotive VRWE recruitment narratives.<sup>298</sup>

Farm murders are linked to, but distinct from, narratives of a white genocide – the idea that violent crime and murder is being directed at the white South African minority as a whole in an effort to gradually diminish this group.<sup>299</sup> Even more conspiratorial than this is the narrative depicting a ‘night of the long knives’ – a single event that some individuals associated with VRWE believe to be approaching, where black people will rise up in one night and kill the entire white population.<sup>300</sup>

VRWE narratives about the government enabling the murder of white South African farmers and the expropriation of white-owned land have also started to combine with conspiracy theories that are popular among international VRWE groups (e.g., QAnon conspiracy theories involving President Cyril Ramaphosa as well as Bill Gates and others).<sup>301</sup> In addition, they have combined with narratives indicating that Covid-19 is being used as an excuse for land reform and the introduction of stricter gun laws, which would affect many white South Africans. These narratives have gained traction in some parts of the population.<sup>302</sup> The incidents of unrest in the country in July 2021 further validated some of these fears and narratives of an imminent looming danger in the eyes of some VRWE groups and individuals.<sup>303</sup> However, it is important to note that different VRWE groups and individuals are taking these narratives to different extremes, with only a minority falling on the violent end of the spectrum.

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<sup>290</sup> Haley McEwen, “Global White Supremacy Cult: How the South African Radical Right Bolsters US Extremism,” *OpenDemocracy*, 11 February 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/global-cult-white-supremacy-how-south-african-radical-right-bolstering-us-extremism/>.

<sup>291</sup> McMichael, “The Persistence of the Far-Right.”

<sup>292</sup> Interviewee 3, South Africa Researcher, 28 September 2021; Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>293</sup> Marianne Merten, “S25 constitutional amendment sinks amid party political insults – now all eyes on Expropriation Bill,” *Daily Maverick*, 7 December 2021, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-12-07-s25-constitutional-amendment-sinks-amid-party-political-insults-now-all-eyes-on-expropriation-bill/>.

<sup>294</sup> Interviewee 3, South Africa Researcher, 28 September 2021.

<sup>295</sup> Schonteich, “The Emerging Threat? South Africa’s Extreme Right.”

<sup>296</sup> Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>297</sup> Schonteich, “The Emerging Threat? South Africa’s Extreme Right.”

<sup>298</sup> Carla Hill, “The Racist Obsession with South African ‘White Genocide,’” *Anti-Defamation League*, 24 August 2018, <https://www.adl.org/blog/the-racist-obsession-with-south-african-white-genocide>; and Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>299</sup> Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021; Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>300</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.; and, Schonteich, “The Emerging Threat? South Africa’s Extreme Right.”

<sup>301</sup> McEwen, “Global White Supremacy Cult.”

<sup>302</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>303</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

In addition to VRWE narratives directed at black South Africans, also ‘Afrophobia’ – xenophobia directed at foreigners from other African countries – is pervasive in South Africa. Rooted in the colonial and apartheid legacy of the country, resentments against black African immigrants have not been effectively addressed through government policies or strategies since the end of the apartheid regime. These sentiments have led to sporadic outbreaks of violence against Africans in South Africa since around 1999, often occurring in townships such as the Alexandra township in Johannesburg, the Mpumalanga township in Kwa-Zulu Natal, townships on the outskirts of Cape Town and squatter camps on the East Rand.<sup>304</sup> This included a series of violent attacks in September 2019, which also had negative implications for South Africa’s relationships with its continental neighbours.<sup>305</sup>

### **Current Threat Level**

As the overall support for VRWE groups is minimal in the country, the threat of groups planning or successfully executing large-scale attacks in South Africa is relatively low.<sup>306</sup> Nevertheless, combined with global narratives around disenfranchised white people, local events and narratives (such as the potential passing of land reform legislation) could act as a spark for larger-scale unrest or violence.<sup>307</sup> For example, the July 2021 unrests appeared to some devotees of VRWE narratives as the ‘night of the long knives’, leading them to mobilise others to defend white suburbs against ‘dangerous’ black people.<sup>308</sup>

As these views are shared by a small portion of the white minority only, they are not likely to gain majority support among Afrikaners, let alone in the country.<sup>309</sup> Yet, there is a general trend of societal polarisation, and although the centre of gravity of the media landscape in the country remains quite central, political ideologies are moving increasingly further to the extreme.<sup>310</sup> This general polarisation of the political discourse in the country has led to small political parties picking up on xenophobia and other VRWE narratives. While there is little risk that these VRWE ideologies are going to become mainstream, there is a chance that such parties could gain significant influence as ‘kingmaker’ parties.<sup>311</sup>

Additionally, it is important to note that in South Africa, Islamist extremism is the more dominant concern, with international Islamist extremist groups (including al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab) operating within their territory. For example, the alleged leader of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Henry Okah, spent time in South Africa and apparently coordinated attacks in Nigeria from there.<sup>312</sup> More recently, there have been concerns over Islamist extremism in neighbouring Mozambique spilling over into South Africa.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Nompumelelo P. Dlamini et al. “Afrophobia and South Africa’s image on the continent: Implications for inter-state relations and diplomacy,” *African Renaissance*, 17, no.3 (September 2020): 9-31; Kudzayi Savious Tarisayi and Sadhana Manik, “An unabating challenge: Media portrayal of xenophobia in South Africa,” *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 7, no.1 (2020); Moses E. Ochonou, “South African Afrophobia in local and continental contexts,” *Modern African Studies*, 58, no.4 (2020): 499-519.

<sup>305</sup> Wendell Roelf, Alexander Winning, “South Africa tries to contain ‘Afrophobia’ fallout as riots upstage summit,” Reuters, 5 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-wef-africa-idUSKCN1VQ0Y1>.

<sup>306</sup> Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>307</sup> Interviewee 3, South Africa Researcher, 28 September 2021; Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

<sup>308</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

<sup>309</sup> Schonteich, “The Emerging Threat? South Africa’s Extreme Right.”

<sup>310</sup> Interviewee 6, South Africa Researcher, 30 September 2021.

<sup>311</sup> Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>312</sup> Cachalia and Schoeman, “Violent Extremism in South Africa.”

<sup>313</sup> Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

### ***Transnational Connections***

Narrative: VRWE narratives in South Africa are simultaneously influenced by global trends on the extreme right (e.g., the QAnon conspiracy theory)<sup>314</sup> and inform and fuel ethno-nationalist movements and VRWE narratives elsewhere (e.g., by providing an illustration of perceived white victimhood).<sup>315</sup>

While South African VRWE discourse is largely based on locally relevant narratives, especially in the last few years it also borrows from international narratives. In particular, US-specific issues such as libertarianism, gun rights, hostility toward mainstream media, anti-authoritarianism, and ‘MAGA’ (Make America Great Again) slogans and narratives have gained increasing traction in the South African VRWE space online.<sup>316</sup> The close connections between VRWE online movements in the US and South Africa was also demonstrated by the fact that the blocking of social media accounts and communities engaging with QAnon conspiracy theories following the January 6 storming of the US Capitol also affected South African accounts and online discourse significantly.<sup>317</sup>

Another issue that was imported from the US Christian Right discourse is the protection of ‘traditional’ family values and the opposition to LGBTQ+ people and issues such as abortion.<sup>318</sup> Pro-family advocacy groups such as the Alliance Defending Freedom<sup>319</sup> have spent large sums on campaigns in Africa, including South Africa, where they have not only engaged with white Afrikaner VRWE groups, but also with conservative, black African groups, aiming to radicalise people around issues like gender equality, heteropatriarchy, and the idea that the nuclear family is the only legitimate form of family.<sup>320</sup>

However, the international VRWE discourse is also being influenced by the situation in South Africa. South Africa is frequently used as a posterchild for how things can go wrong when white populations are no longer in power.<sup>321</sup> For VRWE groups in the West, the case is the ultimate expression of the fear of white replacement,<sup>322</sup> based on false as well as exaggerated pieces of information about farm murders and other real or imagined events in South Africa.<sup>323</sup> In importing South African narratives, international VRWE actors blend together distinct issues ranging from land expropriation to myths of white genocide to create a coherent-sounding illustration of white victimhood that appeals to North American, European, and Australasian audiences.<sup>324</sup> The individual responsible for the murder of nine African Americans at a Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 was clearly inspired by VRWE narratives revolving around white populations in southern Africa.<sup>325</sup>

Online: Given the physical distance to areas like Europe and North America, many of these exchanges are taking place online, for example through internet radios that are linked to VRWE groups in the US and elsewhere.<sup>326</sup> Strong online links also exist to VRWE movements in countries including Germany and Belgium, as well as to Serbian groups (given the large Serb diaspora living in South Africa).<sup>327</sup> Similarly, strong online and physical links exist to Israel, the US, Canada, the UK, Australia and the Netherlands, which all have white South African diasporas.<sup>328</sup> Also, enabled by the shared language,

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<sup>314</sup> Campbell, “Transnational White Supremacist Militancy.”

<sup>315</sup> McEwen, “Global White Supremacy Cult.”

<sup>316</sup> Interviewee 6, South Africa Researcher, 30 September 2021.

<sup>317</sup> Interviewee 6, South Africa Researcher, 30 September 2021.

<sup>318</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

<sup>319</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “Alliance Defending Freedom,” *Southern Poverty Law Center: Extremist Group Files*, n.d., <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/alliance-defending-freedom>.

<sup>320</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

<sup>321</sup> Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021; Interviewee 6, South Africa Researcher, 30 September 2021.

<sup>322</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

<sup>323</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

<sup>324</sup> McEwen, “Global White Supremacy Cult.”

<sup>325</sup> Campbell, “Transnational White Supremacist Militancy.”

<sup>326</sup> Interviewee 3, South Africa Researcher, 28 September 2021.

<sup>327</sup> Interviewee 3, South Africa Researcher, 28 September 2021.

<sup>328</sup> Interviewee 3, South Africa Researcher, 28 September 2021.

communication channels with the US are strong and US talking points are accordingly prominent in the South African VRWE discourse.<sup>329</sup> This also extends to the QAnon conspiracy theory, which originated in the US but has gradually adapted to local contexts and narratives around the world – including in South Africa, where overlaps between QAnon and the ‘white genocide’ narratives have been observed. One possible reason for this conspiracy theory taking an early hold in South Africa could be that one of the prominent initiators of QAnon, believed by some to have made the initial posts as Q, is a South African.<sup>330</sup>

International VRWE figures including Tucker Carlson, Donald Trump, leader of Identity Evropa, Patrick Casey, and Richard Spencer have done their part in spreading awareness of the perceived ‘plight of white South Africans’, while Canadian VRWE personality Lauren Southern even published a documentary titled ‘Farmlands’, detailing her perspective on the ‘genocide against the white population ready to erupt in an all-out race war’.<sup>331</sup>

**Physical:** In addition to online exchanges, leading figures in the South African VRWE context have also travelled abroad to connect with their international counterparts. A few prominent examples include: 1) Ernst Roets, co-founder of AfriForum and author of a controversial book on the ‘white genocide’ in South Africa, toured Australia and the US, where he spread claims about farm murders and white genocide on Tucker Carlson’s show on Fox News, leading then president Donald Trump to tweet about the ‘large scale killing of farmers’ in South Africa;<sup>332</sup> 2) in 2017, Simon Roche, a senior figure in the Suidlanders group, intensified the links of his group with US-based VRWE groups through his participation in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia;<sup>333</sup> and, 3) VRWE figure Katie Hopkins from the UK visited South Africa to engage with local groups.<sup>334</sup>

### **Responses to VRWE**

Responses at the governmental level, as well as interventions by the international community in relation to VE have been relatively limited in the South Africa context.

#### **Government Response**

So far, government officials in South Africa have largely downplayed the threat of VRWE as well as other forms of VE, given that other issues such as high crime rates and violent protests have arguably taken priority.<sup>335</sup> The key piece of legislation on VE in the country, the Protection of Constitutional Democracy against Terrorist and Related Activities Act, which was passed in 2004, is in need of an update. For example, it does not address P/CVE, given that the term was only coined after the introduction of the policy document.<sup>336</sup>

Particularly with regard to VRWE, the small recruitment base for such movements in the country means that the threat is not being taken very seriously by the political leadership.<sup>337</sup> However, this perspective overlooks the potential of South African VRWE groups and narratives to inspire radicalisation, recruitment, and even acts of VE elsewhere.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>330</sup> Rebecca Davis, “QAnon originated in South Africa – now that the global cult is back here we should all be afraid,” *Daily Maverick*, 26 September 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-09-26-qanon-originated-in-south-africa-now-that-the-global-cult-is-back-here-we-should-all-be-afraid/>.

<sup>331</sup> Hill, “The Racist Obsession with South African “White Genocide”.”

<sup>332</sup> McEwen, “Global White Supremacy Cult.”; and, Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

<sup>333</sup> McMichael, “The Persistence of the Far-Right.”

<sup>334</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021; Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>335</sup> Cachalia and Schoeman, “Violent Extremism in South Africa.”

<sup>336</sup> Cheryl Frank and Denys Reva, “Preventing Violent Extremism: South Africa’s Place in the World,” *Institute for Security Studies*, 15 December 2016, <https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/preventing-violent-extremism-south-africas-place-in-the-world>.

<sup>337</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021; Interviewee 6, South Africa Researcher, 30 September 2021; Interviewee 3, South Africa Researcher, 28 September 2021.

<sup>338</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

Hate Crime Legislation: As is the case in other countries, some criminal acts inspired by VRWE ideologies fall into the category of hate crimes or hate speech. However, while the spread of hatred based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion is prohibited in the South African constitution, the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill (which provides a legal definition for hate crimes, covering racism as well as homophobia and misogyny, as well as provisions for the prevention of hate crimes and hate speech) still sits before the South African National Assembly five years after it was first introduced. International actors, including US-based Christian Right groups, and the local groups they support and engage with are campaigning against this piece of legislation, claiming that it stands in contrast to traditional family values.<sup>339</sup>

### ***Donor Responses***

While government policy on P/CVE is not up to date, a number of international actors are engaged in general P/CVE programming in South Africa. This includes, among others, the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF), which was co-founded by South Africa in 2011 and works to establish ‘good practice’ guidelines on P/CVE, and the RESOLVE Network.<sup>340</sup> In addition, several initiatives led by civil society organisations are currently ongoing in the country.

As there have been no major VE incidents in the recent past involving VRWE actors, those working on P/CVE programming have not been prompted to develop interventions specifically designed to counter this type of ideology.<sup>341</sup> Still, there are some programmes that are potentially relevant in the fight against VRWE. This includes informal networks of experts conducting diversity interventions and other race-related work,<sup>342</sup> online initiatives to counter disinformation and VRWE narratives led by the fact-checking organisation Busting the Myth of Violent Genocide,<sup>343</sup> and dialogue and democracy projects led by the organisation Defend our Democracy.<sup>344</sup>

Role of the EU: The EU is currently not involved in any P/CVE-type programming in South Africa or the region, and it appears that direct involvement in programming would not be perceived well in the country. Particular scepticism can be expected from those who have already been exposed to VRWE narratives and believe that the EU, like the UN, is ignoring the pleas of the Afrikaner population regarding the alleged ‘white genocide’ that is taking place in the country.<sup>345</sup>

However, one important role the EU could play in this context would be to work on sensitising decision-makers and the South African government to the threat of VRWE, especially in the context of social media which is largely overlooked in the country at the moment.<sup>346</sup> A better understanding of these online dynamics and transnational connections would also provide the basis for addressing the symbiotic relationship that exists between South African and international VRWE actors. In this context, the EU, alongside other international actors such as the US, could also play a role in leading discussions with social media platforms to address these issues.<sup>347</sup>

In addition, the EU could play a role in supporting national law enforcement to strengthen effective intelligence work to counter VRWE and Islamist extremism and terrorism, as well as to improve overall police capacities – including in remote areas, such as to better prevent farm murders.

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<sup>339</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

<sup>340</sup> Frank and Reva, “Preventing Violent Extremism.”

<sup>341</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>342</sup> Interviewee 7, South Africa Researcher, 7 October 2021.

<sup>343</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.; and, McEwen, “Global White Supremacy Cult.”

<sup>344</sup> Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>345</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021; Interviewee 6, South Africa Researcher, 30 September 2021; Interviewee 3, South Africa Researcher, 28 September 2021.

<sup>346</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

<sup>347</sup> Interviewee 4, South Africa Researcher, 5 October 2021.

P/CVE Programming Recommendations: As the threat of VRWE in South Africa largely remains limited to the political fringes, targeted programmes that provide tailored interventions for individuals on the pathway of radicalisation and recruitment into VRWE can be an effective response.<sup>348</sup> For example, existing programmes targeting disinformation around the Covid-19 vaccine through tested narratives based on reliable information (provided to interested friends and family members of those engaging with conspiracy theory content and other disinformation) could be replicated for other narratives that are prominent in the South African VRWE discourse.<sup>349</sup> Similarly, initiatives aiming to change online conversations by engaging directly with those spreading xenophobic content could also be applied to other issues relevant to VRWE radicalisation online.<sup>350</sup>

In addition to targeted programmes, wider programmes addressing societal polarisation are also needed to effectively address the problem of VRWE in the country. Polarisation has been on the rise in South Africa, which can constrict the space for political dialogue.<sup>351</sup> Addressing some of the root causes of this political polarisation would require bolstering the legitimacy of the government and its activities, including addressing some of the legitimate grievances shared by VRWE actors. This would require a range of programming, including initiatives aimed at preventing the fragmentation of the media landscape. Investment in the Fourth Estate, could improve some of the conditions that currently allow disinformation and badly researched, sensationalist reporting to flourish in alternative media systems.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Campbell, “Transnational White Supremacist Militancy.”

<sup>349</sup> Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>350</sup> Interviewee 5, South Africa Researcher, 11 October 2021.

<sup>351</sup> Interviewee 6, South Africa Researcher, 30 September 2021.

<sup>352</sup> Interviewee 6, South Africa Researcher, 30 September 2021.

## V. CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the different contexts of and responses to VRWE across the different case studies, VRWE is a global concern. It exists in different forms and asserts its influences through different facets, but it is built on those definitional foundations of othering, nativism, and authoritarianism. Understanding VRWE as an interconnected global phenomenon with locally contextualised and partially cross-cutting ideas, narratives, and activities will ultimately enable the implementation of more effective and sustainable EU responses to VRWE.

Through this research, the local context of VRWE in each case study location has been mapped – including historical context; key narratives, actors, and outgroups; current threat level; and, transnational connections that exist at the narrative, online, and offline levels. This paper gives a brief introduction to what are very complex and different VRWE contexts. More research into each of these case study locations could deepen the understanding established in this paper, and well as broadening the lines of inquiry to themes that were not addressed in this paper or require further exploration, such as the financing of VRWE and its prominence in each of these case studies.

Additionally, these case study locations represent dynamic political and social contexts. Since the beginning of this research there have been significant events occurring, which have the potential to impact VRWE in these locations. For example, the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina has the Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik pushing for the dissolution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the support of Russia and Serbia, and without significant resistance from the EU or the US.<sup>353</sup> In the context of the Western Balkans, this type of overture has the potential to break the regional peace agreement and start new conflicts. There are also concerns mounting around the possibility of Russian invasion of the Ukraine, which would have a significant impact on the region.<sup>354</sup>

In each case studies we also included key observations and recommendations that emerged around governmental and legal responses to VRWE, as well as identifying current P/CVE responses and any apparent context-specific recommendations. The VRWE context is closely linked with the issue of hate crime and discrimination, which sometimes lends more legal ability to prosecute. However, this connection also sometimes complicates the already politically sensitive and ambiguous nature of extremist violence and how to address it on the spectrum of terrorism responses.

Also, there are still significant differences in the ways that governments approach various VE threats and the level of concern they assign to them. For example, the legal differentiation between VRWE influenced foreign fighters and ISIL/Da'esh affiliated FTFs highlights the lack of governmental willingness to prosecute equally the same actions committed under different ideological banners.

The convoluted range of differences and commonalities between VRWE and Islamist extremism also becomes apparent in these case study contexts when mapping the threats and responses. It is commonly assumed that VRWE and Islamist extremism are opposites or at odds with each other; however, both ideological umbrellas are located at the right end of spectrum politically and both contain elements of political, social, and religious extremism. The case of the Grey Wolves, discussed in the Turkey case study, highlights an interesting combination of VRWE being encouraged and enacted by groups with members predominantly adherent to conservative Islam.

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<sup>353</sup> Daria Sito-Sucic, "Explainer: What is Causing the Political Crisis in Bosnia?," *Reuters*, 3 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-is-causing-political-crisis-bosnia-2021-11-03/>.

<sup>354</sup> BBC News, "Ukraine crisis: Biden warns Russia may invade next month," *BBC News*, 28 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60164537>.

Ultimately, there are commonalities which can help with carrying over learning from transnational CT and P/CVE approaches that have largely been focused on Islamist extremism over the last 15 years. It is essential to build upon lessons already identified in this space. There have been multiple reviews of what works and what does not for CT and P/CVE,<sup>355</sup> including lessons learned from more established VRWE focused policy and programming.<sup>356</sup> Additionally, there are recommendations that emerge from this research regarding the VRWE threat and response, some of which are specific to each case study and are mentioned in their respective chapters, and others of which are more general cross-case findings highlighted below.

Therefore – based on the threat and response mapping, observation of EU practices and knowledge sharing procedures throughout the course of this research, and existing CT and P/CVE lessons learned – this paper concludes by making the following recommendations for how the EU’s response to the VRWE threat could be tailored and strengthened:

### Recommendations

1. Solidify the positioning of the EU on VRWE. There needs to be a central definition of VRWE to inform policy and programme design.<sup>357</sup> This is especially true due to the difference of MS perceptions around VRWE and its extremely politically sensitive nature, often bordering and intersecting with mainstream political and social discourse. As the external facing departments of the EU begin to shift priority to VRWE, often the key role they will be able to play is to hold dialogues with local governments to sensitise them to the VRWE threat. A central EU definition of VRWE is needed to guide these discussions and to allow a level of priority to be assigned to them.
2. Consider VRWE-related legal frameworks as essential to CT and P/CVE. Discrimination (e.g., racial, gender-based, ethnic, etc.) is a core component of VRWE and the established legal frameworks around hate crime need to be working in cooperation with frameworks established to prevent, counter, and prosecute VRWE. Additionally, legal discrepancies between how perpetrators of VRWE offences versus other types of VE offences need to be reconsidered and aligned – for example, consideration of VRWE actors returning from Ukraine as foreign fighters and jihadist actors returning from Syria and Iraq as FTFs, with corresponding and significant differences in prosecution and punishment. In many cases, this requires improved understanding and reform of legal practices, where political pressure, inadequate knowledge, and other influencing factors may be impacting legal interpretations and rulings.
3. Improve internal EU information sharing and handover processes. As rotation of EU staff is a regular occurrence, there need to be established processes in place to govern and require knowledge transfer between former and current position holders, as well as transfer between the various EU departments. There are currently gaps where knowledge of VRWE is limited to certain individuals or knowledge hubs and not being effectively disseminated back and forth between the

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<sup>355</sup> See RUSI reviews at: RUSI, “Prevention Project,” RUSI, n.d., <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/prevention-project>; and, RUSI, “Review of CT and P/CVE Activity Effectiveness,” RUSI, n.d., <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/review-of-ct-and-p-cve-activity-effectiveness>.

<sup>356</sup> Annelies Pauwels, “Contemporary Manifestations of Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the EU: An Overview of P/CVE Practices,” *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, April 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran\\_adhoc\\_cont\\_manif\\_vrwe\\_eu\\_overv\\_pcve\\_pract\\_2021\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran_adhoc_cont_manif_vrwe_eu_overv_pcve_pract_2021_en.pdf).

<sup>357</sup> Andrew Glazzard, Martine Zeuthen and Jessica White, “Executive Summary and Recommendations: A Systematic Literature Review of Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Activities,” *Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and RUSI*, February 2021, 4, [https://english.ioe-evaluatie.nl/binaries/ioe-evaluatie-eng/documents/sub-studies/2021/02/01/literature-studies-%E2%80%93-counterterrorism-and-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism/Rusi\\_Summary\\_and\\_recommendations\\_202102.pdf.pdf](https://english.ioe-evaluatie.nl/binaries/ioe-evaluatie-eng/documents/sub-studies/2021/02/01/literature-studies-%E2%80%93-counterterrorism-and-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism/Rusi_Summary_and_recommendations_202102.pdf.pdf).

wider departments of the EU that might be in contact with VE issues and challenges, including the related and extremely locally contextual political, cultural, religious, development, etc. discussions that orbit and impact VE.

4. Increase multi-stakeholder engagement in assessment of the VRWE threat. Increasing the role of RAN and other similar types of knowledge-sharing programmes improves the knowledge base from which researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are working.<sup>358</sup> Additionally, encouraging multi-stakeholder engagement brings in a wider array of professionals with different perspectives and helps to challenge and improve approaches.<sup>359</sup> It may be especially effective in the case of VRWE to rely on EU MS who have dealt more extensively with this threat to offer guidance for other less-experienced EU MS or external parties. This should include working with security practitioners, such as Europol.<sup>360</sup>
5. Support evidence-based threat assessment and response. Currently programme design and funding are based on information gathered across multiple EU bodies, including meetings with local European External Action Service delegations, and the EU CT Coordinator. There are regional network meetings held regularly to disseminate information on main trends, council meetings, and working group outputs.<sup>361</sup> However, this process could be more systematically supported by local-, national-, and regional- level research and practitioner inputs. There is an opportunity, as attention to VRWE is still in a relatively early stage at the EU level, to assess the threat based on new research, especially for areas in which VRWE is under-researched.<sup>362</sup> For example, before developing responses it is necessary to support more research into the drivers of VRWE in respective countries and regions – design of programming should be based on local context. Largely, research that currently exists on drivers of VE focuses on Islamist VE. Therefore, new assessments need to be conducted on drivers of VRWE.
6. Rely on local expertise and practitioners. Additionally, it is important, to the extent possible, to listen to local practitioners on what works and what does not in specific local contexts. Local civil society organisations already working in this space should be supported, wherever possible, over large-scale, donor-driven models. Reliability of and trust in intervention providers impacts successfulness.<sup>363</sup> This can be supplemented, where needed, through bringing in of comparative expertise.
7. Invest in competency-based programming and development of the knowledge base.<sup>364</sup> Effectively implementing a multi-disciplinary approach to programme design and implementation can not

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<sup>358</sup> Pauwels, “Contemporary Manifestations of Violent Right-Wing Extremism.”; For more information, see also the RAN webpage at, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran_en).

<sup>359</sup> Pauwels, “Contemporary Manifestations of Violent Right-Wing Extremism.”

<sup>360</sup> For example, within the framework of the EU-funded “Partnership against Crime and Terrorism” project in the Western Balkans (WB PaCT), CEPOL and Europol today hosted the first Strategic Cooperation Forum (SCF) to discuss the training priorities in the key security threat areas with the long-term objective to strengthen the strategic cooperation in the region. See also: CEPOL, “First Strategic Cooperation Forum Brings Together High-Level Law Enforcement Officials from the Western Balkans to Discuss Key Security Threats and Related Training Needs,” *EU Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL)*, 31 May 2021, <https://www.cepol.europa.eu/media/news/first-strategic-cooperation-forum-brings-together-high-level-law-enforcement-officials>.

<sup>361</sup> Interviewee 12, EU Representative, 8 October 2021.

<sup>362</sup> Interviewee 14, EU Representative, 13 October 2021.

<sup>363</sup> Michael Jones, Claudia Wallner and Emily Winterbotham, “Lessons for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: An Evidence-Based Approach,” *RUSI*, 7 September 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/lessons-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-evidence-based-approach>.

<sup>364</sup> Glazzard, Zeuthen and White, “Executive Summary and Recommendations,” 4.

only allow for increased effectiveness and impact of the programme, but it can also allow unique and diverse knowledge generation opportunities. However, donors must be willing to publish successes and failures, as both present equally good learning opportunities.

8. Apply a gender lens. One of the recurring themes across all three case studies was the gendered nature of VRWE, often manifesting with very strong misogynist and anti-feminist under- or over-tones (e.g., gender-based and anti-LGBTQ+ violence were common themes across all three cases). Use of a gender lens in threat and response analysis is essential to knowledge generation and effective programme development.<sup>365</sup>
  
9. Investigate opportunities to apply P/CVE programming in a wider social context. There is a current global trend of extreme polarisation of politics and society. The online environment provides an effective platform for spreading VRWE and generally hateful narratives. This phenomenon has been spurred on by global events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which not only provided narrative content but also encouraged people into online engagement. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how programming or alternative narratives can reach a wider social base, rather than just targeted groups of those more at risk of radicalisation or recruitment into VRWE,<sup>366</sup> as well as how the online space can be converted into a more positive social space for responsible civic discourse.

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Pauwels, "Contemporary Manifestations of Violent Right-Wing Extremism."