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MAKING SENSE OF EXTREMISM IN THE BOSNIAN FOOTBALL TERRACES: AN INITIAL ANALYSIS

Abstract: *This paper presents an initial assessment of the results of a four month research project studying the Ultras¹ groups in BiH. This research contributed to the Bosnia & Herzegovina Resilience Initiative (BHRI) Programme (implemented by the International Organization for Migration - United Nations, funded and closely coordinated with the U.S. Agency for International Development - USAID) aiming to reduce the threat of violent extremism in BiH and to counter extremist efforts to deepen or exploit community tensions.*

Keywords: *Ultras, BiH, football, Extremism, public security.*

1. Introduction

The last 18 years have witnessed a dynamic and significant development of radicalisation linked to religious and political polarisation and extremism throughout Europe. Hence, studying and preventing radicalisation has become a European and global priority. As the European Commission² acknowledges, radicalisation is a complex and dynamic phenomenon involving people em-

1 This report uses the terms Ultras and not hooligan because the participants define themselves as such as they model their repertoire of actions according to Ultras groups in Europe such as the most notorious Italian Ultras. The term ultras – or ultrà – originates from the ultra-royalist French, indicating the most fanatical to gods of the White Terror in the years immediately following the French Revolution (Testa and Armstrong, 2010 a,b).

2 European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, Prevention of radicalisation, Retrieved January 10, 2020, from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/crisis-and-terror/radicalisation_en

bracing extreme ideologies that can lead to the commitment of violence and ultimately terrorism. As human behaviour is influenced by the interaction it has with the environment, to understand radicalisation we must address its micro dimension (individual exposure), which must be studied concomitantly to the enabling environment of its meso (group domain) and macro (social space) dimensions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2007).

Bosnia and Herzegovina Social Space

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a country divided geographically and politically along ethnic and religious lines, a result of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords that established the country as a tripartite state. The legacy of the ethnic and religious conflicts of the 1990s remains a key factor in Bosnia's politics, society and engagement with the international community. This legacy continues to influence the narratives that fuse culture, religion, heritage and ethnicity in the formation of Bosnian identities, and serves as a key driver of difference and division.

In recent years, the BiH government has cited recruitment by international Islamist terrorist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda as the greatest contemporary security threat, catalysed by ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Since 2012, estimated 220-330 Bosnian foreign fighters have travelled to conflict zones in Iraq and Syria, with many have since returned (Beslin and Ignjatijević, 2017).

However, ethnic-religious tensions between Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Serbs and Croats have not dissipated, with renewed concerns around far-right and ethno-nationalist movements that have typically not faced the same levels of scrutiny. Akin to the Islamist threat, across the Western Balkans these movements have their roots in conflicts of the 1990s, and have also produced foreign fighters that have travelled to participate in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

In countries neighbouring BiH, such as Serbia and Croatia, there is often a lack of political will to tackle and condemn extremism due to a number of factors, from the broadly accepted incorporation of nationalism in state policies, to the tolerance of far-right organisations through strategic calculations of national interest. Despite the divergent nationalist agendas of far-right groups in Croatia and Serbia, they typically promote the self-determination or independence of the Croats and Serbs in Bosnia and share a desire to create a Greater Croatia or Greater Serbia. For example, Serbian nationalists call for the unification of today's Serbia with Bosnia's Serb-dominated entity, Republika Srpska, and with parts of Croatia that were once dominated by Serbs.

In Bosnia, far-right “Chetnik” groups (named after Serbo-Croat units within the former Yugoslav Army) rely mainly on the Ravna Gora movement, primarily based in the north-western town of Prijedor. Neo-Ustaše groups (the former Croatian fascist movement) in Bosnia are especially active in areas close to the border in Croatia, where ethnic incidents flare between the majority Croat population and Bosnian Muslims.

Bosniaks do also have their own far-right or nationalist groups. The majority are linked with radical Islamism, but in recent years new movements have also emerged, including the Bosnian Movement of National Pride (BPNP). The BPNP promote Bosniak identity and advocate for a secular Bosniak ethno-state, and have declared a range of minority groups as enemies of Bosnia, including Jewish people, Roma, Communists, gays and non-whites.

As would be expected, many of these groups have an extensive online presence, with a wealth of far-right extremist content available across a range of internet platforms, especially Facebook, but also Instagram and YouTube. Additionally, numerous websites are available across the Western Balkans promoting far-right groups, often linking to wider international far-right movements (Beslin, Ignjatić: 2017). Content focuses on a wide range of issues to mobilise support, from anti-abortion and homophobic campaigns, to neo-fascism, ethnic supremacy and cultural homogeneity. For example, the Ravna Gora movement are active online, with their website achieving around 4,000 daily visits and an overall total of 3 million visits, alongside a network of closed Facebook groups.

Amid this context, ethnic tensions are often expressed via football across the Western Balkans, and nationalist leaders and groups use football to further their goals. The Balkans has a long and tragic history of politics in the football stands; at the end of the 1980s, former Yugoslavian football experienced a progressive politicization. This trend should not surprise; Increasingly, European football terraces are becoming a ‘zona franca’ where violence, xenophobia, ethnic-chauvinism and religious prejudice are displayed (Testa, 2009; Spaaij and Testa, 2016). Testa (2008) argues that the football stadium is a symbolic locale where extreme ideological narratives are promoted and through which the radicalisation of youth is given agency and carried outside the stadium. The emerging nationalist elites employed the sport as a basis for personal enrichment, construction of power at the local level and political self-legitimization in the eyes of their own national/ethnic groups.

This trend is evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with fights between groups of Ultras, mostly divided along ethnic lines, a typically low-level but regular occurrence. In a number of cases, however, violence has escalated, exacerbated

by the legacy of conflict. In 2015, the bus of the Siroki Brijeg youth team was attacked in Sarajevo, again involving hooligans associated with FK Zeljeznicar³. Similar tensions also exist in towns with mixed populations such as Mostar, where the rival Velez and Zrinjski clubs are supported by Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats respectively.

Because of the nature of extremist groups⁴, most studies on the link between extremism and football groups relies on 'external' observations of the groups' behaviours, and secondary data mostly collected from the Internet via social media⁵. There is a lack of existing research on the Ultras that has utilised an in-depth ethnographic approach⁶, especially across the Western Balkans. This ethnographic study aimed to fill this gap in the study of extremist football fans groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The aim of the study was to use primary and secondary data gained from participant observation (both on and offline), semi-structured interviews, content analysis of documents, and from cutting-edge online analysis tools to study the behavioural dynamics of involving Ultras in and out the BiH football terraces.

2. Methodology

To fulfill the aims of this study, the research team interviewed all those involved, namely representatives of the:

- Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Sarajevo Canton
- Sarajevo Canton police
- Republic of Srpska Ministry of the Interior
- Police Administration Banja Luka.
- Football Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Nogometni/Fudbalski Savez Bosne i Hercegovine (N/FSB&H));

3 Hooligan Attack Raises Ethnic Tensions in Bosnia, Balkan Transitional Justice, from March 16, 2015. Retrieved January 12, 2020 from <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/03/16/hooligan-attack1-raises-ethnic-tensions-in-bosnia/>

4 Fielding (1981) in his seminal study on the British National Front, details the challenges for a researcher in studying extremist groups objectively; while Testa (2009, 2010, 2012, 2018) points out the risk inherent in interacting with them.

5 This also holds true for mainstream extremism especially Jihadist and Far-Right groups.

6 C. f Pearson, in Hobbs and May (2002, p. viii)

- Football Association of Republika Srpska (Fudbalski savez Republike Srpske)
- Football Club Široki Brijeg (Nogometni klub Široki Brijeg)
- HŠK Zrinjski Mostar (Hrvatski športski klub Zrinjski Mostar)
- Football Club Željezničar (Fudbalski klub Željezničar Sarajevo)
- FK Velež Mostar (Fudbalski klub Velež Mostar)
- Škripari - NK Široki Brijeg
- Ultras - HŠK Zrinjski Mostar
- Lešinari - FK Borac Banja Luka
- Robijaši - NK Čelik Zenica

This study employed an ‘applied ethnographic’ approach. Applied ethnography has two main advantages; it has an explanatory dimension that seeks to develop knowledge that will be relevant for policy makers, practitioners and institutions, and other stakeholders seeking to address complex social issues. The second is that is readily applied to dynamic and contemporary real world problems; it will provide a specific framework for accessing data that enables in depth analysis and understanding of how individuals’ social world unfolds; how individuals makes sense of their decisions, how they feel about their (criminal) actions, how as a group interact with their internal and external environment (Pelto, 2013).

The research team approach involved:

Accessing relevant Ultras groups via a network of key ‘gate-keepers’ (i.e. individuals linked directly to individuals who were active in the communities in question).

On the basis of this negotiated access, the researchers gathered data via fieldwork from a variety of sources including direct interviews and observations and the internet.

Researchers gathered data on the culture, values, ideology of participants/groups as well as their interactions with each other. To gather data, the team used triangulation. As the term suggests, this approach employed more than one method to collect information (Hobbs & May, 2002).

This study collected data through:

- Semi-structured interviews targeting groups members and key stakeholders in the football context (for instance representatives of the Football Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina, clubs and the Police);
- Fieldwork observations of the groups studied in and around a selection of relevant football fixtures in BiH;
- Documents analysis.
- Online analysis of Ultras groups, networks and their narratives.

Online Mapping & Analysis of Bosnian Ultras Groups

The online research was carried out by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and it aimed to complement the offline research by determining the extent of online activity by Ultras groups in BiH and whether these groups have ties to ethno-nationalist violent extremism. The online research examined:

- The scale and extent of online activity;
- The platforms these groups use, how they use them and for what purposes;
- The types of content and narratives promoted by these groups.

This project used a mixed methodology drawing on qualitative and quantitative assessments of the online public activity of BiH Ultras groups through the use of social listening tools and ‘digital ethnographic’ research⁷. Based on an initial scoping exercise, the research focused on public social media activity on Facebook and YouTube, as well as a series of online forums used by Bosnian football fans and hooligan groups. Research for this project took the following steps:

1. Initial scoping of online platforms: To discover relevant online groups and communities ISD researchers used ‘snowball sampling’, starting from known Bosnian football supporter social media groups on popular platforms such as Facebook. Once an initial series of accounts and groups were identified, researchers aimed to identify related groups and platforms to build a picture of the relevant online ecosystem.

⁷ For the purpose of this project public activity is understood to be content produced by particular accounts or groups on social media which is readily available to researchers searching across a platform, or through that platform's API, and which does not require special permission to access (e.g. through a request to a closed group or chat channel).

2. Mapping of identified Ultras groups and networks: Using our social listening tools we mapped the public social media presence of the identified groups, accounts and platforms. Based on our initial scoping, we decided to include:

a. Tracking group activity on Facebook using Crowd tangle. Crowd tangle data were queried through a quantitative analysis on the total volume of posts produced by these pages over time, and the levels of engagement with these posts including numbers of likes, shares and comments; and qualitative analysis on the topics of the most popular posts to identify the nature of engagement.

b. Tracking key accounts on YouTube. The research team identified up to 20 YouTube accounts that are posting relevant content and gather data relating to the numbers of followers these YouTubers have and the numbers of views on their videos. We performed a qualitative analysis of their video content to identify trends over time.

c. From our initial scoping, we identified a number of more traditional online forums that appear to have been used by Bosnian football supporters and Ultras. Many of these forums were older, and appeared to be used less frequently, however we conducted a further review of these to understand the evolution of online activity over time.

Data Analysis Strategy

The research team collated the data sources and conducted a preliminary thematic analysis; interview data were contrasted together with field observations and internet analysis to deliver the theoretical understanding of the research questions.

Section 1: Who and what are the Ultras in BiH and do they present a problem to the BiH authorities?

Explaining the Ultras in BiH is a complex task; this research suggests it is appropriate to understand them as a form of extremist group⁸. BiH authorities are struggling to tackle the groups' criminal activity and to curb their violence in and outside the football stadia. Their dangerousness is explained by a recent violent episode; the 27th of September 2019 Radio Sarajevo was attacked, and

⁸ Ultras are football fans groups who manifest extreme and organised displays of anti-social behaviour and criminal activity which is often established in biases usually linked with the right-wing extremist scene (Cf. Spaaiji and Testa, 2016; Testa, 2013, 2018).

several journalists were threatened by a group of Ultras of the Football Club Sarajevo⁹. Since the beginning of 2019, BH Journalists and the Free Media Help Line have registered five death threats and six physical assaults on journalists and media teams; the journalists lamented that the authorities were unable to stop these groups¹⁰.

There are a series of risk factors that explain the existence and appeal of the Ultras groups to the youth of BiH. Our research suggests that the first risk factor creating this threat is socio-environmental in nature and therefore needs to consider a wide range of issues. Ethnicity and ethnic tensions do appear to play a role, but we suggest this is not a primary issue in understanding the Ultras groups in BiH. It is true, though, that in a political milieu constructed on ethnic divisions and reciprocal discriminations, ethnic nationalism is understood by some as an antidote to poor social condition. It is exploited by the Ultras groups to justify their existence; the groups function as a catalyst of belonging in a politically fragmented country. Ethnic roots are also used by the Ultras as a narrative to single out and most often legitimise provocation to rival factions and in some cases violence.

However, our research suggests that the economic of BiH and in particular unemployment rate and concomitant under-utilisation of youth was a key factor identified by all stakeholders, including the Ultras groups them. Disenfranchised youth join these groups, which offer the possibility to gain power, tackle boredom, discharge daily frustrations and, because of the prolific criminal activities of these groups, earning money.

Our data suggest the environment (in particular the football stadium) is a key risk factor; in particular the poor stadium infrastructure, lack of stadium regulation, poor security arrangements and match attendances. As in East European countries, low attendances at football matches work as amplifier of Ultras' actions and presence (Dzhekova et.al. 2015). In addition, the lack of football clubs security and of regulation inside the stadium means the Ultras groups can exert a very high level of control in the stadiums. As a result, the Ultras are perceived by youth and other fans as powerful. Their chants, banners, symbols

9 In terms of criminal activities, the Maniacs (Manijaci supporters of the Football Club Željezničar) and Horde Zla (supporters of the FC Sarajevo) are deemed by all police forces interviewed as the most dangerous because criminal organisations. It is important to stress that both groups were the only one who denied at the last moment to meet the research team because of our questions focusing on criminal activities.

10 Bosnia Journalists Protest After Thugs Storm News Outlet, BalkanInsight, from September 30, 2019, retrieved January 21, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/09/30/bosnia-journalists3-protest-after-thugs-storm-news-outlet>

and physical intimidation are used to either recruit (fans join them because they are intimidated) or to eject those who oppose their presence and dominance.

The second broad risk factor is political and can be identified in the Ultras' narrative of a perceived corrupt political class which fails BiH youth and society around which the groups organise and recruit. In this case, the Ultras portray themselves as the only resistance group to the status quo. For example, all the groups declared their oppositions to local political parties who according to them have hijacked any societal arena including the police; in some cases, the groups acted as political/pressure agent to contrast local politics (Cf. Robijaši Zenica). Far right ideology was part of two groups collective identity¹¹ but it did not appear to be sophisticated and strong like other European groups for instance those in Italy, Spain, Greece and some Eastern European groups such as in Poland and Bulgaria. This ideology feeds an "Ultras Mentality" which our research suggests is one of the main drivers to explain the group's repertoire of actions. Important risk factors are also the sense of belonging/community and identity.

For example, being from Grbavica in Sarajevo enshrines an identity upon the everyday teenager of being a Manijac¹². Local networks (family, friend groups, classmates) also amplify the chances that one joins an Ultras groups. Our data also stress risk factors such as the feeling of victimhood against journalists, the Federal State, local politicians and the police; love for the city and the football club; and the excitement of violence and Glory.

Section 2: Groups' structure, Ultras Mentality, Criminal and Online activities

Section two of this paper analysis the Ultras groups structure, their collective habitus¹³ what we call the "Ultras Mentality", which informs and explains their actions; their criminal activities and their online presence.

The structure of the groups can be described as a hub-and-spoke network; there are more leaders, and members have some authority. Power is in multiple

11 Škripari - NK Široki Brijeg and Ultras - HŠK Zrinjski Mostar

12 Ultras supporting the Football Club Željezničar (Sarajevo)

13 French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines Habitus as "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" These "internalised structures" and "schemes of perception" structure the subject's (shared) world-view and their "apperception" of the world in which they suppose they exist (Bourdieu, 1977, p.86; Bourdieu, 1998 and Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2007).

hands and there is a high level of functional diversity; in one group there were 10 leaders.

Leaders were those who were older and were perceived as charismatic figures, this is important to make sense of the radicalisation of newcomer's process as they are those who promote changes in beliefs and behaviours and facilitate the adoption of the Ultras Mentality which justifies violence and their self-sacrifice if needed for their "people" (ethnic belonging) and the Ultras group.

Based on our data, the Ultras Mentality in BiH is constructed around four important elements:

Values: being an Ultras means living following the virtues of Loyalty, Honour, celebrating "Balkans" masculinity, strength, unity and most importantly violence.

Anti-system stances against the perceived corrupt state and political class, against their armed "henchmen" the police, and against the Football Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina considered decadent and costly spending money on "fancy" buildings in Sarajevo but not investing in Stadium facilities and in promoting BiH youth talent in football.

Past and tradition: These fuels rivalries among groups and in BiH it is more important than ethnicity to explain Ultras violence.

Ethnic nationalism which in some groups was linked to Far-Right and Far-Left ideologies. However, as explained earlier Ethnic nationalism does not explain the BiH Ultras existence; The BiH extremism is explained by localised power dynamics and the Ultras groups' criminogenic needs.

To be part of the nucleus, it is necessary to show commitment and elitism (adhere to the values, ideology and tradition of the group) only in this case a member is co-opted. The Nucleus covers all the functions of the group from memberships, mural graffiti, banners, chanting, smuggle pyrotechnics and crimes such as selling drugs.

The Ultras criminal Activities

Our research suggests that the Ultras phenomenon in BiH is not so much an issue of political or religious 'extremism' (Cf. ethnic nationalism, Far Right or Jihadist ideologies) but more about their criminogenic nature, status and needs within the political, social and economic geography of their local environment.

Our data indicate that in BiH, Ultras groups exist fundamentally to make money from criminal activities particularly via drug dealing, racketeering, extortions, intimidations and “services” offered to local politicians during the electoral period. Our data also highlight that in certain locales, levels of corruption exist that allow the Ultras groups to gain and exercise their power and control. This research suggests that crime and corruption were so intrinsically linked to the Ultras in BiH that one group regretted that it was relatively small in number because this was hindering their criminal opportunities and profits. This data highlights how a key driver for such groups is not ethnic or sectarian but relates directly to their capacity to operate as a semi-organised crime group within and sometimes beyond their locality.

Our data also point out that the organised criminality of those within Ultras groups is empowered through the connections between the Ultras Leaders and the Football clubs. Our data suggests that most of the groups receive financial payments from the football clubs to avoid creating problems.

The Ultras Online activity:

- There is a strong online presence of pages, channels and accounts associated with ultras groups. From our sample there are on average 31,431 users which follow ultras group related pages from BiH.
- In the course of this study we analysed engagement data with online public Facebook pages associated with hooliganism in Bosnia over one year. This revealed over 4.7 million user interactions with posts in these groups over the year period, from 1.5 million users liking these pages, an 11% growth over the 12-month period.
- Some of the uses for these groups include: sharing various types of news related to football, football news from the Balkans and BiH, news about their team; sharing general information and guidance for firm/groups members about games, strategic decisions, issues they have with the management of the club; selling merchandise; belittling opponents; sharing political messages; sharing content which glorifies the club.
- Over a dozen YouTube channels associated with Ultras in BiH had garnered nearly 15 million views, and almost 34,500 subscribers. These channels were largely associated with firms linked to specific football clubs, although there were channels that also championed broader (sub-)national groups, such as ‘Serbian Hooligans’ or ‘Bosnian ultras’, associated with nationalist ideologies.

- Content on these YouTube channels was not explicitly violent, but dominated by footage of crowds chanting to intimidate opposition, street marches by supporters' groups with individual faces covered, and some scenes of street violence against fans from rival clubs, often including cutaways during clashes.

Section 3: The BiH State response and Research recommendations

- Our findings underline the importance of a coherent and systematic response in terms of policing, club security arrangements and new legislation. There are clear and obvious deficits in the responses among the authorities at a local level that need to be addressed at a Federal level to bring BiH up to international standards of policing and safety and security.

- Based on our data, we suggest the Ultras in BiH is an issue that must be addressed because of their associations with criminal activity and the manner in which their behaviour in football stadiums enables their power and influence to enact crime, including homophobic hate crimes.

- Greater levels of safety and security measures should be introduced both within and outside of football stadiums. Policing should be consistent in every Canton as disparity of treatment is a problem. For example, there were attempts by police forces notably the Sarajevo Canton police to harmonise in all Cantons the Law on Public Assembly and the Law on Violence and indecent behaviour at sport events but these attempts were proved difficult for the resistance of local cantons political authorities to transfer power to the Federal government. One of the main recommendations of the study is that a proposed federal law "On the Prevention of Violence and Misbehaviour at Sport Events" is considered and new national legislation created by the legislator at a Federal level as this will create the necessary legal framework for harmonisation at the canton level. This law also includes empowering Football Banning Orders and creating the necessary conditions for adequate safety and security both inside and outside football stadiums.

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**SMISAO EKSTREMIZMA NA FUDBALSКИM
TERENIMA BIH: INICIJALNA ANALIZA**

Rezime

Ovaj rad predstavlja početnu procenu rezultata četvoromesečnog istraživačkog projekta koji proučava Ultrase u BiH. Ovo istraživanje je doprinelo programu Bosanskohercegovačke inicijative za otpornost (BHRI) (sprovodi ga Međunarodna organizacija za migracije-Ujedinjene nacije, a finansiralo i bliže koordinisano s Američkom agencijom za međunarodni razvoj - USAID) s ciljem da se smanji pretnja nasilnim ekstremizmom u BiH i suzbijanje ekstremističkih napora za produblјivanje ili iskorišćavanje komunalnih tenzija.

Ključne reči: *Ultras, BiH, fudbal, navijačke grupe, javna sigurnost.*