



Cultural Drivers of Radicalisation

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Executive Summary

This report examines the use of media objects by the proponents of the Islamic State in Kosovo to trigger radicalization in the country by weaving in past political social grievances of discrimination and underrepresentation and evoking deep-seated traumas caused by the 1998-1999 war in Kosovo to conjure up a rallying cry of defiance to secular authorities and to the democratic order. Through an analysis of media landscape and audience habits in the age of digital media, the report traces the emergence of new forms of strategic communication by radical groups, which continue to elicit attention and spark debates long after the carriers of the messages have met their aims. To understand the context of radicalization in Kosovo, the report provides a key summary of cultural drivers that enabled the IS to raise in Kosovo one of the highest numbers of foreign fighters from Europe by combining traditional means of recruitment through social networks in real life and by media in real time. By tracing the narrative of a radicalized community as exemplified by its most prominent mouthpieces over time and space through two videos, the report contributes a perspective on how a radical group's message springs from subcultural media to mainstream media in the process of radicalization.

1. Introduction

As part of the D. Rad project, this report seeks to investigate the mainstreaming of radicalization through media in Kosovo in an effort to contextualize the cultural drivers of radicalization in the country. It does so through an analysis of specific cultural objects produced and disseminated by a radicalized group in Kosovo. As part of a broader theoretical framework, the report traces how a cultural object takes on a life of its own – namely how representation, distribution and media consumption habits give rise to alternative narratives, myths, and conspiracies.

In particular, by tracing key videos from the Islamic State targeting the Albanian-speaking audience in Kosovo as well as the dissemination patterns in mainstream media and social media platforms, the report looks at the effects of an audience's exposure to a particular media artifact and its impact over time. It compares two videos - one an amateur video recorded in 2012 by local radicalized actors who in a short period of time become among the most popular Kosovo members of the Islamic State. The last video of the group released in 2015 is a visible upgrade in production and reach, mirroring the rise and spread of the IS and their selection of local actors in disseminating their global message. The videos show the radicalized group's spring boarding from sub-cultural media to mainstream media, including international outlets. The videos are also a stark example of how individual grievances (micro level) move to the radical group (meso level) through a process of offering an alternative vision of justice, as D.Rad's I-GAP spectrum suggests, a framework of radicalization analysis through the concepts of injustice, grievance, alienation and polarization.

In addition to a thorough analysis of the media objects, this report provides an examination of the media landscape and news consumption habits of the targeted audience, both through narrative deconstruction and representation as well as composition to illustrate the use of propaganda as a radicalization tool. By placing the narratives and their representation in the wider historical, social, and political context of Kosovo, this report aims to connect the cultural drivers of radicalization to patterns of radicalization to facilitate an understanding how violent extremism messaging exploits the vulnerabilities of the target audience. Particularly, through an examination and comparison of the media objects, the report traces how the narrative moves from the cultural grievances of under-recognition and under-representation to a broader political grievance of

discrimination at the hands of secular authorities and alienation from a particular system of governance.

2. Methodology

This study sets to examine the media objects of the Islamic State in driving radicalization and violent extremism in Kosovo. It does so through deconstructing the narrative of the Islamic State as depicted in the two videos featuring the prominent IS foreign fighters from Kosovo. These videos target the local Albanian-speaking population in the Western Balkans, namely in Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and southern Serbia between 2012 and 2015, a period that marks the height of the IS recruitment of foreign fighters in Kosovo.

Most studies that analyzed the origins of radicalization and violent extremism in Kosovo have pointed to the centrality of the IS messaging and its apt use of media to radicalize and attract new recruits to fill the ranks of the Islamic State. However, with the exception of one report that studied the narrative of the Islamic State and detailed the content of their message (Kraja 2017), the role of media objects in driving radicalization in a national context is under researched. In addition to studies that focused on the pathway of foreign fighters from Kosovo, valuable insights were also provided on the media tactics used by the IS to expand its reach, shedding light on the IS use of social media (Kelmendi and Balaj 2017).

This report will examine the impact of media artifacts and the country's media consumption patterns on radicalization and violent extremism in Kosovo. The report seeks to situate the IS media objects in Kosovo's media landscape to analyze the circumstances that incidentally saw mainstream and social media networks become conduits of the IS propaganda. The IS did not run any media outlets in Kosovo and their videos were distributed through individual social media accounts mainly on Facebook. This content, along with Facebook, Twitter and YouTube profiles, have been removed from these social media networks in 2016 and 2017 by Kosovo authorities in a bid to curb the distribution of the IS propaganda material.

This report examines the existing material still available on YouTube media channels of mainstream media to gauge the media objects' impact on the audience based on views, news impact and the user generated comments elicited. The IS videos dedicated to the Kosovo audiences are now available only through news reports or random YouTube channels and websites. For the

purposes of this report, the videos selected are harnessed as secondary data from random YouTube channels, rather than the official channels of the organization.

To study representation in media objects, our data will be two IS videos, which contain explicitly radicalized ideas that call for violence. In the four years of its existence, radicalized individuals who joined the IS as foreign fighters released four prominent video messages to their Kosovo audience. The first video is believed to have been filmed in 2012 and is an elaboration of the local grievances of radicalized individuals before they joined the IS. This video emerged only after one of the men featured prominently in it was reportedly killed in a suicide attack in Iraq. The second video analyzed in this report is distributed in 2015 through the IS media al-Hayat marks both the IS reach and its effort to cast a wider net in recruiting its sympathizers in Kosovo and the wider Western Balkans. They are the first and the last video that contain an elaboration of their radicalization effort in Kosovo, enabling researchers to identify how that narrative evolved over time. For the purposes of this study, the examination of the first and the last video will be conducted to draw attention to the underlying myths that the group sought to exploit in Kosovo and to point out the narrative's ideological consistency.

The two videos were chosen also because they allow the tracking of the narrative through the main radicalized interlocutors - individuals who went on to become the faces of IS in Kosovo and the ways in which they sought to attract a following and persuade their Kosovo sympathizers to join radical causes and organizations. Both videos feature the three most prominent IS fighters from Kosovo. Although there is no evidence that the three men ever rose to prominence in the IS hierarchy, it shows that the organization itself was aware of their popularity and appeal among Muslims in the Balkans and sought to capitalize on it. The second video also reached unprecedented popularity. By June 2021, the edited two-minute video was viewed over 360,000 times and elicited over 700 viewer comments (Kanali Shtate 2015). The viewer comments on both videos offer a glimpse of the audience reaction to the group's message. The prominence of the videos was further filtered by desk research that traced their circulation and consumption context based on an assessment of their impact on audience-building in Kosovo. Though limited, the videos' impact is described through views of the videos on YouTube, and the commentary harnessed on YouTube to examine the reaction they trigger.

Because the viewers commented on the YouTube video overtime, this report attempts to shed light how the public's reaction is shaped by the rise and the

demise of the radical group. It will set to answer whether the public's reaction and engagement with the video changed from when it was released up to when the IS was defeated. To allow for comparison in terms of context, the media objects will be described for their narrative and core message. They were chosen across time and space to facilitate a better understanding of the IS' ability to adapt its narrative to current Kosovo-specific developments and cast as a reaction to them.

Though most of the media objects under study have been banned by Kosovo's authorities since 2017 crackdown on IS-related online content and closing of social media accounts of IS recruiters, influencers, and sympathizers, and most of the protagonists in the videos have been killed or jailed following the defeat of the IS and their retreat, the IS message, its followers, and sympathizers in the organization's media representation continues to have their lifeline online. Lastly, the analysis of the media objects under study was paired with the political and social context in which these products were situated, and the mainstream media representation of the videos and the radicalized individuals featured in them.

3. Cultural drivers of radicalization in Kosovo

There is neither a single pathway nor a single driver that propelled Kosovo's radicalized recruits to join thousands of foreign fighters that streamed from Europe into Syria and Iraq to join the IS. Instead, various studies (Kursani 2015, Shtuni 2016, Gojani and Xharra 2017, Kraja 2017, Jakupi and Kraja 2018) have identified a set of push and pull factors that have acted as a backdrop for scores of radicalized Kosovo Albanians that chose to heed IS' call and fight for the establishment of the so-called "Caliphate."

Most of the research focused on the individual drivers (Kursani 2015, Shtuni 2016, Gojani and Xharra 2017, Speckhard 2017), but also more recently there have been attempts to examine the community-level circumstances in a bid to identify the factors that make a community vulnerable to violent extremism and those that manage to resist such threats in an effort to provide possible policy interventions that would prevent the threat of violent extremism in the future.

These studies have found a mix of external and internal factors that enabled radicalization in Kosovo. Among the most prominent external influence is the introduction of various strands of Islam in Kosovo that compete with the Hanefi

tradition¹ practiced locally in Kosovo. These new strands polarized the community of believers and created animosity with the secular part of the society in the country (Kursani 2015, Shtuni 2016, Gojani and Xharra 2017). The external influence is particularly relevant in the IS messaging through its media artifacts that includes Kosovo as part of a supranational identity and casts the religious practice as a struggle with the secular democratic order purportedly dictated by Western powers (Jakupi and Kelmendi 2019, Kraja 2017).

Among internal drivers, studies have identified social alienation brought upon by weak institutions, corruption, clientelism and rising inequality between ruling elites congregated in the urban areas and the socially marginalized in the rural parts of the country (Kursani 2015, Shtuni 2016, Jakupi and Kraja 2017). The theme of internally driven social exclusion plays prominently in the IS local narrative, including grievances of perceived repression and imposition of Western liberal norms (Kraja 2017). Others have identified altruistic motivations, strong trauma, economic deprivation, social disenfranchisement personal significance and religious ideology among the personal incentives that have laid the path for individuals to join the IS (Speckhard, 2017, GCERF 2020). A few other studies have also noted a shallow prior religious knowledge among foreign fighters from Kosovo as a vulnerability to IS intentions and propaganda (GCERF 2020, Kursani 2017).

Among the community-level factors that have contributed to Kosovo's vulnerability, researchers have also found the activity of grass-root local Islamist organizations that became influential as Kosovo's Islamic Association was gripped by a breakdown in authority and faced a crisis of legitimacy (Jakupi and Kraja 2017), as well as the close-knit family and social ties in Kosovo. A random sample of the IS recruits from Kosovo showed that 70% of the foreign fighters were related and 40% of those were siblings (Kursani 2018), indicating the effectiveness of the locally driven recruitment campaign by the IS in the later stages of group's trajectory. Yet, the IS recruitment in Kosovo was often done through the Internet. In that sense it was not tied to a specific geographical "hotspot" but was rather related to the frequent propaganda in media (Qehaja 2019).

Placed in the wider context, Kosovo's episode with radicalization and violent extremism emerged a decade after it was placed under a UN rule following NATO's air campaign against Serbian forces to stop their ethnic cleansing

¹ Largely understood as the most liberal school of Sunni Muslim tradition, inherited, and practiced since the Ottoman conquest in the Balkans.

campaign on Kosovo's Albanian population. The war in Kosovo followed the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia, though the organized armed resistance in the two former Yugoslav units differed significantly. While the radicalization problem and the threat of violent extremism and extremist ideology is in part due to the homegrown radicalization as a remnant of the Bosnian war and participation of the "El-Mujahid" unit of religious foreign fighters in that conflict, who settled in Bosnia after the war" (Azinovic et al 2015), in Kosovo no such legacy was present. In Kosovo, the most vulnerable group for IS recruitment was between ages 21-25 years old (Shtuni 2016), suggesting that this generation of radicalized individuals had no ties to the Kosovo war, or the subsequent armed uprisings in neighboring North Macedonia (2001) and Presevo Valley/Southern Serbia (2000), as the majority of them were young children during the period of conflict.

Furthermore, the 2010 political developments in the Middle East and across the Arab world with the upheaval created around the Arab Spring uprisings framed radicalization in Kosovo. Many in Kosovo, including the country's government, viewed the uprisings as a paradigm shift that could bring about more recognitions for the young country. Prior to the Arab Spring, the governments across the Middle Eastern countries mostly rejected Kosovo's independence as an American project and sided with Serbia in disputing Kosovo's secession in part due to their allegiance to Yugoslavia, which led the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War of which they were part of, but also their own territorial ambitions and disputes. This renewed interest in the political developments in the Middle East in Kosovo became even more crucial following the recognitions to Kosovo's independence by Egypt and Libya shortly after the regime change in both countries that saw the toppling of longtime dictators (VOA 2013). Following a similar trail of thought, Kosovo's then foreign minister Enver Hoxhaj, announced in a UN Security Council meeting on Kosovo that the country had established contacts with the Syrian opposition and was supporting their fight "to oust" the Syrian President Assad. "We were among the first governments in Europe who was supporting the opposition in Libya and in other Arab countries last year, because we were fighting for the same aspirations, for the same values... We are supporting their cause very much" Hoxhaj told the high-level meeting in a session broadcast and widely watched in Kosovo (Reuters 2012). This line was repeatedly used by the returned IS foreign fighters as they mounted their defense in local courts in Kosovo (BBC 2018, Xharra and Gojani 2017).

At the same time, the dissemination of the IS propaganda and radicalized messaging developed as internet-based outlets often taking advantage of the

lack of regulation of media ownership proliferated. The current media legislation in Kosovo does not cover media ownership transparency and media concentration enabling media to operate in a legal vacuum and through financial practices that are not transparent compromising their independence and ethical standards (Berisha 2015). Furthermore, the online sphere in Kosovo is not regulated and recent efforts to propose regulation on online media video content through the law on the Independent Media Commission has been met with criticism by media associations who view these moves as government efforts to exert control over media.

4. Media landscape of radicalization in Kosovo

The media environment in Kosovo has increasingly become polarized and commercialized. There has been a deterioration in professional ethics and standards and a rise in attacks, threats and instances of public smear campaigns against investigative reporters and journalists (Freedom House 2021, EU Progress Report 2020, RWB 2021, IREX 2019). These investigative reporters and journalists have been attacked because they have researched government corruption and organized crime ties and reported on religious extremism in Kosovo (BIRN 2017, CPJ 2021). Media watchdogs rank Kosovo as partly free due to the political interference in the media sector; the country dropped 8 places in the World Press Freedom Index in 2021 (Freedom House 2021, Reporters without Borders 2021).

Kosovo has a media code and legislation regulating its traditional media environment. The regulation is managed through the Independent Media Commission and the self-regulating Press Council of Kosovo (Hoxha 2020), but its implementation is often lacking. The media, including the public broadcaster, have increasingly come under political influence and are vulnerable to political control (EU Progress Report 2020).

This challenging environment is further aggravated by the lack of ownership transparency, especially of the web-based news sites (Berisha 2015), which have mushroomed in recent years, and generally low trust in the mainstream media (NDI 2019) and high media illiteracy (OSCE 2020). Furthermore, the coverage is centered on Kosovo's capital Pristina, often neglecting regional developments that influence much of the country's political and social life (Hoxha 2020).

Kosovo's small media market is crowded but diverse. Traditional media are regulated, however the new media such as news website and online television productions have no oversight. There are 20 television stations, 83 radio

stations, including the influential, state-funded public broadcasters with national reach, and the privately owned media with funding mainly secured through advertisement, including from government and political parties, and subscription fees of numerous cable platforms (EU Progress Report 2020, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2020). A number of media continue to be funded by international donors, though their support over the years has significantly dwindled (Berisha 2015). While media watchdogs have classified the media landscape as “nearly sustainable” (IREX 2019), much of the media in Kosovo have become hostage to click-baits due to financial pressures and shrinking newsrooms that provide little original content and allow social media to dictate content and amplification of influencers to meet the demands of continuous news cycle. Media researchers have also noted concerning patterns in media ownership in Kosovo; in some cases political and business interest groups infiltrate media ownership structures or launched new media but hide behind nominal owners while in other cases corporations take over media to leverage information in pursuit of their business interests (Berisha 2015). In addition to the ownership challenges that have affected media independence, the rapid expansion of online media has led “to drastic deterioration” of journalistic standards and public debate often becoming vessels of individual’s frustration (Berisha 2015).

The media scene is further fractured along the ethnic lines, with each ethnic group relying on their own language media, with little to no crossover. Media on both sides of the ethnic divide in Kosovo have a history of hate speech directed at the rival ethnic group. In 2004, when Kosovo was still a UN protectorate, the country’s public broadcaster was singled out for unethical coverage that sparked anti-Serb riots that left dozen dead and forced thousands of Serbs to flee their homes (OSCE 2004). Since 2004, the role of the Kosovo media in incitement of violence has been addressed through media regulations, professional trainings, strengthening of ethical considerations in making hate speech unacceptable (Hoxha 2020). Highlighting the lingering issues, however, media of both ethnic groups tend to garrison around national issues in times of heightened tensions and resort to reviving the context of prevailing animosities. Media in Kosovo glorify the 1998-1999 war against Serbia, whereas Serbia vilifies the now-defunct Kosovo Liberation Army that fought Serb forces and NATO’s intervention to stop the war.

Despite these systemic weaknesses and lack of critical approach and promotion of nationalism, Kosovo’s traditional media – both public and private – did not directly glorify the Islamic State or its actions in Syria and Iraq. In fact, an Islamophobic discourse was prevalent in the media, often incited by Kosovo leaders who conflate Islam with violence (Fetiu 2015). Yet, as was the case with

the media around the world at the peak of the IS territorial reach, media in Kosovo also fell prey to the temptation to run IS-made high-end media products delivered from the battlefield that no independent news media could reach. In addition, because of the click-baiting nature of tabloid online media and 24-hour news cycles, the mainstream media in Kosovo became unwittingly lured into the IS strategic communication and propaganda machinery for a period between 2014-2016 (Kraja 2017).

Kosovo has a near whole country Internet coverage and a record high use of mobile phones and social media among all age groups and ethnic communities proportionate to its population. According to a 2019 household survey, 93.2 percent of the Kosovo households have internet access, with nearly 53% of the users under the age of 45 (ASK 2019). In addition, the internet users were almost evenly distributed between the rural and urban dwellers. Of the total internet users, 84.9% reported to access internet through their smart phone. The vast majority of Kosovo's population uses mobile phones; in 2019 98 % of the adult population possessed a mobile phone and half of those users had internet subscription on their phones (STIKK 2019). Similarly, Kosovars are avid users of social media. Various estimates put the number of social media users in Kosovo at 1.1 million, or about 60 % of the population. The vast majority of social media users have a Facebook account.

Among the main enablers of the IS recruitment strategy in Kosovo were media developments of the last decade, especially with the rise of social media, that aided the proliferation of the IS propaganda. The advent of social media in particular introduced major changes in the information domain and became a "weapon in modern warfare (Çela 2018). In found a ripe terrain in Kosovo where broad content in the Albanian language continues to be scarce, practically divided between pop culture and lectures by imams modeled to online sermons (Kursani 2015), through which controversial imams reached stardom at an impressive speed. For instance, a prominent imam of the main mosque in Kosovo, who was investigated and charged for inciting worshippers to go to Syria but later acquitted, has over 307,000 followers on his public account on Facebook, just below that of Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani and the country's Prime Minister Albin Kurti. For instance, Krasniqi's sermon on "Values that a good woman should possess" netted 1 million views on YouTube. His influence, however, is not limited to his social media accounts. Due to his high popularity, Krasniqi and other controversial imams are frequently hosted on prime time talk shows as media compete for viewership and advertising.

These media habits and in particular the widespread use of social media as one of the main information sources have made Kosovo's public vulnerable to violent extremism and have enabled a far-reaching spread of propaganda and disinformation. According to a recent NDI survey in Kosovo, 24% of Kosovars consider social media the most trusted source of information (NDI 2019). Such reliance on social media for information has granted the Islamic State the infrastructure to enable the wide dissemination of their message as the social media are the preferred tools of radicalization by the IS recruiters in Kosovo (Kursani 2018, Speckhard 2017, Xharra and Gojani 2017, Kraja 2017). As Kelmendi and Balaj show, the Islamic State relied on individual accounts to create a community of amplifiers of their propaganda in Kosovo as well as a number of autonomous websites that tried to mimic the propaganda of the IS global media campaign. In Kosovo, the IS did not establish a magazine or its own Facebook or YouTube channel. However, Kosovo members of the IS posted videos from Syria and Iraq on their private account for further dissemination by their networks and media (Kelmendi and Balaj 2017, Kraja 2017). As social media increasingly sets the agenda of mainstream media and given the factors outlined above, the IS propaganda and messaging was amplified in the country's main media, reaching an even greater audience (Kraja 2017).

With the wide proliferation of internet and the expansive use of mobile phones, the IS media outreach and strategy, initially developed in sub-cultural media, below the radar of authorities and the general public, but catapulted to national prominence over time as the reach of the IS and the prominence of the group rose. Videos shared on social media such as Facebook and YouTube featured prominently in person-to-person recruitment effort and were used to increase the IS appeal among the Albanian-speaking audience and expand the ranks of their sympathizers in Kosovo (Kraja 2017). Through a combination of hundreds of public pages and closed groups on Facebook, public channels on YouTube and public chats on Telegram, the IS messaging in Albanian language sought to mimic the official IS propaganda and clustered around the call for "jihad" (Kelmendi and Balaj 2017). Through these social networks, sympathizers – often through anonymity and impunity granted by the very nature of social media - who did not partake in the conflict in Syria became ample amplifiers of the IS propaganda on Facebook and YouTube, giving the impression of their oversized presence at no cost. By 2017, when the IS propaganda in Albanian language became commonly disseminated, there were over 800,000 active Facebook users in Kosovo (Kelmendi and Balaj 2017). As Kelmendi and Balaj (2017) note, the IS sympathizers entered and created the IS online communities on the basis

of activities they displayed on their individual social media accounts. Eventually, as authorities began to crack down on the IS-related online content, these virtual communities migrated to closed chat groups in Telegram and Signal where they were informed in real time about the developments in Syria (Kelmendi and Balaj 2017).

The videos, through which the IS members communicated directly in Albanian language to their audiences, also became a regular feature of widely followed online tabloids and online media in Albanian language, which are becoming key information sources as the print circulation declined and was practically brought to a halt in 2020. For instance, Gazeta Express, the most read Albanian-language news website in Kosovo, prominently featured the IS produced content as part of its news coverage of the group. Though the news website editorialized the content, inadvertently media became vessels of the IS propaganda by replaying the videos through which IS members from Syria appealed to the audience in Kosovo. The media coverage not only acknowledged the group's existence, but the unfiltered broadcast of their messages and the accompanying images of the foreign fighters from the battlefield extended the lifeline of their messages (Kraja 2017). By 2021 most of the Kosovo men that appeared in the IS videos in Albanian language had been killed, and while the police have cracked down on the group's online presence, the videos carried by some media channels have continued a life of their own.

The trauma and the continuous narratives of victimization and heroic resistance loom large in the region's attitude, utilized by various sides to fit the current political agendas, as discussed by Hehir and Lanza 2021. It is present in leaders' rhetoric, representation in media and popular culture and it surfaces strongly in moments of national crisis or when Kosovo feels threatened by Serbia. Feeding into this narrative of grievances are facts of Kosovo's tumultuous past that stretched over decades under the rule of Socialist Yugoslavia. Kosovo was Yugoslavia's most underdeveloped and repressed part and its majority non-Slavic Albanian population suffered from institutional discrimination and neglect that left it economically underdeveloped, suffering from chronic unemployment and with staggering illiteracy (Independent International Commission on Kosovo, 37). The narrative of victimization in the 1980s and 1990s when Serbia pursued a policy aimed at changing the ethnic composition of Kosovo was further fueled by the widespread repression in the late 1990s when Kosovo Albanians were subjected to apartheid-like rules and eventually mass killings, rapes and ethnic cleansing in 1998 and 1999. These traumatic experiences shaped the attitudes on the Syrian war of Albanians in Kosovo as they identified themselves in the Sunnis' ordeal in Syria (Shtuni 2016). Others assessed that because of their

personal experience, “many Kosovars felt a duty and strong responsibility to assist other Sunni Muslims facing a dictator (Speckhard 2017), ideas of transnational and pan-Islamic movement that influenced a stronger sense of religious identity.

The backdrop of the radicalization in Kosovo is also one of its religious identity. Islam has a long tradition in Kosovo, dating back to the Ottoman conquest in the 15th century that stretched over for five centuries, ending in 1912 with the fall of the empire. Though largely shaped by the secular attitudes of socialist Yugoslavia of which Kosovo was a part of for nearly 50 years and due to the fact that they were targets of discrimination and state reprisals due to their ethnic identity, Albanians in Kosovo integrated Islam as an identity and territorial marker to assure their group survival. While ethnic groups in Kosovo continue to primarily identify by their ethnicity, as the population underwent major changes in the last three decades often seeing their political will frustrated, some scholars are of the view that Albanians in Kosovo are experiencing a religious reawakening (Shtuni 2016). Some credit this development to various humanitarian organizations that rushed to rural Kosovo with a religious agenda at the end of the war in 1999 filling a vacuum left by secular authorities and Western aid organizations (Shtuni 2016, Kursani 2015) but also to scores of regional imams educated in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to name a few. According to Kosovo’s 2011 census, over 90 percent of its population identifies as Muslim (out of 1.7 million people, 1.6 million identify as Muslim and the rest identify as Orthodox Christians and Roman Christians). However, since the end of the war with Serbia in 1999 when the territory became a UN protectorate, Kosovo’s authorities and its international overseers have tried hard to construct and forge the identity of the new country as a liberal, multi-confessional democracy. Kosovo Albanians largely take pride in their historical religious tolerance and their potent ethnic identity that trumped any religious identification during their struggle against the Serbian regime. As nationalism scholar Gezim Krasniqi explains: “the Albanian nationalism was a secular one... and leaders traditionally avoided politicizing religion because of the need to avoid internal division that would create dissent in the process of nation-building” (Krasniqi 2011).

Yet, after the war, under the supervision of the United Nations, Kosovo leaders established democratic institutions through regular elections, embraced freedom of expression and the right to association. Religious practices once banned and strongly discouraged in socialist Yugoslavia are now granted and guaranteed by Kosovo’s Constitution. Religion and religious institutions have seeped into the political landscape where they compete with other forces for a foothold in

shaping the country's values and ideological orientation. Islam and in particular its relationship to the state is integral to the public debate. It ranges from issues such as the headscarf bans in schools and other public institutions to recent trends of politicians making frequent references to piety in their public appearances as well as imams reaching celebrity status in their YouTube channels discussing marital affairs and gender roles to local imams invited to current affairs shows to discuss national affairs. Polls corroborate this further: 57% of those surveyed claimed they trusted the religious institutions compared to 14% trust in the government (KCSS Security Barometer 2017). That said, in 2021 after initially entering the parliament in 2010, parties with an Islamist agenda in Kosovo have failed to pass the electoral threshold and appear to garner little public support. But the renewed interest in accommodating religious identity in the political landscape persists. In the past year these efforts became more visible, and they appear to be signs of times as several Kosovo's senior government representatives stopped their speeches not to interfere with the call to prayer or adjourn government sessions to break the fast during the month of Ramadan in apparent show of sensitivity toward the increased religiosity.

While in Kosovo's case scholars do not make a causal link between increased religiosity and radicalization, several argue that this religious awakening in Kosovo has enabled some local imams to re-imagine Kosovo as part of a supranational Islamic identity. Amid this broader context of developments, scholars, and researchers (Shtuni 2016, Kursani 2015, Speckhard 2017) identified "chronic vulnerabilities" in Kosovo that have turned the country into a target for IS' recruitment effort. These conditions are traced to the frustrated expectations in the new state to endemic corruption, identity crisis and as previously discussed to the influence of specific dubious Islamic relief organizations from Gulf countries – namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar - that established their operations on behalf of humanitarian aid but engaged in proselytizing in Salafist teachings right at the end of the 1998-1999 war (Shtuni, 2016). In these circumstances, as Shtuni argues, "local radical imams were able to use this newly crafted religious bond with the Ummah to recast the Kosovans' grievances and struggles as local manifestations of a greater global trend of oppression against Muslims."

Several radicalized individuals from Kosovo linked their participation in Syria and Iraq with IS as a continuation of the conflict in Kosovo, suggesting that the conflict provided an important hook for the IS recruiters who could liken the war in Syria to the one in Kosovo that the generation of the recruits they were raising were too young to fight in (Xharra and Gojani, 2017, Shtuni 2016). This narrative was also validated by the few members of the former guerrilla organization,

such as Naman Demolli, among the first foreign fighters from Kosovo to join the warring parties in Syria, who challenged the long-held view that Kosovo fought a war against Serbia's occupation, giving the conflict in Kosovo religious undertones and portraying it as a war against Islam (Kraja 2017).

Aside from the struggle with Kosovo's stagnated international consolidation, well into its first decade of its independence, some in the country gradually began to feel a deep sense of isolation and alienation. The promise of democracy, open market economy and Western-style prosperity did not materialize, and Kosovars, despite an overall improvement of indicators however insufficient, began to grow weary of their institutions and political system, which they increasingly viewed as corrupt and serving a few at the top. The hopes for a just society gave way to perceptions of injustice. By 2013, nearly 70 percent were dissatisfied with the political trends in Kosovo, a stark contrast with 2008 when only 36% expressed pessimism. Similarly, the trust in Kosovo's government had halved by 2013 to a meager 27% compared to 56% in 2008 and only 16% were satisfied with the courts and over 56 percent viewed them as corrupt (Public Pulse UNDP 2013).

The municipalities with the largest number of foreign fighters per capita suffered from political marginalization and underrepresentation at the central level (Jakupi and Kraja 2017), which translated into further disenfranchisement and social alienation of portions of the population far removed from the center of power. The allegations of endemic corruption and weak institutions are the main criticism leveled at Kosovo authorities by the country's international allies, including the EU and the US, and often quoted as the reason to hold Kosovo back in joining international bodies, successfully pursuing Western investment or gaining free movement in the European countries. Such shortcomings - coupled with daily scandals of embezzlement and abuse of public office by elected officials and a culture of impunity that has surrounded high-profile corruption cases - figure high in the media and have shaped the narrative of the country as a failed state. According to GCERF, which has run programs aimed at prevention in Kosovo, factors such as corruption and lack of political accountability play into the Salafi narrative to argue that "without Divine order and absolute obedience to God, humans are incapable of creating and maintaining just and functioning societies" (GCERF 2020).

Local imams that inspired radicalization in Kosovo and advocated violent extremism, often operated in underground mosques, and were linked to a broader network of politically potent Islamist imams from North Macedonia with links into eastern Kosovo municipalities as well as summer camps run by

various Islamic organizations in the war's aftermath (Kursani 2015, Shtuni 2016, Qehaja and Perteshi 2018). Until 2012, arguably the reach of the local imams was constrained to their immediate followers in the mosques where they operated. However, with wide internet access, the advent of mobile phones and the proliferation of social media, many of the local imams, some with education attained in Saudi Arabia and preaching a political Islam, which stood in stark contrast to the Islam that co-habited with the secular state in the 1990s in Kosovo, began to operate their own social media platforms. This was particularly problematic given that “a lack of prior religious knowledge was noted among foreign fighters... suggesting that a shallow understanding of religion makes one vulnerable” (GCERF 2020). Prying on this context, over the course of the years, local imams exchanged the pulpit in a mosque with social media accounts, rising to national prominence often with blatant reductionism.

On a similar basis, the extensive reach and use of social media by the Islamic State and its sympathizers played prominently into radicalization in Kosovo. GCERF reports that the majority of the foreign fighters from Kosovo were influenced “in some way online,” whether through the passive viewing of videos on Internet, while a “significant minority” said their entire recruitment took place online (GCERF 2020). Others reported to have been influenced on their journey toward radicalization through social media where they “absorbed religious interpretations that resonated” (Kursani 2018). The social media platforms with their immediate feedback also enabled IS to “cast an enormous propaganda net” by making it possible to contact those who liked, retweeted, or commented their media object in real time (Speckhard 2017). Up to 2017, IS Kosovo foreign fighters uninterruptedly utilized Facebook and YouTube to amplify their narratives and activities from the battlefields of the Middle East (Xharra and Gojani 2017, Kraja 2017, Kelmendi and Balaj 2017).

5. The journey of the radicalized message: from the battlefield of Syria to the smart phone screens in Kosovo

As a case study representative of the radicalization patterns and pathways in Kosovo, two videos issued by IS foreign fighters with links to Kosovo and targeting the Kosovo audience have been selected for examination of how specific media objects create audiences. The two videos produced by IS for the Kosovo audience are examined across time and space. The study argues that despite the videos' attempt to create an ideological religious appeal to join IS in

the creation of “the Caliphate”, the narrative is constructed to appeal to and respond to local issues, such as the dispute over the construction of a new mosque in the center of Kosovo’s capital Pristina and the uproar following the law enforcement crackdown on the foreign fighters who joined the IS from Kosovo. It did so by exploiting primarily the narratives of disenchantment with Kosovo’s institutions and its international backers, to render Kosovo’s efforts to establish itself as a prosperous democracy as failed and to portray IS’ struggle as a continuation of the global jihad that played out its episode during the Kosovo war and may do so again in the future. The IS narrative further sought to exploit victimhood through threat of future violence, evocation of trauma to spark uncertainty and fear, and portray Albanians in general and Kosovo Albanians in particular as part of a larger Muslim community, unrestricted by borders that have come to confine much of their political trajectory.

Most of the videos that were produced by the Islamic State circulated unhindered in the social media sphere between 2012 and 2017. They were also prominently featured, and mostly broadcast uncensored in television, news websites and distributed via social media by the main local media channels in Kosovo, though most of the times the videos’ broadcast in media was typically negatively portrayed. Yet, the broadcast of IS propaganda videos by local media allowed for further amplification of the IS narrative and messaging, which continues to have a life of its own to this day, albeit limited. The videos, still to be found in media clippings and fringe websites, extend beyond group’s existence and authorities’ ban on all IS propaganda material from the social media sphere and IS-sponsored channels. IS has produced one high quality video dedicated to the audience in the Western Balkans, including Kosovo and Albania, which was produced and distributed by al-Hayat in January 2016. The video remains the last media object of the organization dedicated to its effort to raise recruits and lure sympathizers in Kosovo and the region.

At the heart of the narrative is the purported humiliation of Muslims by constrains of the secular state historically and presently, both at the community and individual level. The thread woven in the IS propaganda targeting Kosovo’s sympathizers portrays Kosovo as part of the global war against Islam, and country’s Muslims as besieged by Christians, ruled by the dictate of a small religious minority. Both videos appeal to the persecution of Kosovo Albanians at the hands of Serb forces. However, the narrative while drawing on victimization in both cases, it breaks away with the general understanding that the war in Kosovo was an ethnic war fought over the right to a territory. Instead, in describing the atrocities committed by Serb forces, the Roman Catholic Church

and the Serb Orthodox Church are conflated as “cross-bearers” intent on defeating Islam and repressing Muslims. In the face of such grievances and injustice, Demolli strikes at the imams that he considers as disloyal to the defense of their cause, heralding a new era of disobedience to the authority of the Islamic Association of Kosovo, which IS sympathizers came to view as corrupt (Jakupi and Kraja 2017).

The first video is an amateur video that dates back to 2012, featuring one of the first foreign fighters from Kosovo, Naman Demolli, who went on to fight with al-Nusra in Syria and was eventually killed in the battlefield, becoming the first casualty from Kosovo in the Syrian war. In the video, the black-clad Demolli appears flanked by two young men one of whom goes on to become the most prominent IS recruiter from Kosovo and self-styled leader of the Albanians in the Levant, Lavdrim Muhaxhiri. In the video, the men situate themselves between an unfinished Serbian Orthodox Church, built in the 1990s by Serbia’s regime on the grounds of the university campus that Kosovo Albanians were not allowed to attend. The Church, which remains unfinished, is seen by most Kosovo Albanians as a reminder of repression by Serbia. Across from Demolli and Muhaxhiri and opposite the Serbian Orthodox Church is the newly finished Roman Catholic Cathedral, a post-war church built with the support of Kosovo’s late President Ibrahim Rugova, who viewed the church as a testament to Kosovo’s multi-confessional nature despite Kosovo’s dwindling Catholic community, an image he hoped would alleviate the perceived Western bias toward the majority Muslim, but largely secular, Kosovo. The two men shot the video as they prepared to protest the authorities’ refusal to allow the construction of a grand mosque in the middle of the two worship sites. At the beginning of his speech, Demolli protests the statement of the Roman Catholic bishop in Kosovo who objected to having a mosque built across the cathedral. “Ninety-eight percent of us here are Muslims,” he claims. “Which means they are ruling over us with that minority that lives here. We have nothing against them, but we are against the cathedral.” He goes on to paint a worldview in which he places Kosovo as part of a global war against Islam and counts the humiliation of murders, beatings of “brothers” and rape of dozens of “sisters” by Christian Serb forces. “They came to fight Islam... “Every time I see the Cathedral, I see Slobodan Milosevic’s face. Every time I see the Cathedral I see Serbia’s tanks,” he exclaims. Demolli builds on the narrative of victimization at the hands of Christian Slavs in the 1998-1999 war evoking particular traumas that were commonly experienced by the Albanian population during the conflict (Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000). He also plays on the

sentiment of Kosovo Albanian Muslims as an oppressed majority forced into shunning its Muslim identity to appear closer to Western liberal values.

At the time when the video was made, Demolli led demonstrations protesting the authorities' reluctance to designate a space for the building of a mosque in central Pristina, shortly after the consecration of a Roman Catholic Cathedral and meters away from Serbian Orthodox Church build over a decade earlier. Months later, Demolli was killed while carrying an apparent suicide attack in Iraq blamed on the al-Nusra Front. Worthy of note is that a mainstream media in Kosovo, Klan Kosova television channel, characterized Demolli as "a volunteer" in the fight against the regime of the Syrian dictator Bashar al Assad, thereby romanticizing the first Kosovo casualty of the Syrian war.

In a similar vein, the al-Hayat 20-minute video "The honor is in the jihad," blurs the ethnic divisions by grouping Bosnian Muslims and Albanians in the imagined, borderless *Ummah*, appealing to the Muslim identity of the two. The video's narrative, delivered in Bosnian and Albanian, with English interpretation of historical events aimed at showing the victimization of Muslim majority in both countries, is a condemnation of the secular state as the basis of all the ills. "The US and the Crusader Europe allowed for Muslims to be slaughtered as sheep," a Bosnian IS foreign fighter states, flanked by a group of armed Bosnians and their sons. The call for Bosnian and Albanian Muslim sympathizers to join the Islamic State fluctuates between pleas and threats, stark warnings, and intimidation. Similarly, the video moves from portrayals of optimism and camaraderie, to pristine scenery and devastation of the frontlines and a projected confidence in the project of "the Caliphate" as the armed men of all ages walk with their sons in the battlefield. In one segment, one of the armed men is seen walking in a busy street with his fully veiled wife, holding two children, appealing to Muslims to join them in building the "Caliphate" where they can live free of "the humiliation that you have to endure" with authorities barging into homes in the "middle of the night to find your wife uncovered." Yet, despite the reportedly prominent role of women from the Western Balkans in the Islamic State, they were absent from the propaganda videos directed at the audience in Kosovo. Also, the condemnation of secular authorities as sellouts and their purported humiliation of Muslims comes to the fore here as well: "Don't think we forgot about the abuse that you inflicted upon Muslims, don't think we've forgotten about the humiliation you cause to Muslims," Ridvan Aqifi, known as al-Kosovi, a Kosovo IS foreign leader threatens, beating his suicide vest. "Dark days are coming to you. You'll be afraid to walk the streets... We shall fight you until the word of Allah is the order."

Both videos have widely circulated on local media in Kosovo and since they have been banned from YouTube and Facebook. However, excerpts of these videos exist through news items, generating much viewership and continuous commentary that goes on to this very day. It indicates an active but burrowed audience that prefers to maintain its anonymity in the light of law enforcement crackdown. For instance, the viewership of Demolli's video has drawn 50,000 views on a channel with merely 51 subscribers some of the supportive comments posted as recently as 2020. Among the 127 comments reviewed on the YouTube channel, many appear to praise his courage and sacrifice, wishing "God grant him paradise." Others pledge in the commentary "the day will come when Islam will firmly take hold in these lands."

Yet, over time, as IS hideous crimes become public and authorities crack down on their recruiters and followers, the curiosity and exposure to IS propaganda becomes more intense, but the audience is less swayed. Such instance is offered through an analysis of the commentary on "Honor is in the Jihad" video in the Kanal 7 YouTube channel that has just over 45,000 subscribers has generated 360,493 views and 781 comments, with about 20 comments added in the last two months. While most of the comments reviewed draw a wide condemnation of the participation of Albanians as foreign fighters and mock the threatening language of IS protagonists, only in several instances praise is offered. "You think that Allah will help you while you kill people," remarked a viewer in a comment posted a year ago. "You are not Muslims, you are killers," commented another one. Some of the prose used in the propaganda video sparked a popular – and at times funny – meme among youth. Instead of inciting fear among the public, eventually the video sparked ridicule.

The most visible difference in terms of viewer comments made on both videos is that the first one with Demolli gathers a group of sympathizers possibly because of the call by Demolli, who perished early in the conflict without being tainted with the horrors perpetrated by the IS, still resonates with many because of his ability to relate it to the daily challenges and their own experiences of the 1998-1999 conflict. In Aqifi's case in the second video, he appears as a mouthpiece of the IS, representing a linear history that is closer to the worldview of the populations of the Middle East, then the lived experience of the audiences in Kosovo. The video intentionally selects historical events that attempt to fit Kosovo and Albanians in the global narrative of the making of the *Ummah*. Although they are not isolated cases, both videos offer a glimpse into how radicalized and violent groups utilize local grievances, a purported sense of injustice and alienation in an attempt to create and appeal to an audience.

6. Conclusion

The case of the IS radicalization in Kosovo offers a classic textbook example of the ways narratives of injustice and past grievances and a general culture of victimization have come to play a prominent role in the processes of radicalization. The past grievances in Kosovo loom large as the country continues to be gripped by political drama - a contested statehood and opposition to its independence by Serbia, presently fueling a perception of uncertainty and fear of renewed conflict.

Similarly, Kosovo's traumatic collective experience of humiliation at the hands of Serbian authorities during a decade of repression by Slobodan Milosevic's regime is prominently used in media objects that shape the Islamic State's narrative for the Albanian audience in Kosovo. They are further exacerbated by memories of economic deprivation as Kosovo was one of the poorest regions of former Yugoslavia, a stigma that continues to haunt it to this very day even through the paradigm shift that has seen Kosovo reemerge as an independent state. Today those grievances of maldistribution of wealth resurface as income inequality between ruling elites and rural parts of Kosovo widens. Those grievances are present also in the cultural and political realm where religious identity has found a new lease of life in the makings of a pluralistic democratic society where it competes with the secular identity of the state.

Here too, as Kosovo sought to embrace the identity of a secular, pro-Western and multi-confessional state, a portion of its Muslim population sees itself as not being afforded the liberties of other confessions and parts of secular society thereby enforcing a feeling of social alienation at the hands of what they perceive a ruling minority. In this marketplace of ideas and competing grievances where identities are in flux or shaped by a culture of victimization, organizations such as the IS have exploited these fractures in society stoking up a sense of injustice that they promise to rectify.

In the two visual instances presented in this report, radicalized individuals in Kosovo step up to forge a closeness in a community purportedly wronged by secular authorities. In the first case, radicalized individuals use a clash over the construction of a mosque in the central part of Kosovo's capital Pristina as an occasion to protest their perceived discrimination. Despite being amateur videos, the first video of the radicalized individuals that become the most prominent IS members from Kosovo, is carefully choreographed to stir up emotions and animosity against the Christian communities in Kosovo. In the second video, the

IS seeks to provoke fear among unbelievers of an imminent settling of scores in a purported long battle between Christianity and Islam. In conclusion, Kosovo's experience with the radicalization process points to an unfinished process of building a national identity amid an ever-changing geopolitical landscape in the aftermath of five decades of Communism and immediate rise of nationalism, both currents that suppressed religious identity yet failed to create longstanding institutions to address cultural, social, and political inequalities.

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