Serbian police stand in front of far-right groups protesting the Mirdita-Dobar Dan festival on Oct. 22, 2020. The event, organized by liberal groups from Serbia and Kosovo, was in Belgrade, Serbia. Police prevented the protesters from disrupting the opening of the event. (Andrej Isakovic / AFP via Getty Images)

The Far-Right Landscape in the Western Balkans

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New and unexpected alliances have been slowly developing between the global far right and far-right movements in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). To what extent they continue to develop and manifest is contingent on a range of factors, including the outcome of the war in Ukraine, the EU migration crisis (with its close links to rates of Islamophobia), the inflation crisis, and even climate change.

A positive outcome for Ukraine — marked by the easing of inflation, reduced migration, and slowing climate change (as this is one of the factors driving both migration and inflation) — would most likely result in a decline in far-right sentiment. Given that the war in Ukraine rages on and the other enumerated problems show little chance of reversal, it can be said with confidence that the existing links between far-right nationalists in both the Balkans and abroad are likely to develop further. The more serious the problems become, the more rapid this integration will be. This is especially true in Serbia.

What would be the potential consequences? At the local level, the convergence of the local far right with the global far right would have disastrous

consequences for Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims, as well as other minorities in the Western Balkans. This prediction is supported by the firsthand experience of the 1990s, which laid bare what Serbian nationalism (which shares much in common with the global far right) was able to "accomplish" in Srebrenica (BiH), Vukovar (Croatia), and Račak (Kosovo). Likewise, Croatian nationalism, which led to war crimes against Bosnians and Bosnian Serbs, also continues to pose a major threat in BiH.

In terms of the influence of local far-right ideology on the global far right, there are two incidents wherein Serbian nationalism had a demonstrable impact on far-right figures outside the Balkans — namely, the 2011 Utoya massacre, carried out by Anders Breivik; and the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings. In both cases, the attackers drew direct inspiration from Serbian nationalism. If these links continue to grow, it is likely that the crimes of Serbian nationalists will continue to inspire other far-right individuals and organizations around the world.

This paper begins by introducing the basic terminology used as the framework for this discussion. It then provides a brief analysis of the relationships between the global far right (GFR) and both Croatian and Serbian nationalists. Finally, it highlights the geopolitical significance of these developments.

One final note for consideration is that BiH is home to sizable Serb (Bosnian Serb) and Croat (Bosnian Croat) communities, accounting for 30% and 15% of BiH's population, respectively. A substantial percentage, although certainly not all, of these Bosnian Serbs and Croats identify with Serbia and Croatia more so than they do with BiH. Politically and ideologically, they are aligned with Serbian and Croatian nationalisms, which is very apparent in areas where they are in the majority, namely, the Bosnian Serb entity of Republika Srpska (a regional entity within BiH), as well as certain regions in central and southern BiH. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, discussion of Croatian and Serbian far-right nationalism and its links to the global far right include both Serb and Bosnian Serb politics and groups, as well as both Croatian and Bosnian Croat politics and groups.

Terminology and Concepts

The Global Far Right

Our understanding of the term "far right" is often shaped by analysis and discourse originating in the United States, and there is good reason for this. As noted by Sian Norris recently in the Guardian, "due to the networked nature of the modern far right, trends that start stateside don't remain there." In the American context, the Anti-Defamation League defines the far right, or what it prefers to call the "extreme right," as encompassing a spectrum of groups and ideologies, including the white supremacist movement, which consists of various sub-movements, such as neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, and the alt-right. On another part of the spectrum are antigovernment extremist movements, militia movements, and sovereign citizens. Additionally, there are several "single-issue" movements, which all tend to represent the extreme wing of the more mainstream conservative movement. These include anti-abortion extremists, anti-immigration extremists, and anti-Muslim extremists, among others.

The European perception of the far right shares many similarities with that of the U.S., but there are also nuanced differences. According to Bettina Rodríguez-Aguilera, the EU far right is best defined by "chauvinistic and ethnic exaltation of the nation; anti-immigrant xenophobia; and 'anti-politician,' anti-establishment populism." The EU far right offers its followers an exclusive identity, singles out the culprits (the establishment), and advocates simple and expedient solutions (e.g., expelling foreigners and overthrowing the "political class").

Rodríguez-Aguilera goes on to highlight the ideological obsession of the far right with the idea of the sacrosanct nation, and thus with the myth of the ethnic purity of "our people." This increasingly leads to a rejection of the EU itself. Xenophobia is one of the factors that provides the greatest dividends to the far right, as it is notorious for demagogically emphasizing the alleged "dangers" of immigration and, in particular, of Muslim immigrants, who are depicted as incapable of integration and as obstinate opponents of "Christian and Western civilization." In this context, immigrants are blamed for "freeloading" off the welfare state,

rising crime rates (including terrorism), and even reintroducing diseases that were previously eradicated in Europe. The ultimate charge, however, is that they are guilty of attempting a "Great Replacement," a notion that refers to a Jewish-engineered plot to import Muslims into Europe and thereby bring about the collapse of Christendom. This idea is increasingly popular in American far-right circles as well.

In summary, running through both American and EU far-right ideologies are nationalist fixations on race and nation, racist "fears" of a "great replacement" (by either Jews or Muslims), and a rejection of democracy. These elements justify the usage of the term "global far right" (GFR). This is supported by a recent theoretical contribution by Andrea Pirro, which establishes this designation as a generic umbrella term that encompasses all the above points. Pirro also acknowledges the increasingly mutable borders and growing links between populist radical-right *political parties*, on one hand, and extreme-right *movements and groups*, on the other hand. The GFR is thus taken to mean a collective of far-right political parties, organizations, groups, and individuals, which is found primarily in North America, Europe, Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Australia, and New Zealand, mostly among white populations, who collectively adhere to the basic tenets outlined above.

The Balkan Far Right

As discussed in previous research, the framework for defining the Balkan far right is based upon the 2019 "Helpdesk Report" sponsored by the U.K. government. According to this report, the nationalist movements in the Western Balkans are largely characterized by the following:

1. Advocating ethnically based politics
2. Continual reference to the 1990s wars
3. Glorification of war criminals and ethnic cleansing (and genocide) from the 1990s
4. A belief in victimization
5. A desire to redraw boundaries on ethnic lines
6. Hatred or the "securitization" of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) groups
7. The use of violence

Protesters rally against the Mirdita-Dobar Dan festival in Belgrade. The festival was created to boost reconciliation and better understanding between Serbia and Kosovo. (Andrej Isakovic / AFP via Getty Images)

8. Anti-NATO and anti-EU politics
9. Pro-Russian attitudes and ties
10. Connections to organized crime

To this list, we have added the following key elements that were not included in the aforementioned report:

11. Islamophobia (perhaps better understood as anti-Muslim sentiment)
12. Genocide denial

A final consideration is underscored by Luke Kelly, the author of the "Helpdesk Report," who notes that "most right-wing groups [in the Western Balkans] advocate some form of border change based on ethnicity." Although the definition given above speaks of Western Balkan *nationalisms*, it is evident from previous clarifications and definitions that these

nationalisms certainly overlap with European and American far-right ideologies. When this paper refers to Serbian nationalists and Croatian nationalists, we confidently assert the many similarities between local nationalists and the GFR, many of which are elaborated upon below.

The Far Right and the Western Balkans

Serbia

As the war in Ukraine moves into a critical phase with the Ukrainian Armed Forces' highly anticipated 2023 Summer Offensive, one of the anti-Russian alliance's key concerns remains the positioning of the Serbian government led by Alexander Vučić. Since Serbia embarked on its disastrous, nationalism-fueled course toward independence during the breakup of Yugoslavia, marked by the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Croatia and Kosovo along with genocide in BiH, Serbia's political leadership has maintained a somewhat schizophrenic relationship with its neighboring powers. On one hand, Serbia craves the economic stability, living standards, respect, and success of its European counterparts. On the other hand, it rejects any notion of democratic checks and balances, as well as many European values.

To balance the influence of Europe and of an America that it largely resents, the Serbian political elite has revamped its relationship with Russia, which had long been confined primarily to the religious and cultural spheres. The Serbian political elite seeks the power and wealth amassed by its Russian cousins, but it is also aware that their populace would reject the idea of adopting standard Russian living conditions.

Under Putin, Russia has been only too happy to accept Belgrade's advances, viewing a relationship with Serbia as an opportunity to vex, distract, and disrupt both Europe and America. Russian nationalists, such as Alexander Dugin, see in Serbia a fellow Orthodox Church bulwark against the heathen West and another kind of *antemurale christianitatis*.

Thus, in the Western Balkans, Vučić's Serbia is perceived as a valuable political partner and thus is being courted by different sides. More recently, this has taken the form of appeasement by the West, allowing Vučić (and his proxy in BiH, Milorad Dodik) to accumulate vast wealth and consolidate their power uncontested. Russian courtship has been even more profitable for Vučić and Dodik, with the added element of moral legitimacy in the eyes of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In recent years, relations between these countries have also flourished in the security sector, including arms sales and joint military exercises.

While these factors testify to the criminality and political pragmatism underpinning the motivations of the Serbian political elite, the influence of nationalist ideology should not be underestimated. Serbian President Alexander Vučić is well known for his associations with hardline nationalist politicians such as his political mentor Vojislav Šešelj, who is the founder and president of the far-right Serbian Radical Party and also a convicted war criminal. Furthermore, Vučić is backed by longtime colleague Alexander Vulin, the former minister for and now director of the Serbian security services, who has openly called for the establishment of the "Serbian World." The concept of the Serbian World would resonate with members of the GFR, as it entails the creation of a Greater Serbian state by annexing parts of neighboring countries and ethnically cleansing them of non-Serbs. Effectively, Vulin is calling for the continuation of the most recent war, stating that it is the "task of the current political generation … to create that Serbian World which would unify all Serbs, no matter where they live."

Vučić, Vulin, and their associates are drawing from a reservoir of nationalism that has deep historical and ideological roots and underlies much of the national, social, and political identity of both Serb politicians and the general public. This nationalism, which is found in Serbia and Serb-dominated areas of BiH, does not have a clear far-right heritage, taking no direct inspiration from Nazism and fascism. Rather, it is best defined by its anti-Croat/Catholic, anti-Muslim, anti-Western, pro-Orthodox-nationalist, and pro-Russian principles.

Another central pillar of this ideology is the fixation on the issue of Kosovo, a territory over which many Serbs believe they have a spiritual and ancestral claim. Similarly, the belief that areas of BiH (and, to a certain extent, Croatia) also belong to Serbia is another prominent ideological fixation. With Muslim populations in both Kosovo and BiH, anti-Muslim

Bosnian citizens living in Izmir, Turkey, held a commemoration ceremony on the 28th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre on July 11, 2023. The killings of more than 8,000 Bosniak people is considered a genocide by the Internaltional Court of Justice. (Yusuf Belek / SOPA Images / LightRocket via Getty Images)

sentiment is a key ingredient of Serbian far-right ideology. This animosity draws upon long-standing resentments against the Ottoman Empire for its historical occupation of the region.

This anti-Muslim sentiment has been manifested intermittently throughout Serbian history and is evident in old poetry and songs that have remained popular over time. More modern examples can be found in the conduct of Serb nationalist guerrilla units, known as Chetniks, that committed large-scale massacres of Bosniaks living in Montenegro, southern Serbia, and eastern Bosnia during World War II. These atrocities were repeated in the most recent war, culminating in the genocide in Srebrenica. The symbology of this hatred — which can be seen in graffiti, murals, songs, literature, and academic and political discourse — has been consistently present ever since.

Since the start of the Russian war against Ukraine, popular support for Russia has surged, sustained by a diet of relentless propaganda. Headlines and social media platforms have reverberated with endorsements of Putin and diatribes against the despised West. The various Serbian far-right groups (e.g., the popular, so-called People's Patrol, Obraz, Liberation Movement, Serbian-Russian Bridge, Night Wolves, and Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement) have proudly and publicly declared their support for Russia. In return, the Russian far right has shown its appreciation for its Serbian counterpart, which is predominantly centered on support for Serbia's steadfast claim to Kosovo. As Pirro observed,

the boundaries between the nationalist, far-right groups and political parties in Serbia are becoming increasingly blurred.

There has been a conscious effort of late by far-right local groups to draw closer to the GFR. During Donald Trump's presidency, which fostered a permissive atmosphere for the GFR, tentative alliances began to form between the American far right and some Serbian far-right groups that shared similar views on race and identity. The investigative outlet Bellingcat noted that American far-right leaders visited Belgrade, seeking to make connections with local far-right groups. Similarly, the news outlet Balkan Insight reported on collaboration between British and Russian far-right groups and Serbian nationalist groups in Kosovo in efforts to provide the latter with weaponry. The same outlet also revealed how the British far right offered "info-war" training to the Serbian far right. Reportage by the Resonant Voices project also found evidence of cooperation, albeit not always successful, between the EU far right and Serbian nationalists. Further evidence of this growing affinity can be found in the disturbing fact that one of the murderers responsible for the recent mass shootings in Serbia was wearing a T-shirt adorned with far-right insignia when he was arrested.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the inspiration that the GFR finds in Serbian nationalist exploits. On July 22, 2011, Anders Breivik, a self-identified neo-Nazi, killed 77 of his fellow Norwegians in a terrorist attack. In his pre-attack manifesto, Breivik detailed the extent to which he had been inspired by Serb nationalism, as well as the supposed "demographic threat" posed by Albanians and Bosniaks. Likewise, when Brenton Tarrant murdered 49 people in a terror attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, he drew inspiration from Serb nationalism, playing a Serbian nationalist song as he drove to the mosques and writing the names of historical Serbian nationalist figures on his firearm.

The song played by Tarrant on his way to the massacre is another example of how Serb nationalist symbols and ideas are being adopted by the GFR. In 1993, a Serbian soldier named Željko Grmuša penned a song to lift the spirits of fellow Serb soldiers, titled "Karadžiću, vodi Srbe svoje" ("Karadžić, lead your Serbs"). The music video of this song, which is known as "God Is a Serb and He Will Protect Us," features Grmuša, Novislav Đajić, and Nenad Tintor, all soldiers in the Bosnian Serb Army. The song's lyrics, which were standard fare at the time, glorify now-convicted genocidist Radovan Karadžić, leader of the Bosnian Serbs, and make genocidal threats toward the Bosniaks and Croats standing in their way.[1] Over the years, the song, now often called "Serbia Strong" or "Remove Kebab" (a codified way of saying "remove Muslims"), has grown in popularity in far-right chatrooms and message boards. A recent report by the Center for the Analysis of the Radical Right highlighted incidents of the song being sung in China, the Slovak Republic, and Poland, which serves as evidence of its wide appeal.

Serbian nationalism poses by far the greatest danger to the region's Muslims. With regard to Serbian far-right nationalism, policymakers must have a clear understanding of the following:

1. The Serbian far right draws upon a genocidal ideology.
2. This ideology is robust and thriving.
3. There is growing interconnectedness between this ideology and the GFR.
4. Most importantly, when Serbian far-right nationalism is emboldened, the Balkans are destabilized, and innocent people are killed.

Croatia

The Croatian/Bosnian-Croat far right is relatively simpler to explain. Generally, it belongs to the broader European "far-right ecosystem" and is less ideologically complex than Serbian nationalism. Inspired directly by traditional right-wing (Nazi) ideologies, this brand of nationalism has its roots in the Croatian Nazi-allied Ustaša movement that dominated much of present-day Croatia, BiH, and parts of Serbia during World War II. The authorities that ruled Yugoslavia after the war failed to adequately address the atrocities committed by this regime. As a result, resentment persisted locally, erupting during the conflict that tore apart the region in the 1990s.

As Yugoslavia collapsed, Croatian nationalists revived the symbols, language, and much of the ideology

used by the Ustaša. Within Croatia's armed forces, entire units reveled in this historical legacy. There was, for example, a unit named after Jure Francetić, an Ustaša leader responsible for the massacres of Serbs and Jews in BiH during World War II. Again, they directed much of their violence against the Serbs who remained in Croatia and the Bosniaks who remained in BiH. The danger posed to BiH by contemporary Croatian nationalism has precedents in the massacres committed and concentration camps set up by the Bosnian Croat army under Zagreb's control.

With the end of the war, Croatia began its path toward joining European institutions, at times seeming to make genuine efforts to confront the past. Nevertheless, the popularity of the far right and its symbolism have not faded away completely. Abundant evidence of this can be found in the widespread presence of Nazi/Ustaša graffiti across the whole of Croatia and in parts of Bosnia, in chants at football matches, in the popularity of nationalist singers and songs, and in the rhetoric of some of the more extreme politicians.

In comparison with Serbia, the Croatian far right does not have the same range of publicly visible and powerful groups. Furthermore, Croatia is not dominated by a single political figure, like Vučić in Belgrade. Politically, however, far-right sentiments tend to dominate the center of the Croatian political space. Liberal and leftist parties do exist, but rarely hold significant power. The dominance of the Croatian far right, embodied in Croatia's most powerful political party, the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, or HDZ) and in its sister party in BiH, creates a politically conducive environment for far-right sentiment to flourish.

During the wars in the 1990s, the Croatian state, led by the HDZ, aimed to carve out large sections of BiH for Croatia. Although they were partially prevented from achieving this by American diplomacy and the spirited resistance of the Bosnian Army, the Dayton Peace Agreement granted Bosnian Croats a power disproportionate to the size of their population, allowing them to politically dominate several cantons in BiH. The long-held desire to claim parts of BiH away never receded, and it is now increasingly obvious that Zagreb is intensifying its efforts to meet its wartime objectives. Croatian politicians have often sought to demonize Bosniaks to the rest of Europe as fundamentalist Islamic warriors, and they frequently cooperate with Bosnian Serbs in engineering BiH's gradual collapse.

Underpinning this project is an aggressive hatred of local Muslims, and a desire to live in an ethnically homogeneous Greater Croatia. These ideas align with those prevalent among the GFR. Generally speaking, the key elements of Croatian nationalism can be summarized as follows:

1. Anti-Semitism
2. Hatred of Serbs (including the glorification of their slaughter at the hands of the Ustaša in World War II)
3. More recently, a very aggressive Islamophobia.
4. Hatred of Roma
5. Hatred of immigrants
6. Homophobia

Based on the evidence given thus far in this paper, the Croatian far right is connected to the broader European far right and shares natural similarities with neighboring countries such as the Slovak Republic and Hungary (which is also a key supporter of Serbia). There is little evidence of interaction with the American far right, and there is certainly no visible desire to cooperate with the Serbian far right. Notably, while members of the Serbian far right went to Ukraine to fight alongside the Russians, members of the Croatian far right went to fight alongside the neo-Nazi Azov battalion.

Regarding Croatian far-right nationalism, it is crucial that policymakers have a clear understanding of the following:

1. The Croatian far right, like its Serbian cousin, also draws from a genocidal ideology
2. This ideology is robust and thriving
3. This ideology drives Zagreb's attempts to destabilize and break up BiH.

Other Far-Right Groups in the Western Balkans

Far-right sentiment is not confined to Serb and Croat nationalists but can also be found, albeit to a much lesser degree, among small segments of the Kosovar and Bosniak populations. It is important to reiterate that Bosniak nationalism and Kosovar nationalism are far less pervasive and share little in common with the ideology of the broader far right.

Generally, nationalism in Kosovo bears little resemblance to the ideological platform of the GFR, or even that of its Serbian and Croatian counterparts. According to a recent EU Commission report, what is considered right-wing extremist discourse in Kosovo is largely characterized by "Kosovo independence sentiments" and is regionally connected with ethnic Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Notably, the report states: "While the idea of uniting 'Albanian territories' has emotional appeal, it is fringe and does not enjoy a wide popular support. The RWE [right-wing extremist] organizations that advocate for Greater Albania are marginal." It is also important to highlight the role that Serbian nationalism plays in reifying Kosovar Albanian nationalism, as the latter is contingent upon the former.

Bosniak far-right sentiment is also far less prevalent than its Croatian and Serbian counterparts, remaining marginal and politically irrelevant. While it is similar to Kosovar nationalism in this respect, Bosniak far-right nationalism differs from Kosovar nationalism in that some of its beliefs, ideas, and claims are demonstrably similar to those of the GFR. Currently limited to a few internet-based groups, the Bosnian far right espouses an ideology that is based loosely upon Nazim and includes these tenets:

1. Bosnia is primarily for Bosniaks, to be ruled by Bosniaks for the benefit of Bosniaks (Bosniak identity is viewed primarily as ethnic/racial, rather than as religious).
2. Bosniak society should be guided by the principles of national socialism (Nazism).
3. Immigrants are unwelcome.
4. Zionism and global Jewish domination should be resisted, as should communism, multiculturalism, and liberalism.
5. Only traditional Bosniak values, which are seen as compatible with Nazism, are permitted.

The groups that promulgate these beliefs are mainly confined to social media platforms, and to Facebook in particular, with their other activities in the past decade having been limited to one or two poster campaigns.

When compared with Serbia and Croatia, neither the Kosovar nor the Bosniak far right can be reasonably equated; nor do they have any significant connections to the GFR. In fact, the GFR would be likely be disinclined to collaborate with either, primarily because of their perceived religious identities — that is, their association with Islam. As such, these groups hold little social or political relevance.

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Endnote

1 Incidentally, the accordion player Novislav Đajić was sentenced to 5 years in prison for killing and torturing 14 people (there were accounts on 27) who were victims in two villages in BiH during the war. Now known as "Dat Face Soldier," his meme-ified face is now ubiquitous in far-right chat rooms.