

A Broad Spectrum of Signs of Islamist Radicalisation and Extremism in a Country without a Single Terrorist Attack: The Case of Slovenia

by Iztok Prezelj & Klemen Kocjancic

Abstract

Studies in radicalisation, extremism and terrorism generally focus on the most visible and dangerous groups or attacks, frequently leaving smaller cases overlooked. This article looks at the case of one country that has no publicly known terrorist group and has not experienced a single terrorist attack (Slovenia) and shows that this 'non-case' is actually an example of a very broad spectrum of basic and supportive forms of Islamist extremism. The article identifies and studies instances of the transit of foreign Islamists, their finances and arms, provides examples of local foreign fighters and their return, identifies NGOs with radical agendas and attempts at recruitment, as well as threats made to local authorities, training under the cover of a social event, the deportation of extremists, and a foiled terrorist attack. Most of these indicators are linked to Jihadi and Islamist sources of power based in Bosnia. Overlooking and underestimating cases like Slovenia could have serious consequences in terms of prevention and preparedness.

Keywords: Islamist radicalisation, extremism, jihadism, recruitment, terrorism, foreign fighters, training, foiled attack, Slovenia, Balkans

Introduction

The goal of this article is to explore the forms and the spectrum of Islamist radicalisation faced by an EU member state that has not had a single successful terrorist attack on its soil and where no officially recognised terrorist group is actively working against the country. Researchers and analysts normally study cases with the most visible problems (terrorism and radicalisation in our case), yet it sometimes makes sense to look at—and perhaps learn also from—cases where the problem is less apparent.

Why is such an approach relevant? The existing literature generally focuses on big and better-known terrorist attacks or countries associated with a confirmed and long-standing threat by terrorist and radical groups. Academic and policy communities are thus learning from the worst examples, while forgetting that they might only represent the extreme edge of the overall problem. There is a gap in the literature with respect to less-developed cases and smaller European countries that do not have terrorist groups or large-scale terrorist attacks. This gap is problematic because the threat brought by Islamist radicalisation and terrorism is a global phenomenon that is able to migrate from places with tougher counter-radicalisation and counterterrorism measures to places with fewer obstacles. Such a shift has already been seen with organised criminal groups in Europe (for example from Italy to Slovenia). Another problem is that such countries might be less prepared to face threats from Islamist terrorism and thereby become the weakest link in a preventive chain of measures.

The risk of terrorism and radicalisation is unevenly spread across Europe. Our overview of all Europol's TE-SAT reports between 2007 and 2019 suggests they chiefly concentrate on countries with significant numbers of successful, failed or foiled terrorist attacks, such as France, the UK, Spain and also countries with smaller yet still considerable numbers like Ireland, Germany, Greece, Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Slovenia is clearly one of the countries mentioned the least in the TE-SAT reports, it is mostly associated with zeros in tables, while two reports do not even mention it at all (TE-SAT 2012 and TE-SAT 2013).[1]. However, this does not mean that Islamist radicalisation is not present or increasing in Slovenia. It does exist. If this seemingly 'non-case' is actually a case and this can be proven, then we have a problem with counterterrorism. In this article, we argue that the spectrum of Islamist radicalisation and related activities can be surprisingly broad

in a state without a single active Islamist terrorist group or a completed terrorist attack. For countries with a fully developed extremist and terrorist threat, one could expect numerous indicators such as the existence of organised terrorist groups, terrorist attacks on people and infrastructure, kidnappings or hostage-takings, the manufacture, possession, transport, supply or use of explosives and weapons, including chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons, the release of dangerous substances, or illegal data interference and seizures of aircraft, ships or other forms of transport. One could also expect instances of recruitment for terrorism, providing and receiving training, travelling and organising travelling for the purpose of terrorism (e.g. foreign fighters), public provocations to commit a terrorist offence, financing of extremist and terrorist activities and other support activities.[2] In addition, mature radicalisation towards the use of violence may be anticipated to include several cases of individuals or groups undergoing the complex process of transforming their beliefs, feelings and behaviours, [3] examples of dangerous converts to Islam and of aggressive civilian Islamists who make political arguments to impose their radical vision on the political regime and society.[4] The whole situation becomes even more complicated with indicators of foreign fighters returning to their home countries. [5]

In order to assess the example of Slovenia, we used the case study method while also strongly relying on media analysis. The following methodological steps were used in the article's empirical part. First, we conducted a pilot scan of various national media sources and created an initial list of cases of Islamist radicalisation (such as those associated with the aforementioned indicators). This list was sent to the Slovenian Criminal Police Directorate and its Counterterrorism and Extreme Violence Section for confirmation or to suggest other cases. The final list of cases was reduced to basic key words, such as the names of key actors, events and institutions that were used as search words in the database of the Slovenian Press Agency (STA) and two national newspapers—*Delo* and *Dnevnik*. In most cases, other media were also searched.

We analysed all cases with respect to the following variables (if feasible due to the specific nature of cases): 1. Radicalisation actors (identification of individuals or groups in the process of radicalisation); 2. Description of key events that indicate radicalisation, including the time framework (chronology); 3. Goals of actors; 4. The content of radicalisation (description of the transformation of perceptions, norms, deeds/actions); 5. Contacts of the radicalising/radicalised actor with other relevant actors in the home country or abroad; 6. The broader social context of radicalisation (does the case reflect broader polarisation in society, anything relevant for understanding the case).

Terrorist Threats and Islamist Radicalisation in an 'Overlooked' Country

Some countries are not only ignored by scholars writing on terrorism and extremism, but are obviously also largely ignored by Islamist terrorists and extremists. Slovenia is such a country. This is not surprising; the terrorist threat in general and more specifically the Islamist terrorist threat has developed unevenly across Europe. While serious terrorist attacks have taken place in some European countries and other indicators have been rising, Slovenia has not been mentioned much in international political and media circles. The country has only seen bizarre situations like the European parliamentary debate on Slovenia's accession to the EU during 2003 and 2004 when one Spanish MEP stressed that Slovenia could not become a member whilst it appeared to be harbouring elements of the ETA terrorist organisation. A well-established, successful Slovenian food producer called "Eta" had started selling goods in the EU market and the Spanish were unable to digest this name. Accordingly, the company Eta was forced to change the brand name of all products to "Natureta" before Slovenia joined the EU in 2004.[6]

The official terrorist threat level in Slovenia has always been low, with the general security situation in the country since its independence in 1991 being very stable. Slovenia's national security strategies suggest the biggest threat to national security in the 1990s was military in nature (due to unresolved national, political, military and economic problems among the states of former Yugoslavia, potential retaliatory attempts to restore borders and the revival of crises in wider Europe).[7] The perception then shifted to 'new' and 'dynamic' non-military threats and risks. After 2000, decision-makers perceived military threats in South-East Europe (SEE)

as only indirectly affecting Slovenian national security.[8] In 2010, a broad spectrum of nonmilitary threats, such as climate change, terrorism and challenges to public safety etc., was well recognised by the government [9], whereas hybrid threats related to Russia are stressed in a recently adopted document.[10] Crime levels have always been low in Slovenia relative to other countries. Consequently, the public has also never seen terrorism as a great threat. In fact, public opinion polls conducted by the University of Ljubljana before and after 9/11 show that the Slovenian public regarded terrorism as one of the smallest threats, somewhere close to the military threat from other states.[11]

As suggested by the above text, Slovenia is not simply overlooked by analysts, but even by terrorists themselves. One question arises: why has there been no terrorism (terrorist groups and attacks) in Slovenia? First, some terrorism is associated with colonial and post-colonial relations, like is the case with the UK and France. Slovenia has neither been a coloniser nor been violently colonised, for example by the Austro-Hungarian empire. Secondly, the country is ethnically and religiously relatively homogenous. According to the last census from 2002, the population consists of 83,04% Slovenes, 1,98% Serbians, 1,81% Croatians, 0,53% Muslims, etc. In terms of religious composition, 69.1% of the population was Catholic, 1.1% Evangelical, 0.6% Orthodox Christian and 0.6% Muslim.[12]. Interreligious relations mostly occur without any serious conflicts. The Muslim minority in Slovenia has never been considerable. Bosniak immigrants are regarded as relatively moderate Muslims due to the impact of the former socialist Yugoslavia. The influx of Muslim migrants into Europe in recent years also reveals that upon arriving they mostly do not want to remain in Slovenia and wish to move on to other Western countries. At last, but not at least, Slovenia is not really exposed in any conflict with a Muslim country abroad (although it has soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq). Al Qaeda and ISIS have had more attractive targets in Europe than Slovenia.

Still, our careful examination of several smaller events shows the country is in fact not any kind of safe harbour protected from Islamist and other extremists. After Slovenia achieved its independence in 1991, some plans were uncovered of the Yugoslav People's Army to conduct a few terrorist attacks on the electrical infrastructure with the aim to create instability in Slovenia as a pretext for some retaliatory military intervention in Slovenia. Our overview of Europol TE-SAT reports finds Slovenia being mentioned a couple of times. It was mentioned as a potential logistical base for Islamist terrorists (together with Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and Finland) and as a transit country for terrorists trying to enter EU countries (along with Romania and Estonia).[13] With the emergence of the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Syria, Slovenia was mentioned (together with Germany, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Romania, BiH, Serbia, Bulgaria, Italy and Greece) as a popular land route for fighters going from the EU to Turkey.[14] A branch of the Sharia 4 movement was reported to exist in Slovenia (also in Belgium, Czech Republic, Poland, Denmark, France, Italy, Netherlands and Spain) in 2012, 2013 and 2014. [15] Slovenia was also mentioned in relation to two arrested terrorist suspects in 2018 and two court verdicts (one in 2015, the other in 2016).[16] Europol also mentioned Slovenia in terms of a new trend of converting marginalised individuals from the Roma community, although it was believed the Roma's main motivation has been financial (they were allegedly given money to convert).[17]

This all suggests that Slovenia might not be that different from other smaller European countries. It is necessary to place this case in the context of other smaller European countries. Europe in general was the target of terrorists of Muslim origin in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. the attack by Black September on Israeli athletes at the Summer Olympic Games in 1972 in Munich or Libya's state-sponsored terrorism in 1988 by exploding a bomb on Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie). A series of Islamist terrorist bomb attacks was launched in 1995 in the French capital of Paris by the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Al Qaeda's attack on 11 September 2001 in the United States was followed by deadly attacks in Spain (the 2004 Madrid train bombing that caused 193 deaths) and in the United Kingdom (the 2005 London bombings that killed 52 people). After the Islamic State was established in Syria and Iraq, a new wave of Islamist terrorism swept over Europe: France, the UK, Belgium, Germany, Russia, Spain, and Turkey were, among others, targeted. As a result, most Islamist terrorism-related studies have considered these countries and not other European countries facing a lower level of threat, such as the Czech Republic and Finland.[18] In Bulgaria, which has the highest share of Muslims among all European Union countries, research has focused on the threat brought by religious extremism, based

on “ideas of Islamization, which come straight from Turkey.”[19] The lack of Islamist extremism in Bulgaria is also connected to both the absence of factors like a colonial past and high immigration as well as the successful integration of Bulgarian Muslims into the mainly Orthodox Christian society.[20] Nevertheless, there was a case of 13 imams preaching radical Islam in illegal mosques.[21] On the other hand, some smaller countries in South-East Europe face quite substantial radicalisation. Bosnia was exposed to a strong wave of radicalisation during and especially after the war in the 1990s.[22] Kosovo witnessed a considerable number of radicals travelling as foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq. The local literature has largely focused on the problem of foreign fighters and the drivers of violent extremism.[23]

Immigration appeared as a very important factor in studies of radicalisation and terrorism, especially following the Syria-induced migration crisis of 2015. In Norway, a study was conducted on a typology of Jihadi militant networks, entailing five different archetypes: “militant exiles”, “diasporic support networks”, “militant visitors”, “attack cells” and “homegrown extremists”.[24] Homegrown terrorism and extremism also became a popular research subject when more and more European-born Muslims accepted the Jihadi ideology and became radicalised. For example, the Danish Ministry of Justice identified both background factors (Muslim identity crisis, discrimination and deprivation, segregation and parallel society, lack of Muslim public debate on terrorism), and trigger factors (foreign policy, myth of Jihadism and activism, a charismatic leader or advisor) which, combined with opportunity factors (social media, prisons, mosques, schools and other establishments), had led to radicalisation in Denmark. This could then lead to further radicalisation abroad and exacerbate the problem of European “foreign fighters”.[25] Converts to Islam (also to Islamism or Islamist radicalism) are a special group of homegrown terrorists. Belgian and Dutch research suggests that their converts were all in their teens or twenties, came from lower- or lower-middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds with a low or medium level of education, combined with a problematic childhood and adolescence, the use of alcohol and drugs and some involvement with criminal activity.[26] After the decline/defeat of the Islamic State, Europe has had to deal with the major security problem of returning foreign fighters and how to treat them, which de-radicalisation programmes to use, etc.[27] Some research has also attempted to differentiate violent and nonviolent Salafism, as in the case of the Netherlands, and examined the connection between terrorists and diasporas.[28] In other countries (like Portugal), the presence of Jihadists without specific terrorist activities was detected, etc.[29] All signs from the Slovenian case, however weak they might be, should, directly or indirectly, relate to the European context described above.

The Spectrum of Islamist Radicalisation and Extremism in Slovenia

In the empirical part of our research, we were looking for all indicators of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism (as described in the introduction) in Slovenia. We established that the forms of Islamist radicalisation and extremism and associated activities in Slovenia arise from it being: (1) a transit country for foreign Islamists, their finances and arms; (2) a place for the radicalisation of certain Slovenian citizens and their departure for Syria, including their return; (3) a place in which some NGOs are active in defending, promoting and supporting extremist Islam(ism) and introducing Sharia law into Slovenia; (4) an area where members of the Roma minority have been recruited for Jihad; (5) a place of unattributed threats to a local mayor to force him to build a mosque and convert to Islam; (6) a place where social events were likely used as a cover for the training of Islamists; (7) an area in which an attempted terrorist attack in the capital city was foiled; and (8) a country from where Islamist extremists have been deported. All of these forms are reflected in relatively weak indicators that were collected by the authors of this article. These indicators appeared in isolation and we seek to connect them here to provide a more comprehensive overview of the situation facing the country.

A Transit Country for Islamists, Funding and Arms

Terrorist groups fulfil their transnational agenda by moving people, money and weapons across land, air and maritime borders. Slovenia has been used as a transit country by various Islamist groups in this regard.

After 9-11, Slovenian authorities arrested a suspected terrorist travelling from France to the Balkans.[30] In November 2016, during a routine check on a train, Slovenian police came across three people without identification documents. The three men provided false information and it was later revealed that all three had been involved in terrorist activities in France and that European warrants for them had been issued. According to French media, the three men were on their way to Syria. Perhaps the best-known case came with the migrant crisis in 2015. In early September 2016, CNN reported that at least four Islamic state attackers in the Paris attacks in 2015 had travelled along the Balkan route to Austria.[31] In late September 2016, the president of the Slovenian parliamentary committee on intelligence and security services confirmed that during the mass migration crisis (in 2015) eight terrorists had crossed Slovenian territory. Two of them were directly involved in the 2015 Paris attacks, while others were arrested in Austria or Germany.[32] Subsequently, the European Union adopted more resolute measures to manage the migration flows.[33]

On 21 October 2010, Slovenian police officers in Dobrovnik encountered two foreign citizens (a 25-year-old man and a 24-year-old woman) dressed in typical Muslim clothes and without any identification documents. They were detained and escorted to the police station where it was revealed they were both German citizens and that a European search warrant had been issued for the man. He was Gabriel Kruse, a German professional soldier who had converted to Islam just before his planned departure on a German mission in Afghanistan. Kruse was sought for his involvement in recruiting for terrorist organisations. He was brought before a judge who ordered him to be detained for 30 days, while the woman (who had a machete in her possession) was released and directed to leave for Austria. On 26 October 2010, this woman was once again spotted in Slovenia. During the ensuing police procedure, she attacked police officers with an axe and damaged a police vehicle. She was arrested and put in prison. During these two encounters, both were wearing traditional Muslim garb and had a Quran in their possession. The man was later turned over to German authorities. In July 2012, Slovenian police again arrested the same woman and the following week also the man. While being arrested, Kruse attacked several police officers with a knife. The Slovenian police had been informed of their presence in Slovenia by the Austrian police, which was investigating a string of robberies/burglaries in Austria. The pair had been hiding in forests in Slovenia while trying to obtain funds to travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina where they wished to join a Salafi group. This couple was using Slovenia as a transit and logistical space on their way to Bosnia. Their movement was obviously financed from burglaries and robberies. This case did not receive much media attention.[34]

Slovenia has been used as a transit country for supplies of weapons and explosives, especially after the end of the Balkan wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Croatia. It was initially believed that the explosives used in the two largest terrorist attacks in Europe (Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005) had a Balkan origin and, knowing the modus operandi of the Balkan smuggling route, it was likely they were smuggled through Slovenia.[35] Yet these hypotheses were later rejected by investigators in both cases. It was, however, confirmed based on their serial numbers that the M-70 rifles used in the November 2015 Paris attack had been smuggled from Slovenia (or from Bosnia or Macedonia via Slovenia) and that weapons and some ammunition used in the Charlie Hebdo attack came from Croatia, Republika Srpska and Serbia.[36]

Slovenia has also been used as a transit country for financial transactions. In October 2001, Slovenian media reported that a Tunisian citizen Shafik Ayadi had received US \$500,000 in April 1996 in a private bank account set up with SAB Banka in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina). The money originated from Salem bin Mahfuz, a representative of the International Islamic Relief Organisation, and his bank account with the Slovenian bank SKB. Ayadi was running an organisation called Moafak, which was actually a front company for Osama bin Laden. Ayadi was put on the list of persons and companies with frozen assets in the UK and the USA for having alleged connections with Al Qaida.[37] In March 2015, the Slovenian police in Maribor found an excavator that had been stolen on 20 February in Croatia and then transported to Slovenia. Two suspects, caught by the Croatian police, admitted they were planning to sell the excavator “in the area controlled by the Islamic State extremists.”[38]

Between 2008 and 2010, another case, most likely connected with the financing of terrorism, occurred in Slovenia. In December 2008, an Iranian businessman with ties to Iran’s nuclear proliferation efforts opened a

bank account with Slovenia's largest bank (NLB). Soon, large sums of money started to arrive in this account (up to 50 transfers per day); monthly deposits reached up to EUR 70 million and, by the end of 2010, up to EUR 900 million. In March 2009, bank employees notified their superiors of suspicious transactions and several foreign banks started to decline money transfers from this NLB account. It was only in December 2010 that NLB shut the account down after the central bank (Bank of Slovenia) demanded immediate action due to a suspicion of money laundering and financing of terrorism. The money in the NLB account came from two Iranian banks (via another Iranian company) which at the time were both already under a US and EU embargo, while the money was sent on to over 9,000 accounts around the world. A special parliamentary investigation committee found that this could have not taken place without the knowledge of certain high-level officials in Slovenia. One interpretation was that in this way somebody had been supporting terrorism.[39]

Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq

The number of Slovenian foreign fighters in Syria was small in comparison with other, larger European countries. It is believed that around 10 people from Slovenia have fought for ISIS. Some basic elements of their stories are provided below. Slovenian foreign fighters were connected to a recruiting network based in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On 24 September 2014, Slovenian media reported that the police had carried out two search operations on properties in Ljubljana and Vrhnika. The subject of the search warrants was Bostjan Skubic, one of several Slovenian citizens who had joined Islamist extremists in the fight in Syria. The police found and seized automatic weapons, ammunition and a rocket launcher. While Skubic was charged with the illegal possessions of weapons, he was released. The media later reported that the cause of the searches in Slovenia was Operation Damascus in Bosnia and Herzegovina that led to the arrest of Bilal Bosnic, one of the main recruiters and ideological heads of Islamist extremism in the area of former Yugoslavia. Among the seized evidence, Bosnian police had discovered information related to Skubic, which was turned over to the Slovenian police. Reporters also noted that the Slovenian Security and Intelligence Agency (SOVA) was monitoring around 15 people at that time, including Slovenian converts to Islam and Slovenian citizens with roots in the former Yugoslavia.[40]

Another reason for the search warrants was that Skubic was an employee of the Fenolit chemical factory located in Breg pri Borovnici. It was here that police officers from Vrhnika handcuffed him and searched his automobile. The search then continued in the neighbourhood, where they seized a rocket launcher. Under a pillow they also found two envelopes containing a significant sum of money. While searching his garden shed, an automatic assault rifle and six full magazines were discovered. He apparently gave the excuse that he had bought the weapon several years before when the black market was awash with cheap weapons from the Balkan wars.[41]

On the next day the media reported that, along with two previously identified Slovenian foreign fighters (Skubic and Rok Zavbi), at least three others (Jure Korelec, Rok Sogoric and Matevz Cvetkovic) had been recruited by or through Bosniak Bilal Bosnic. An important role in their recruitment was also supposedly played by Senad Celakovic, who frequently visited Slovenia. Celakovic was apparently subordinated to Nusret Imamovic, who had a supervisory role over the recruiting.[42]

On 29 September, Zavbi denied that he had fought on the side of Islamic State extremists and claimed that he went to Syria "with the intention of helping as a medic in the resistance against the cruel regime of Syrian president Bashar al Assad." At that time, he was an unemployed medical technician. He also stated that he had travelled to Syria at his own expense and on his own initiative and that he had not been recruited by Bosnic. He claimed he had met Bosnic "coincidentally, as a tourist" while visiting Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was in Syria between June and September 2013 and then left the country due to disagreements and fighting among the rebel groups: "The thing became somewhat too ridiculous", he added.[43]

On 30 September 2014, the media reported on the first Slovenian casualty during the war in Syria and Iraq.

A 29-year-old Slovenian convert, Jure Korelec from Zgornja Senica near Medvode, had been killed while fighting alongside Islamist extremists. After his conversion, he apparently used the name Yusuf (Slovenian: Jusuf). Three years before his death, Korelec had left home and limited all contacts with his family and friends. Reporters discovered that in July 2013 Korelec and four other Slovenian Islamist extremists had left Slovenia for Syria through Turkey. The group comprised Korelec, Rok Zavbi, Bostjan Skubic, Rok Sogoric and Matevz Cvetkovic. The four others came home after one month in Syria. Sogoric told media 24ur.com that he had only been once in Syria (in 2012) after he had converted and had never fought.[44] Another media company reported that Sogoric had established the Nur Foundation for Culture, Education and Training from Ljubljana, which strongly supported the ideology of the Islamic State.[45]

Reporters also claimed that their departure had been arranged by Nusret Imamovic from Bosnia and Herzegovina, considered to be one of the most dangerous foreign fighters and recruiters for Islamist terrorist groups. Imamovic was in the position to assign to which Islamist groups Slovenians would be included. At first, the Slovenian group was sent to the Al Nusra Front but was then relocated to the Islamic State. Korelec was involved in fighting for the Syrian city of Raqqa, where Dora Bilic (a Muslim woman from Zagreb, Croatia) was seriously wounded and Fatima Mahmutovic (a Muslim woman from BiH) was killed.[46] The case of Jure Korelec shows that he was searching for a new meaning in life after considerable problems with (unrequited) love. He found it in Islam. Where exactly the radicalisation occurred is unknown. However, the speed of his radicalisation was surprising because in the course of one year he found and accepted a new religion, was radicalised and died while fighting for an Islamist terrorist organisation.

In October 2014, Zavbi gave a long interview for the weekly magazine Mladina. He stated: "I fought in Syria. If this had been revealed last September, when I returned, I would be a hero, a freedom fighter. Now I'm a terrorist. I'm being connected to the Islamic State." While raised as a Christian, he had converted to Islam in 2011. His interest in world events increased and he then decided to travel to Syria to help Muslims: "Wherever there is Islam, it's better." He still claimed that he and Skubic had left for Syria on their own and established their own contacts with the rebels. During the entire interview, he defended the ideology of the Islamic State. He confirmed he had been given a weapon in Syria and that he had fought: "Of course I got a weapon, of course I fought and shot. I also completed basic training." He declared that all groups had committed atrocities (mass killings): "Killings are done by everyone, the Geneva conventions aren't followed, prisoners aren't left to live." In September, he and Skubic decided to return home. He claimed he had no contacts with his former colleagues (fighters), except immediately after returning to Slovenia.[47]

In May 2015, reporters obtained a photograph of Zavbi and Skubic dressed in military camouflage and each holding an automatic rifle. This was sufficient proof that both had been armed and had fought on the battlefield for the Islamic State. In early 2016, Skubic pleaded guilty and was sentenced.[48] On 6 May 2016, Zavbi was arrested by the Slovenian police in Ljubljana at a halal butcher shop where he had been working after returning from Syria. Italian authorities issued a European arrest warrant for him because investigators had proven that Zavbi had been communicating with Bosnic before, during and after the Syrian adventure.[49]

The website *Kamnik.info* reported that the 26-year-old Zavbi had grown up in an atheist family in the village of Psajnovica near Tuhinjska dolina. He was not particularly sociable; after vocational high school he studied in Jesenice (a place in Slovenia with a large immigrant community from the Balkans). It was here that he began to lose his way and started to associate with radical Islamists. His family was surprised by the speed of his conversion and the fact he was socialising with "weird and suspicious people from the circle of religious extremists." [50] He left for Syria without telling his family. After coming back, he lived at home and occasionally travelled abroad for a few days. He did not share the destinations of his trips with anyone. In April 2018, he was married but only under Islamic law in an unregistered Islamic prayer room located somewhere in Ljubljana. He had been introduced to his wife Mirza (from BiH) only one month before the wedding; they had only met in person three times.[51]

Despite objecting to the extradition, the Slovenian authorities turned him over to Italy where he was charged with the recruitment of fighters for the Islamic State. While waiting for the trial, he revealed that Bosnic trusted

him and had convinced him to go to Syria. He stated that in October 2012 he had begun to attend Islamist meetings, including some in the home of Nusret Imamovic, a leader of the Al Nusra Front. He also revealed that he had been in contact with Admir Abduloadi, a driver for Bosnic and Imamovic during their travels in Italy. Abduloadi also served as an intermediary for people wanting to go to Syria. Upon returning from Syria, he was once again contacted by Bosnic who sent him to the Italian province of Belluno. There he trained two fighters (Ismar Mesinovic and Minfer Karamalski) who later left for Syria; Mesinovic was killed in 2014, while Karamalski's whereabouts are unknown.[52]

On 11 April 2017, Zavbi was sent to prison for three years and four months by a court in Venice for recruiting fighters for the Islamic State. He was convicted alongside a 39-year-old Macedonian citizen, Ajhan Veapi, for the same crime. In March 2018, an appeals court reduced Zavbi's sentence to two years, two months and 12 days because he had pleaded guilty and distanced himself from his actions. On 25 July 2018, he was released from prison and immediately expelled to Slovenia.[53] One day later, he and his father became involved in a physical conflict in front of their house with reporters from Planet TV who were trying to report on his return.

The above cases confirm that the network of Bosniak Bilal Bosnic was important in the process of radicalisation and recruitment. This network was chiefly composed of Bosniak extremists recruiting for different Islamist organisations in the countries of former Yugoslavia and other countries with a larger concentration of Muslims (Italy and Austria). Their main goal was to provide new recruits for the Islamic State and Al Nusra to fight in Syria or Iraq, while an auxiliary goal was to have returned fighters give training to new recruits. It is obvious that Korelec had converted to Islam prior to leaving for Syria due to "unrequited love". Before leaving, he trained with Bilal Bosnic in Buzim and then left for Syria via Turkey. Similar drivers (unrequited love, rejection by a woman) and unemployment were established for Zavbi, who had become radicalised after meeting local Islamist extremists.

Activities of certain NGOs to Promote and Support Extremism

Several Slovenian media reports have covered the activities of some societies or NGOs that were promoting the introduction of sharia law in Slovenia, defending and promoting radical Islam, while not being affiliated with recognised Islamist religious groups. The most mentioned NGOs were El Iman and Ensarud-Din, which organised preaching by people "with personal connections with people in the Balkans who promoted violence against the West." [54] These reports mostly refer to a network of Islamists existing between Austria and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These societies mostly operate(-d) in Jesenice in North Slovenia (close to the Austrian border) and in Ljubljana, the capital city. While their official purpose was to promote Islam and Arabic culture, the media linked them to the support and promotion of Islamist terrorism. How precisely they were operating was not revealed, but we may assume they have acted as a gatekeeper for the possible recruitment of extremists. Connections were documented between these organisations and known terrorists or terrorist supporters in Bosnia, Austria, and Italy. The most important is once again the connection with Husein Bilal Bosnic, who was convicted in BiH for publicly promoting terrorist activities and recruiting for a terrorist organisation. In January 2011, Bosnic was invited to Ljubljana to give a sermon upon the opening of an Islamic prayer room. Bosnic is considered one of the leaders, if not the highest leader, of an extreme Wahhabi community based in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[55]¹

The third-mentioned NGO was the Nur Society whose declared task is to inform the public about Arabic culture and the problems facing Muslims. Through their members, all three NGOs were connected to several (alleged) terrorist activities (foreign fighters, the 'picnic of radicals'—see below). For example, Rok Sogoric, one of the founders of the Nur Society, had been fighting in Syria.

1. In November 2015, Bilal Bosnic was found guilty by a Bosnian court of several terrorism-related activities: promoting jihad, recruiting Bosnians to join and fight for the Islamic State in Syria and organising their trips to Syria (or Iraq). The court also found that at least six of Bosnic's recruits from Bosnia had already died, while altogether at least 97 had left to fight. Bosnic, who was a musician in his early life and has four wives and 18 children, was sentenced to seven years in prison (while the prosecution wanted the maximum 20-year sentence). During the trial, it was revealed (by a former Bosnian foreign fighter in the ranks of the IS) that Bosnic was the only one who could approve a person to be sent to the battlefield. He financed his activities with money received from Arab countries (Spaic 2015).

Finally, Europol reported on the existence of a branch of the Sharia4 movement in Slovenia in 2012, 2013 and 2014.[56] The only publicly known case involving this movement concerns the desecration of a Catholic chapel at Smarna Gora hill, a popular hiking destination near Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. In early January 2017, three sides of the small chapel had writings in Arabic script, plus two more Latin-script messages, written on them: “*Sharia 4 Slovenia*” and “*Allahu Akhbar*”.[57]

The Recruitment of Roma

Europol released a report stating that the Slovenian police had “noted a new trend of attempted radicalisation of members of the Roma community.”[58] Indeed, a very unusual recruiting attempt was being conducted by Islamist radicals. Some members of the Roma community in north-eastern Slovenia were being paid by some Islamist extremists to convert to Islam and join the jihad. The very few Slovenian media reports that exist on this do not reveal who the recruiters were. However, it is clear that they were targeting the most vulnerable ethnic minority (Roma) in Slovenia who live in difficult economic and social circumstances. The recruiters may have wanted to exploit either their Slovenian (EU) passport that allows them unrestrained movement within the EU or their criminal ties. This attempt may be associated with a more general trend of increasing recruitment for the Islamic State’s purposes in Europe.[59]

Threats to the Local Authorities

Since there is in Slovenia no terrorist group active against the government, we also do not know about any terrorist threats. However, some threats did emerge in a small provincial town. In 2015 and 2016, Bojan Kontic, the mayor of the Slovenian town of Velenje received three threatening letters. An anonymous writer (or writers) had sent the letters from Italy. All these letters contained a demand to build a mosque in Velenje with a 35-metre-high minaret and required that the mayor convert to Islam or otherwise be killed. The writer also stated that Slovenia would become an Islamic state in ten to 15 years. The letters were sent during the peak of the Islamic State’s power in Syria and Iraq.[60] All of these letters were turned over to the police and Kontic did not view them as any real threat. The police investigation did not discover the culprit(s).

This case may be attributed to the forceful Islamisation and conversion to Islam that became a standard operating procedure for the Islamic State. It might also be connected to a large influx of foreign Muslims (particularly from Albania and Macedonia) in Velenje. As an industrial town, Velenje traditionally had an immigrant population, especially miners from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the past ten years, a considerable number of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia have settled there. This group does not integrate well in terms of learning the Slovenian language, causing extra pressure on the local authorities, kindergartens, schools and health institutions. In 2018, the mayor wrote a letter to the president of Slovenia, the prime minister and the president of the parliament in which he stressed the town’s serious social, political and economic situation.[61]

A ‘Picnic’ as a Possible Cover for Training

In 2016, Slovenian media reported that on 19 April 2014 several radical Islamist extremists had met for a ‘picnic’ at the Korant Sport Centre in the village of Dol near Ljubljana. It was said that Salafist extremists had also come from the Austrian cities of Vienna and Graz. The centre was supposedly booked by the El Iman Society for the promotion of Islamic culture in Slovenia, which later denied having any connection with the ‘picnic’.

Media reports described the attendees as: Selman Omerovic, a friend with several members of the El Iman Society and the brother of Mirsad Omerovic (also known as Abu Tejma from Sandjak, BiH, a known recruiter of jihadists in Europe with contacts with Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and Bilal Bosnic), Halil Kasimoglu, Selman Tajroski, Arif Ademovski, Suad Racevic, members of the Durkan Islamic society from Graz, the Islamic theologian Alim Hasangic (from the Slovenian town of Jesenice). Salafists from Germany, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Austria

were also present, including women and children. According to the manager of the Korant Sport Centre, about 60–70 people were present, and this was just one of several such meetings. He stated that he had several times rented this property out to large Muslim groups and had no problems with them.[62]

This may have only been a meeting of a large group of Muslims to celebrate their children's birthdays with accompanying sports activities. However, as the Austrian newspaper *Die Presse* argued, this was likely a cover for covert ideological and shooting training of Islamist extremists in Slovenia.[63] Accordingly, the attendees used weapons hidden in the nearby woods and restricted uninvited people's access to the property. The Austrian investigators intercepted the phone conversation of one attendee who talked about using weapons at the 'picnic'. The Austrian authorities had their attention drawn to this event when persons under surveillance started moving in three vehicles towards Slovenia.

Europol claimed in one report that Islamic State terrorists do not only conduct training in Syria, but also across the European Union and in the Balkans.[64] Such a 'picnic' may have been a cover for terrorist training. *Die Presse* also stated that this event had links with Wahhabis operating from the notorious Bosnian village of Gornja Maoca.

The Slovenian public was surprised to discover that foreign media were the first to report on this 'picnic' based on a story from Austrian intelligence service sources. The Slovenian parliamentary committee on intelligence and security services met and discussed the event and the committee president stated that the Slovenian police had not received any information or had not confirmed terrorist activities at the 'picnic'.[65]

Foiled Terrorist Attack in the Capital City of Ljubljana (The Lone Wolf Brljafa)

On 25 January 2018, the Slovenian border police at the Dragonja border crossing on the Slovenian-Croatian border searched an incoming bus. During their search, they found a black leather belt with tubular rolls and a large knife in the possession of one person. They arrested a 21-year-old Croatian citizen named Loris Brljafa. He claimed that the belt contained explosives. The police later found that this was untrue and that he had been travelling to the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana where he planned to attack local targets. The prosecutor charged him with attempting to threaten the population in the capital city using the belt and large knife. On 17 July 2018, he was found guilty of travelling abroad with the intention to commit terrorist activity and sent to prison for three years and two months and subsequently expelled from Slovenia for another three years.

With the help of Croatian authorities, his home, computer and phone were searched. The investigation showed he had converted to Islam after being quite a pious Christian, was religiously radicalised while following extremist propaganda online and that he considered himself to be an Islamic State follower. His online searches had focused on different extremist groups and on how to make a bomb; he also possessed access codes for terrorist websites. In Ljubljana, he had planned to attack several embassies (American, German and British), the parliament and the governmental palace. He had also looked at the webpages of several weapons stores in Ljubljana. In court, his attorney pointed out that the explosive belt/vest was not real and that Brljafa's main intention was merely to gain attention.

Brljafa was a loner with several personal problems. His father revealed that before the attack Loris had changed significantly, distancing himself from society and spending most of his time online and praying. The police inquiry showed that he had no connections with other extremists and was thus considered to be a 'lone wolf' attacker. He was planning to commit a terrorist attack in Ljubljana in the name of the Islamic State. While searching his home, they also found extremist literature, a black flag of the Islamic State, a green prayer rug and an Arab-Bosnian dictionary.[66]

This attempted attack may have been linked to the Islamic State's calls to its followers to carry out terrorist attacks at home (e.g. outside of Syria and Iraq). Despite this being the first case of such criminal activity by an Islamist extremist in Slovenia, it is surprising that the related media reporting was very limited.

Deportation of Three Islamist Extremists

On 14 March 2019, three citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina were expelled from Slovenia for a period of five years. All three held a permanent residency permit in Slovenia and were working as long-haul truck drivers for two Slovenian companies. The police and Slovenia's external intelligence service (SOVA), using information also obtained through international exchange, confirmed that all three were actively supporting religiously motivated violent extremism and terrorism, and intended to use violence to achieve their political, religious and ideological goals. They had been in contact with people convicted for terrorist activities and with some men who had fought in Syria and Iraq. Two of them even visited Bilal Bosnic in prison. Bosnic had sent a letter, smuggled out of prison by a supporter, to all three containing explicit instructions regarding their activities among supporters in Slovenia. The Slovenian police became aware of this group's activities in 2017 and 2018. After their residency permits were cancelled in December 2018, they appealed and managed to delay the procedure for some time but were eventually deported.

Two brothers Selvir (37) and Nelvir Durakovic (40) along with Selim Ljubijankic (39) were at first employed by the same truck company, but in 2017 Ljubijankic took a job at another company. At the time of his arrest, he had been unemployed. All three had enforced an extremist ideology in their families, they had told their wives and children "not to respect Slovenian law" or else they would be killed without hesitation by having their throats cut. One of them announced to his son that he was looking forward to the day when they would kill unbelievers together.[67]

Their tasks in Slovenia included collecting financial support for imprisoned Islamists and their families and acting as couriers between Bosnic and his followers in Slovenia. SOVA described this group as a "typical, outwardly inactive cell, that uses covert communication." [68]

This example once again confirmed that Bosnia and Herzegovina is home to an ideological and logistical core of Islamist radicalisation in both South-East Europe and Central Europe. Their expulsion also reveals a problem with the current system of issuing work and residency permits for foreigners who come from countries with a strong Islamist extremist presence.

Conclusion

This article has shown that what might at first blush be seen as a non-case of radicalisation and extremism can actually be regarded as a case. Our argument that the spectrum of Islamist radicalisation and related activities can be surprisingly broad in a state without a single active Islamist terrorist group or without a single terrorist attack is confirmed in this article. The forms of Islamist radicalisation and extremism identified above are very wide and range from transfers of people, weapons and money, foreign fighters, dangerous NGOs, recruitment, training, threats through to an attempted attack. All of this happened while Slovenia never raised its official terrorism threat level above the minimum (small threat). All of this also occurred without affecting the opinion of a public that does not perceive terrorism as a pressing threat. The fact is that the country has already faced certain basic forms (e.g. attempted attack, foreign fighters, threats) and supportive forms of Islamist terrorism such as recruitment, training and the transfer of people, money and arms. If we compare this with the full scope of possible Islamist threat expressions described in the introduction to this article, the unusually high number of indicators present in a country without any previous terrorist attack becomes obvious. Indicators not observed in Slovenia are: the existence of a terrorist group acting against the government or its people and infrastructure, a successful terrorist attack, instances of illegal data interference, examples of aggressive political Islamists openly arguing in the political process for changes to the political and democratic regime. No case related to smuggling, possessing or producing radiological, chemical, biological or nuclear weapons was found either.

It should be stressed that in this case of weak radicalisation the primary stimulus is not located in the country. It comes from abroad, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina. Slovenia is geopolitically on the path between

Bosnia and other European sources of Jihadi thought from Austria (Vienna) and Northern Italy (Milano). The radicalisation of Muslim communities in the Balkans (especially Sarajevo) and in Vienna and Milano more or less affects radicalisation in Slovenia. It would appear that for these sources of power Slovenia is as an interesting transit country that will increasingly appear on their agenda. It is a place to meet and not draw too much attention of the authorities, an area to hide, a space for recruitment and one where their agenda will become increasingly clear through threats and other forms of realisation. Most of our cases show that Slovenia is more like a logistical space for Islamist groups in support for their more relevant goals in key battlefields like the Middle East and Western Europe. This corresponds with the Plan Balkan 2020 publicised by Al-Qaeda, where the Western Balkans was described as a logistical hub for spreading terrorism into Western Europe. This means that here one should expect more indicators related to training, financing and supplying than attacks. [69] Respectively, Slovenia has been a pool for the recruitment of foreign fighters and certain individuals from the most vulnerable ethnic group, a transit country for weapons, people and money, a place for meetings and the training of Islamists from neighbouring countries and a venue for debate and the relatively narrow promotion of Islamist ideas within certain small NGOs. Even the threats to the local community identified above were sent from Italy and the self-radicalised individual who tried to carry out an attack in Slovenia came from Croatia. Gravitation towards sources of Islamist power in Bosnia is also confirmed by the indicator of instructions being given by Bilal Bosnic from his prison cell on how to operate and collect money.

The broader picture in the Western Balkans suggests that these Slovenian examples might be connected with the Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Islamic religious, social and political movement. It should be remembered that members of the Muslim Brotherhood fought in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that some Muslims from Kosovo and Albania might have links with the Brotherhood. Yet we did not find any direct links with the Muslim Brotherhood for the cases identified in this article. After no direct contacts could be found, we focused on the key organiser of recruitment for ISIS and Al Nusra in Slovenia, Bilal Bosnic from Bosnia, and his potential links. No contacts were detected for him, also after checking numerous media records and the 2015 verdict against him.

The question arises: how does political Islam spread in an environment like Slovenia? Political Islam as a way of articulating political positions about the transformation of society and politics according to Islamic principles is not present in the country's open political scene. No political parties are openly calling for Islamisation, the rule of Sharia law, etc. However, our results suggest that these ideas may in fact be found in closed circles of certain smaller non-governmental organisations or in the minds of some individuals, and could act as a compass for future actions, perhaps waiting for a window of opportunity to evolve. Such ideas appear to spread in these circles by means of Internet use as general radical ideas are published on relevant websites and by reading and following radical foreign websites and media, travelling abroad or hosting foreign preachers.

Cases like Slovenia should not be overlooked by international counterterrorist authorities and by the academic community. The modest presence of radicals and extremists in a country like Slovenia has led to milder control mechanisms and less attention from the authorities. This can turn out to be counterproductive. Most threats are easier to identify when plotters are not working under the radar. The weakest links in the international surveillance net have already been exploited by Islamist extremists who will no doubt continue to do so in the future.

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About the Authors:

Iztok Prezelj, Ph.D., is a Professor and Vice-Dean for Scientific Research at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. He was a member of Slovenian governmental interagency working groups in the fields

of counterterrorism and crisis management. He was also an Adjunct Professor in the program on terrorism (PTSS) at the George C. Marshall Center in Garmisch-Partenkirchen (Germany). Prezelj is the author of (1) *Improving Interorganisational Cooperation in Counterterrorism based on a Quantitative SWOT Assessment*, *Public Management Review*, 2015; (2) *Inter-organizational Cooperation and Coordination in the Fight against Terrorism: From Undisputable Necessity to Paradoxical Challenges*, *Comparative Strategy*, 2014 and editor of (3) *The Fight against Terrorism and Crisis Management in the Western Balkans*, Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2008.

Klemen Kocjancic has a BA in theology, MA in defense studies and a Ph.D. in history from the University of Ljubljana. He works as a Research Assistant at the Defence Research Centre (Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana). His research interests are military history, insurgency and counterinsurgency, religiously motivated crime and terrorism, military sociology (military families, military chaplaincy), etc. He has written articles for several Slovenian and foreign journals, while also working as a journalist for ten years.

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