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Counter Extremism Project (CEP)

The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a non-profit, non-partisan international organisation that aims to counter the threat of extremist ideologies and to strengthen pluralistic-democratic forces. CEP deals with extremism in all forms, including Islamist extremism/terrorism, as well as right-wing and left-wing extremism/terrorism. To this end, CEP exerts pressure on financial and material support networks of extremist and terrorist organisations through original research and studies, works against extremist and terrorist narratives and their online recruitment tactics, develops good practices for the reintegration of extremists and terrorists, and promotes effective regulations and laws.

In addition to offices in the United States, CEP has offices and a separate legal entity as the Counter Extremism Project, Germany GmbH in Berlin, and maintains representations in Brussels. CEP’s activities are led by an international group of former politicians, senior government officials, and diplomats. CEP supports policymakers in developing laws and regulations to effectively prevent and combat extremism and terrorism, particularly in the area of combating terrorist financing.

More information can be found here: www.counterextremism.com

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The research team is fully independent in implementing the project and has editorial responsibility for all views and opinions expressed herein.
INTRODUCTION

The presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has for a long time remained an understudied issue due to a lack of available open data. The combination of the group’s secretive mode of operation and the attention of governments and media focusing on the more immediate threat of terrorism have resulted in very limited coverage of this topic, whether in English or in the native languages of these countries. GLOBSEC with the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) have decided to contribute to the wider research on this topic, which so far has dissected the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in other regions, predominantly in the West, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as Southeast Asia. 1 With its focus on the CEE region, this project aims to support a wider understanding of the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the previous report, CEE activities of the Muslim Brotherhood: Mapping the Ikhwan’s presence in the region, the authors presented the cases of five countries in the CEE region, each representing a different landscape in which the movement could operate. This report will focus on three of the selected countries, namely Czech Republic, Poland, and Serbia. The first country represents a case with no autochthonous Muslim population, meaning its Muslim minority is composed purely of expatriates, later generations of expats, and converts. Poland, on the other hand, has an autochthonous population of Tatars, which are seemingly in competition with no autochthonous Muslim population, meaning its Muslim minority is composed purely of expatriates, later generations of expats, and converts. Serbia, also has an autochthonous community, divided between Bosniaks in the Raška administrative region (also called Sandžak region) and Albanians in the Preševo Valley. However, unlike Poland, this community is larger than the expatriate and convert communities, who mostly live in Belgrade.

Despite the differences in demographics, there are many commonalities found in the three countries in relation to revivalist movements 2 such as the Muslim Brotherhood. All studied countries face a combination of factors that have resulted in a slowdown of activity of Muslim religious organisations. These factors are both internal as well as external and are - to a large extent - mutual, although there are a few specific conditions within each of the three countries at the centre of this study. All in all, this report will present the challenges that individuals who are alleged to have links to the Muslim Brotherhood have been facing and what adjustments they have had to make in order to continue their activities despite the apparent downward trend of revivalist movements in all three countries.

Methodology & Data collection

The research for this report is based on the methodology developed in the first report for this project 3 Essentially, each country studied for this report represents a different environment with observable specific dynamics between autochthonous, expatriate, or convert communities, and their integration into society. Assuming that revivalist movements are present in these expatriate and convert communities, the research team narrowed its focus to entities that fulfil these criteria and to those that have been at some point branded as revivalist by an interviewee or existing literature. The information and data gathered for this report was then analysed and the specific entity was classified as belonging into one of three categories: Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups, Muslim Brotherhood-inspired groups, or “grey-area” groups.

The data presented in this report was compiled from interviews with four groups of individuals—experts from academia, government officials, members of Muslim communities, and groups involved in the Muslim Brotherhood to the studied groups. 4 In addition to the interviews, the research team used primary sources such as the groups’ official websites, publications, press releases, letters, and other material they published. The team also relied on secondary sources, including academic literature, news articles, and other websites.

In general, the team conducted structured interviews guided by the methodology laid out in the first report of this project. During these interviews, issues such as various religious, social, and even political activities, as well as links to groups or individuals abroad and financing were addressed. This structure was utilised as a general guide and a reference point during all interviews. In most cases, the interviews subsequently also moved into a less structured dialogue, as the majority of the interviewees initially were reluctant to respond when queried about Islamist activism/revivalism/potential of Muslim Brotherhood presence in their countries. At the same time, most interviewees did not hesitate discussing the Muslim presence in other countries analysed for this project, its organisational emanations, their activities, and intra-communal cooperation and/or rivalries. In some cases, the net result of the interview was a multi-faceted commentary of a given interviewee concerning a potential or actual Islamist/revivalist presence. Some of this information was included in this report.

One issue that became clear during the research is the Muslim Brotherhood’s strong presence in the European Islamic arena. It became quite visible while studying older entities—such as the Muslim Students Association and the Muslim League in Poland or General Union of Muslim Students in the Czech Republic—that several became members of Muslim Brotherhood pan-European organisations such as the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe. Because these organisations have managed to bring in individuals and other organisations from all corners of Europe (even those who might not subscribe to the Islamist thought). This was due to their size and access to the European forum, which was important for entities in the CEE region after decades of isolation. Therefore, it is difficult to label them all as linked to the Islamist movement. Of course, the fact remains that the Muslim Brotherhood dominates these institutions; however, using formal membership as the sole indicator for the first category proved not to be sufficient. To avoid inaccuracies and possible “guilt by association”, the research team followed up such connections and supplement them with cross-investigations of other activities, including publications, do’wa, and others. Furthermore, the definition of the first category (“Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups”) was broadened by stipulating that the membership must be active and present on more levels, such as participating in events organised by the Muslim Brotherhood pan-European organisations, hosting them, continuously publishing their output, etc.

1 The Movement has been linked to political parties both in Indonesia and Malaysia, for example. For further information see: Doronick M. Müller (ed.), Islam, Politics and Youth in Malaysia: The Pop-Islamist Reinvention of PAS. Routledge, 2014, and Woodward, Mark, Ali Amin, Inayah Rohmaniyah, and Chris Lundry, Getting culture: a new path for Indonesia’s Islamic Justice and Prosperity party?, Contemporary Islam 7
2 This term was chosen for this report as it best describes the motivation of the movement and has been established in various forms in the works of John O. Voll, Stephen T. Martin, Emir N. Hasipovic, and Robert Lapidus. The term Islamic Revivalism is used in this study to refer to movements that strive to institute a holistic Islamic system which would govern both the public and private life of citizens.
4 The majority, with very few exceptions, asked the research team not to use their names in the report.
THE PAST

The communist regimes in the CEE de facto blocked the entry of Islamists into the region, including revivalist ideologues. Whether a country was a satellite state like Czechoslovakia or Poland, or the peculiar entity that was Yugoslavia, religion in general was not compatible with communist ideology. Although it is important to emphasise that the situation differed based on the specific religion and time period. Generally, it can be concluded that although Islam did not have free space for revivalism, it was cultivated or in some other ways developed. The atheist policies of communist countries along with other factors such as the modernisation of societies meant that even the autochthonous Muslim population was becoming more atheistic. Likewise, foreigners who were allowed entry were mostly from secular states. There were, however, limited developments towards revivalism, such as building a mosque in Gdansk for example.7

After the communist regimes fell and borders opened to all international actors, the situation changed for religious groups. While the Czech Republic and Poland saw more freedom of expression of religion, the situation in the Balkans became more complicated with rising ethnic conflicts, of which religion was an inescapable part, curtailing the Balkan Wars. This allowed revivalist groups to enter the scene in the CEE and influence relationships between groups and transform identities of certain groups, such as Bosnian Muslims for instance.8 The 1990s was a time of transition to democracy for all the mentioned countries and at the same time, the early Islamic communities started to set up their organisations, usually focused on students. Below is a brief overview of the historical development of the Muslim organisations selected for this research and the connections they developed in the past.

Institutions in focus

Islamic institutions in the Czech Republic were established in 1934, nearly two decades after the independence of Czechoslovakia.9 There are a number of current entities active in the country, however, only few are of interest for this research. To identify those groups which have less relevance, it was necessary to focus on those organisations with membership in Muslim Brotherhood European bodies and ones that have a track record of activism. The main one is the Islamic Foundation in Prague (Islamic Foundation of Prague or IFP), which was set up so that Muslims in Prague would have a representative legal body that could ensure the community could buy a space for a prayer room or a mosque. In the 1990s, it acquired one such place from the General Union of Muslim Students (Všeobecný Sväz Musulmánských Studentú a Mladyžé or VSSMS), an older body and a member of FEMYSO, which organises Muslim students around the country, usually foreigners, and facilitated space for prayers in student dormitories. The INP is now a member of the Heads of Muslim Communities (Ústředí evropských organizacímusulmánského života), which includes also the INP, the Islamic Foundation in Brno, the Czech Republic’s second-largest city, hence there will be references to these institutions as well. Besides these two, there is the Muslim Union founded by Mohamed Abbas, a Sudanese-born businessman who had been instrumental for the VSSMS at its beginnings. Since there is no autochthonous Muslim population that is large enough, it becomes less explicit, as the two organisations suffer some resentment amongst the INP members and to some extent, rhetorically closed ranks after 2015 amid the storm of negative sentiment towards Muslim immigrants and Islam in Europe10.

In Serbia, the context is different due to the existence of two separate Islamic communities, a phenomenon raised in various written works, as well as in the interviews conducted. The one established earlier in the 1990s is the Islamic Community in Serbia (Islamska Zajednica u Srbiji or IZuS), with its headquarters in Novi Pazar and subject to the Reis-ul-Ulema in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The origins of the community date to the 1990s conflict, primarily in Bosnia but also in the wider Balkans, which served as a guiding light for Muslim’s “spiritual salvation”11. The other, with a similar name, is the Belgrade-based Islamic Community of Serbia (Islamska Zajednica Srbije or IZS), established in 2007, and was initially headed by the multi Hamdija Jusufspahic, whose prominence dates to Tito’s Yugoslav times. With the establishment of Adem Zilko as Reis-ul-Ulema, the IZS became prominent for proclaiming the independence of Serb Muslims. The two Muslim communities have been at odds since the very beginning due to, as one interviewee described it, differences in their identity politics.12 It appears that while IZS is more interested in catering to the wider Muslim population in Serbia and advocating for the independence of Serb Muslims, IZuS has stronger ties to the Bosniak ethnic identity.

In the second half of the 1990s, the two effectively went their separate ways because the Tatars, in the words of League activists, “would not move on their way of doing things—they, traditions, many rooted in the Polish, predominantly, Christian reality. For you this could be small things but for Arabs this was key—wrong recitation of the Holy Qur’an who were not speak Arabic anyway [...] It was not dogmatic, [...] but practical. Both communities had their own needs and maybe needed their [own] ways to cater to them”13.

As time went by, the League, led by Arab immigrants to Poland, to some extent reapplied the benefits from the nascent “Polish Islam” being reformed, not in the mold of Islam known by the autochthonous population, but by the sheer force of numbers, that of mostly Arabic Muslim arrivals to Poland.14 This caused some resentment amongst the MZR members and initiated a decade-plus rivalry between the two organisations. Only in recent years this conflict has become less explicit, as the two organisations suffer from their own internal problems15 and to some extent, rhetorically closed ranks after 2015 amid the storm of negative sentiment towards Muslim immigrants and Islam in Europe16.
Formal connections

According to the methodology that the research team developed in the previous publication mapping the presence of CEE groups with possible connections to the Muslim Brotherhood, the first category of groups denoted the formal membership list of the Brotherhood’s networks through their involvement as members, associates, affiliates, or in any other relationships with these federations. The research team concluded that formal affiliation to these federations (listed in Box 1), the representatives of these groups demonstrated publicly their intent to belong to the circle of revivalists. Such organisations are termed Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups. However, upon completing the investigation of

1. Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe (FIOE)
2. European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR)
3. The Europe Trust
4. European Institute for Human Science (EIH)
5. The Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations (FEMYSOY)
6. European Forum of Muslim Women (EFOMW)
7. World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY)
8. European Assembly of Muslim Imams
9. The Federation of European Arab-Islamic Schools (also European Union of Arabic Islamic Schools and Association of Muslim Schools in Europe)

Box 1

The Czech Republic has one institution that is a member of a federation laid out in Box 1. The General Union of Muslim Students (VSMS), a member of FEMYSOY. The VSmS was one of the first institutions for Muslims in the Czech Republic after its country’s independence in 1993. It was set up by Mohamed Abbas, who later left and created the Muslim Union, which he registered in FIOE®. Whereas in the past VSmS published videos and short movies of what it is like to be a Muslim in the Czech Republic, the image nowadays looks slightly bleaker. Currently, it is looking more intowards and still organises multiple day congresses for the Muslim community in the country. The congress in 2019 was the last one, since in 2020 the congress had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, externally very few online output has been seen since around 2016. When their past action is contrasted with their current activity, a trend begins to emerge.

A self-confessed “critic of Islamism” stressed in his interview that the main Islamist actor in Poland is the League and that the proof for this could be found in its roots and organisational structure plus its links to like-minded entities involved in other forms of Islamist activity. As was shown, the League party emerged as a student organisation, the Muslims Students Association (Stowarzyszenie Studentów Muzułmańskich w Polsce or SSM), founded a decade earlier, and currently a member of FEMYSOY20. Its original members, mostly students from the Middle East who arrived in Poland in the 1980s and the 1990s and opted to stay in the country. These subsequently organised also other entities, including the Muslim Student Association for Cultural Formation (Muzułmańska Stowarzyszenie Kształcenia Kulturalnego or MSKK), and finally, between 2001 and 2004, the League itself. The interviewed academics stress that SSM is strongly present in the state and does not manifest itself in any controversial activity nor facilitates intra-communal da’wa nor invites members to take up Islamist ideology. There is also another factor to consider, the League’s prominent membership studies at the Institut Européen Des Sciences Humaines in France and, interestingly, some senior members are affiliated with MZR.

Surging activity

The other two group types (or categories) were defined by the authors in the previous report as reliant on determining their connections to the Muslim Brotherhood through their activities rather than formal membership. These organisations are termed Muslim Brotherhood-inspired groups and “groups of activities of these groups have been traced on multiple levels. They were chosen according to various types of activities the Muslim Brotherhood has been known to perform across religious, social, and political spheres.”

On its official website, the Islamic Foundation in Prague expressed its support for the FIOE’s statement of 22 July 2016 concerning the terrorist attack in Munich21, which on its own does not carry significant weight in connecting it to the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, when presented in combination with its wide range of disseminating activities, a fuller picture emerges. For instance, the foundation published a video on combating islamophobia by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)—a US-based organisation that Lorenzo Vidino tied to the Muslim Brotherhood22.

20 See: https://democracyintheunitedstates.org/profiles/muslim-students-society-of-poland
23 The last connection is that the student organisation, VSmS, was present at the FIOE congress in 200923.

The above-mentioned Muslim Union, founded by a key person in the Czech branch of the Third World Relief Agency,24 used to run the website of the European Federation of Muslim Women (EFOMW)25. It was active in Prague until 2018. It was also an affiliate of the Moslem Union (MZR), founded a decade earlier, and currently a member of FEMYSOY. Its original members, mostly students from the Middle East who arrived in Poland in the 1980s and the 1990s and opted to stay in the country. These subsequently organised also other entities, including the Muslim Student Association for Cultural Formation (Muzułmańska Stowarzyszenie Kształcenia Kulturalnego or MSKK), and finally, between 2001 and 2004, the League itself. The interviewed academics stress that SSM is strongly present in the state and does not manifest itself in any controversial activity nor facilitates intra-communal da’wa nor invites members to take up Islamist ideology. There is also another factor to consider, the League’s prominent membership studies at the Institut Européen Des Sciences Humaines in France and, interestingly, some senior members are affiliated with MZR.

The last connection is that the student organisation, VSMS, was present at the FIOE congress in 200923. The above-mentioned Muslim Union, founded by a key person in the Czech branch of the Third World Relief Agency,24 used to run the website
with a multitude of posts. Furthermore, Abbas’ Facebook page commemorated Morsi after his death thanks to his media appearances. One interviewed Brotherhood-inspired group because of the number of posts and the involvement of Abbas and the Muslim Union as a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated cultural and prayer centre in Poland.

Further in the past, the Polish student Muslim organisation the SSM invited Islamist figures associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, including Faysal Mawlawi or the FIOE’s Ahmed al Rawi, to Poland. Moreover, it has also published books of authors at the center of the ideological thinking of the Muslim Brotherhood, such as for example Sayid Qutb and was reported to have been under the “strong ideological influence of the Muslim Brothers”.

In Serbia, in contrast, there are virtually no signs of reported activities that can be connected to the Muslim Brotherhood. These findings are in line with expert’s claims that the Muslim Brotherhood is not very prominent in Serbia. According to the same expert, the Muslim Brotherhood and its presence in Serbia are not a significant topic in academic and media reports.

In Poland, somewhat similar activities have been noted, although to a lesser extent. Theoretically, supporting former President Morsi, the former leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, could also indicate at least affinity with the movement on behalf of the League. This assertion, however, was quickly discounted, even by MZR activists and the academics who pointed out to the research team that as much as the League was actively involved on behalf of defending the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, its Tajik competitor drew closer to Turkey, for example, cooperating closely on a variety of Diyanet-sponsored projects. This cooperation was enacted despite the fact that the country has been labelled as developing into a “regional hub” for the Muslim Brotherhood in exile. Consequently, all contacts interviewed on this subject agreed that such links are not necessarily the result of MZR or the League’s ideological affiliations but because of their pragmatism and need to secure funds for a relatively impoverished and, from a global point of view, marginal Muslim community in Poland. Some of the interviewed actors hurriedly pointed out the hypocrisy of accusations of being a front for “Islamic radicals” when it was Wahhabi Saudi Arabia that sponsored the Warsaw Islamic Centre, an MZR-affiliated cultural and prayer centre in Poland.

It cannot be excluded that the influence and support from the Muslim Brotherhood in exile may be a “political chameleon”. According to one expert, “Cerić is everywhere and good with everyone — and is fantastic at being ambivalent”, which leaves reported ties solely on a speculative level. These allegations will further be discussed in a subsequent report focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

Another avenue analysed for this report was through a Kosovo NGO called the Association for Culture and Education, or AKEA. It is an organisation with suspected Muslim Brotherhood ties. In particular, AKEA was shut down in 2014 by Kosovo’s Special Prosecutor’s Office as one of 64 “suspicious organisations”. According to news reports from 2014, AKEA, with its headquarters in Pristina, was close to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and also enjoyed the support of Turkish President Erdogan via the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, or TIKA. Upon investigation of the organisation’s potential ties to actors in Serbia, a Facebook post by former Israeli journalist u Srbi’s leader Muamer Zukorlić dating back to 23 August 2013 highlighted that a book fair organised by AKEA in Prižren carried his autobiography, which was coincidentally a bestseller. The news was published on the Sandžak Press web portal, which more than once published news about AKEA’s activities, such as “Ramadan Nights” and the annual “Dokufest” in Prižren. However, as no other information was found to substantiate these suspected ties, the evidence of connections of actors in Serbia to the Muslim Brotherhood does not pass the threshold of being anything more than circumstantial.

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doesnt-mean-unlawful-violent-terrorists.
30 See https://www.facebook.com/mohamed.abbas.90/posts/2339308540106549.
31 See https://www.facebook.com/mohamed.abbas.90/posts/2339308540106549.
32 See https://www.facebook.com/mohamed.abbas.90/posts/2339308540106549.
33 See https://www.facebook.com/mohamed.abbas.90/posts/2339308540106549.
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38 See https://www.facebook.com/mohamed.abbas.90/posts/2339308540106549.
39 See https://www.facebook.com/mohamed.abbas.90/posts/2339308540106549.
40 See e.g., http://www.balkan-playground.org/monito/2013052374063/445699969817601.
41 See e.g., http://www.balkan-playground.org/monito/2013052374063/445699969817601.
42 See e.g., http://www.balkan-playground.org/monito/2013052374063/445699969817601.
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46 See e.g., http://www.balkan-playground.org/monito/2013052374063/445699969817601.
47 See e.g., http://www.balkan-playground.org/monito/2013052374063/445699969817601.
Following the terrorist attacks in Europe between 2015 and 2016, immigrants were labelled as a security threat by Czech, Polish, and Serbian politicians, often drawing this heterogeneous group with a broad brush as Muslims, regardless of their actual faith. Consequently, a significant number of Czech, Polish, and Serbian citizens adopted far-right political commentators who had promoted the wider discourse. As such, xenophobic nationalism accompanied by Islamophobia flourished across the political discussions in these countries.

In the past, even high-level officials in the Czech Republic publicly expressed negative attitudes towards Muslim immigrants. During the peak of the so-called “refugee crisis” (2015) and extremist jihadist terrorist activity in Europe (2015-2016), the prime minister rejected refugee quotas and demanded EU borders to prevent Muslim refugees from entering Europe. The Czech president also made statements critical towards Muslims. Such rhetoric, which could be characterized as Islamophobic, included reference to the Islamic Centre’s “a tsunami which will kill me” and “Islamists who are coming to subjugate Europe”. Other officials spread narratives that could be interpreted as Islamophobic, including the head of the Foreign Affairs Department, who described Muslim refugees as “dangerous foreign blood”. Such comments mirror the discourses into the sphere of securitisation of immigration and minorities in the West, meaning the creation of a narrative in the political sphere of an “existential threat” that would require immediate attention and additional measures to counter this threat.

The atmosphere in the Czech Republic became even more inhospitable to Muslims after the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance demanded that Czech law be changed to stop the spread of Islamophobia and for racism to be prosecuted. This demand was rejected by the Czech Justice Ministry. This has allowed anti-Muslim sentiment to spread across Czech society, with a number of anti-Islam demonstrations taking place in Prague. It is important to highlight, however, that there were also gatherings that welcomed refugees, which clashed with the anti-immigrant activism. A situation in which there is a lack of support from the state in curbing sentiments against a particular religious minority creates a complex problem for that particular group regardless of their ideology (Islamic or not), resulting in indirectly constraining the expression of individual and collective identity.

The theocratic and demonisations was the police intervention in the Islamic Centre (a now-closed prayer room that used to be administered by the Islamic Foundation of Europe) right before the start of Friday prayers on 25 April 2014. According to an expert interviewed for this report, this action deteriorated the relationships between this Muslim community and the state to an extent that prevented Muslims from now going to prayers for security reasons, in effect making the communities even less organised and concentrated. This presents another challenge in fighting Muslim Brotherhood-linked organisation attempting to present itself as representative of the entire Muslim community, since the number of practising group members is now lower.

In the case of Poland, the 2015 parliamentary elections marked a turning point and the beginning of an escalation towards increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric. Prior to the 2015 national elections, Poland pledged to accept 7000 refugees as part of the European relocation plan. However, this approach was eventually rejected by the elections, which saw a change in the government in Warsaw. The so-called European “migration crisis” and the election campaign in Poland largely overlapped and prompted a string of right-wing publications to describe the arriving refugees as “invading... hostile strangers”, rapists, or murderers. In the aftermath of the Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016) terrorist attacks, the Polish government saw “no possibility for the migrants to arrive in Poland at the current time [i.e. March 2016]”. This statement was supported by assertions that the government could not determine with certainty whether terrorists or ISIS fighters were amongst the migrants. Similar to the situation in the Czech Republic, Poland also saw several protests against refugees, including public statements which could be seen as hate speech towards Muslims.

Furthermore, the government enacted structural changes. For example, it dissolved the Council Against Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia, the only state body that was working on tackling these forms of discrimination. It was argued that it was a “non-functional”, its tasks could be replaced by other existing institutions.

In Serbia, Islamophobia expresses itself in different forms. While some academic literature on Islamophobia in Serbia suggests that it differs from the phenomenon visible in Western Europe, the reality is more complex. This differentiation can be seen in the Islamophobia directed towards the autochthonous Muslim population as compared to Islamophobia directed to newly arrived migrants, which is similar to Islamophobia observable in the rest of Europe.

Islamophobia towards the autochthonous Muslim population in Serbia stems from multidimensional historical factors that have shaped the region and country itself. This non-Muslim population towards Islam is directly tied to historical developments and conflicts between inhabiting groups. In particular, the heritage of Ottoman Empire rule is a principal factor in shaping Islamophobia in Serbia and has evolved into hatred for a particular ethnic group. Previous research showed that only 8% of Serbs stated that they feel an affinity for Bosnia nationals while only 25% felt that towards Albanians. While the findings of the study show a significant degree of social distance, an expert has confirmed that it is largely respectful. A noteworthy factor contributing to the social distance is the geographical locations of the populations, giving the autochthonous Muslim populations in the Preševo Valley and Raška region. As a result, Muslims in Serbia occupy less favourable positions in the infrastructure and organisations.

While Serbian politicians rarely demonstrate explicit Islamophobic sentiment, commenations of war events, such as expulsions of populations, genocide, and war crimes from the 1990s, are still very present in the political arena. To illustrate this, Simultaneously, given the “spectacular” nature of terrorist activity in the world, media outlets and politicians have contributed to an increase in Islamophobia via securitisation of Islam in Serbia. For example, since the rise of Slobodan Milosević the historical region of Sandžak has been portrayed as a dangerous place, a centre of radical Islam in Serbia.

References:
57. Derogatory term denoting southern Slavs who have converted to/accepted Islam as their religion.
64. https://www.preporod.com/index.php/racism/ceeu/interpelacjaTresc.xsp?key=1709BA7D
Such stereotypes persist until today. According to the president of the Sandžak Committee for Human Rights, Islamophobia has been tremendously spread by media, namely tabloid newspapers like the Informer, Alo, Kurt, Telegraph and Pravda—daily news outlets known for giving considerable space to right-wing extremist views.

With a greater influx of migrants from the Middle East and the African continent, new anti-Muslim sentiments arose that differ from those directed towards the Muslim population in Serbia as they lack an ethno-nationalist component and are rather tied to the fear of the unknown. As one expert described it, this is becoming very much about Serbia “is used to the type of Islam practiced in Serbia”.

Media outlets have played a significant role in fostering these negative sentiments, as sensationalist news titles suggesting, among other things, that “muslims are criminals” or “they rob monasteries, break things and attack us” is how Serbs complain about the asylum-seekers. They were used as a pretext to encourage Islamophobia or Muslimophobia that gained strength after 2015 in all countries at the centre of this study. Some member states of the Visegrad Four such as Hungary and Slovakia expanded the powers of the security forces right after the Paris attacks and they “[fed] the threat of terrorism to migration from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries immersed in conflicts”. Media saturated with disinformation and an environment of fear also played an important role in influencing popular opinions. Altogether, this facilitated a very challenging space for all groups that fell in the “other” category as opposed to the majority. This could lead to the perceived loss of power, which could be a potential vulnerability to be exploited by other actors, which could ironically weaken the security of a given country.

Reactions to new hardships

As an increasingly more difficult situation began to take hold in the Czech and Hungarian capitals, the reactions of the groups studied for this report varied. Against the backdrop of the devastating jihadist attacks in European cities in 2015, the Islamic Foundation in Prague decided to be proactive at first and visit schools to talk about Islam as a peaceful religion, as well as inviting the public into the mosques.

Together with its sister organisation in Brno, the INP vigorously attempted to publicly condemn the actions of the terrorists and decouple the link between Islam and terrorism by saying the two have nothing in common and that terrorism affects everyone regardless of their religion.

A similar approach was adopted by the Islamic Community of Serbia, which established and supported anti-extremism projects in the country. Such actions should not be confused with proselytisation, as the purpose was to distance the Western Muslim community from terrorism, rather than invite others into the religion.

The representative of the Centre of Muslim Communities, which unites the aforementioned foundations in Prague, Brno, and other smaller towns, also mentioned the fearful reactions of their members after seeing the president on stage with a representative of the Block against Muslims.

Moreover, there have been several incidents, such as damaging a mosque with anti-Muslim graffiti, breaking windows, or leaving a pig’s head in front of it. In the same article, the representative also emphasised that he was growing tired of trying to persuade Czech society to accept him and Muslim believers. However, despite this statement in 2015 and in the years that followed, the organisation centralised its operations and banned invitations to guest speakers not approved nor vetted by the leadership, and stopped the practice of even offering to put up travelling guests in its mosques or prayer homes for the night. At the same time, the issue of vetting applicants came back on the agenda of the League’s Board. 

Similarly, in Poland, the League activists interviewed for this report confirmed in part the experts’ view on the organisation as being less present in the public sphere, and seemingly less active in their view. This could be the result of the exhaustion of its members after 2015 when “the whole community found itself under siege. This ISIS thing, we were shunned with it. And, yes, one of its leaders (Jakus) even went to Syria to fight, which did not help.21 We were scared, we all had our online ‘fans’, ‘haters’, ‘stikers’, our premises were picketed”. Such conditions hardly prepositioned the organisation towards more activism, as seemingly “our each and every media appearance led to more of the same, a truly vicious circle”. In response and in order to control the threats perceived, the organisation limited its online publication activity, reflecting the developments further. Upon visiting the INP, the administrator mentioned that in his view, Islamophobia is not a problem of people not being informed, but rather of politicians summing up their reaction to current events.

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Finally, the League’s decreased activism could also be the result of the financial tribulations of the organisation. Here, it seems, is where the relatively short-lived political activism of its members had drastic consequences, as the organisation is still in the red over its biggest structural achievement, the construction of its Centre of Islamic Culture in CEE activities of the Muslim Brotherhood: Czech Republic, Poland, Serbia
Warsaw, which opened in 2015, and the closure of its publication, As Salam.

Similar to the situation in the Czech Republic, there have been some recorded incidents of desecration of mosques in Serbia. Furthermore, the Islamic Community in Serbia expressed concern and strongly condemned the act, which “was not characteristic of these areas, even in the 1990s, coloured by hatred and intolerance towards Bosniaks and Muslims”104. Despite some incidents including the burning and vandalisation of mosques in Belgrade and Niš in 2004 by right-wing nationalists in response to the burning of Orthodox churches and monasteries in Kosovo, no other such incidents have been recorded in recent years, fostering an overall peaceful environment.

The Islamic Community of Serbia and the Islamic Community in Serbia continue to publicly advocate against the rise of Islamophobia in Serbia, both in relation to foreign Muslims and migrants, and in Europe and globally. Following the Christchurch shootings, both IZs and IS published statements and spoke to media about the surge of anti-Muslim sentiments, calling for tolerance and justice105. As mentioned before, in response to the negative sentiments, which have grown due to the number of people on the streets and people from abroad, the Islamic Community, an investigation into public addresses, and ultimately failed106. There is also a visible Turkish minority in the Czech Republic, however, they mostly belong to the Gülen movement, according to the experts interviewed for this study.

The Muslim League in Poland enjoyed a wide range of support from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries. The Ambassadors' Council in the Muslim Community, an informal body of high-level diplomats accredited to Poland, which acted as a link between the Polish Muslims and the donors from the MENA region. However, when it enthusiastically welcomed the 2011 Arab Spring and picketed the Egyptian embassy in the aftermath of Egyptian President Morsi’s ouster in 2013, it suffered from a financial backlash from some of its donors, especially those coming from the countries that declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terror organisation, i.e., Saudi Arabia and the UAE107.

Similar to the situation in the Czech Republic and Poland, apparent financial hardship within the Islamic Communities in Serbia was observed. Despite not having the opportunity to converse with the members of the administration of either Islamic community, an investigation into public addresses, press releases, and similar accounts has shown that the members of Islamska Zajednica u Srbiji highlight a lack of financial stability and prosperity. Former Mufti Zukorić highlighted that the primary source of income for the administration of IZs is sadashe (charitable donations), which underlines the community’s progress108. This issue has been brought to light multiple times before, as Insajder’s report, the annual financial report for the year 2019, mentioned that the religious communities is shared between Islamska Zajednica Srbije and Islamska Zajednica u Srbiji109.

On the wider question of Turkish state influence (not Sufism) in Serbia, one interviewee stated that “we [Serbia] has been waiting for the pledged Turkish money for a long time”. This answer was prompted by a question about the Turkish community’s involvement in the attempted reconciliation of the two Islamic Communities in Serbia, which, as suggested by the same interviewee and supported by another, has been a failure since reconciliation is a “tricky political question”, referring to the larger Sandžak issue110. However, the involvement of the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, a visit by Erdoğan, and the tri-lateral Serbia-BiH-Turkey meeting in Belgrade in October 2019, demonstrate that Tukey seeks to establish itself as the dominant player in the Balkans. By spreading its influence in this way, Turkey is attempting “to close the door” to other Islamic players in the region, mainly by employing a rather paternalistic approach and “seeking to become the alpha and omega in the Balkans”111.

According to an interview with an expert, the influence of both Gulf countries—the UAE and Saudi Arabia—as well as Turkey are present in Serbia and the wider Western Balkans112. Turkey’s influence is spread through institutionalised and legal channels which can systematise the Turkish presence in the Balkans and result in a more difficult exploitation of their influence if deemed necessary at any point. In addition, he also suggested that Turkey is the more “palatable” influence in Serbia and the Balkans as their presence is more familiar than that of the Gulf states113.

On a larger scale, the interviewees conducted for this report as well as the available literature suggest that the Muslim Brotherhood is not very prominent in Serbia114. To add, the Muslim Brotherhood and its presence in Serbia is not widely discussed in the public, but there is still a considerable level of apprehension regarding the Muslim Brotherhood’s involvement in Serbia, which is a significant deterrent for the Muslim Brotherhood, as “they don’t really mix”115. Nevertheless, the expert also suggested that while it is difficult to establish a solid link between an Islamic community as a whole or larger Islamic movements to the Muslim Brotherhood, it is important to note that such movements are largely decentralised, which is also the case for the Sandžak and the wider Sandžak, as far as individuals and organisations are concerned, as events and discussions connected to these particular movements have been perceived as more relevant and/or potentially a more significant threat to Serbia’s security.

According to research from 2018, it is suspected that there are around 7000 people who can be classified as Islamist extremists, a number slightly higher than the number of right-wing extremists in Serbia116. The phenomena of Islamist extremism became prominent around the beginning of the conflict in Syria, as some Muslims from the Balkans, and specifically Serbia, travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside various terrorist groups such as ISIL and Al-Nusra117.

In 2006 and 2007, 12 Salafis from Novi Pazar were convicted of crimes related to terrorism, namely being involved in the training of fighters for the Syrian National Army, in progress in Syria118. In 2006 and 2007, 12 Salafis from Novi Pazar were convicted of crimes related to terrorism, namely being involved in the training of fighters for the Syrian National Army, in progress in Syria119.
In 2020, a snapshot of the organisations analysed for this report offers a contrast to their image 10-15 years ago. Having to fight hard to shake off the connection to terrorism and illegal migration has exhausted families and jobs, and to a large extent have moved on with their lives. They might still lead the organisation, but at the cost of it not being the most agile or energetic, and thus, largely failing in its outreach mission. A 2017 doctoral thesis on the influence of Islamic converts on their local communities provides intriguing evidence about the League’s aforementioned “resting on its laurels”134. The organisation allegedly refused to support a local chapter led by a female convert who was able to draw large crowds to events organised by the League on “controversial” topics, such as Muslim feminism. This initiative was apparently critically received by the League’s top brass (mostly of Arabic origin) who preferred more theoretical or Arabic-centric topics. At the same time, the League failed to find a position as anima for a Polish convert who underwent thorough theological studies in Saudi Arabia and passed the necessary qualifications for imams working for the League’s chapters, despite the fact that several positions were apparently available at the time. These two isolated events do not constitute a full-blown trend but nonetheless point at how the League’s strategy to handle the media has changed in these two cases, actually missed out on significant opportunities to spread its brand and also to reach out to native Polish and non-Muslim audiences. Such an approach would hardly be characteristic of an activist and a full-blown revivalist Islamist structure in any country.

The available academic literature further emphasizes that the League used to have a more activist profile. However, since the construction of its Muslim Cultural Centre in Warsaw in 2015, it exists as a “company or an association of friends who focus mostly on themselves” and not, e.g., on any da’wa work, which would be the staple of any Muslim Brotherhood front anywhere. Some stressed it is a “marginal” body that had its heyday around 2005-2006 when it organised meetings, symposia, and published frequently. It was highlighted to the research team during the interviews for this study that such activities have

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122 Petrović and Stakic, “Establishment Research Forum - Serbia Report”, 14
123 Ibid
124 Ibid. 15
125 Ibid
126 Faqihudin Kladničanin, "Vehabije u sajber prostoru Srbije" 129-130.
127 Serbia Expert Interview 1, Belgrade August 2020.

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121 Czech Interview 3, August 2020.
122 Ibid
124 Ibid. 46.
and Religious Communities in the Ministry of Justice, and Islamic Communities was found. Both Islamic communities are officially very moderate in their public discourse, and neither has shown a practice of proselytisation in their discourse. As outlined above, proselytisation, if existing, is oriented within the Islamic communities, rather than outwards. It is important to note that while this is true for the administrative bodies and representatives of the Islamic communities in Serbia, it might not hold for the rhetoric of smaller fractions within these groups, as they could largely differ, with some being more drastic.

It seems, therefore, that the goals of the organisations studied for this report are primarily focused on organising Muslims and speaking on their behalf. They have a track record of advocating for Muslims’ rights and trying to build more spaces for mosques or other places to practise those rights. Added to that is the effort to create more infrastructure to live a full life, such as a network of halal shops, funeral services, etc. According an expert interviewed for this study, in the Czech Republic, the institutions there have a long-term goal of establishing more respectable relations with the state, in addition to improving the connections of Muslims to the wider Czech society.

The main findings of this report can be summarised in the following manner:

1. Formal connections to the Muslim Brotherhood-run organisations in Europe and even beyond were found in the early stages of the development of the organisations analysed for this report. However, currently these appear to be inoperative. In the case of Serbia, there might be a possible Muslim Brotherhood tie facilitated via Bosnia and Herzegovina. This indicates that these groups belong to the sphere of influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, but these indications are judged as ultimately not sufficient and inconclusive by the research team.

2. There has not been any detected da’wa activity noted towards non-Muslims. However, there has been a development in Serbia that points to intra-communal proselytisation. This effort is, however, not tied to the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood but to the more assertive and even more extremist Tafkiris. Also relevant might be online posts of images of successful conversions in one Czech case, although the origin of these images is dubious. Finally, all publication activities have decreased dramatically.

3. The groups surely try to advocate for Muslims and to a certain degree compete to represent this minority in their respective countries. However, these relationships with government institutions in the Czech Republic and Poland are gloomy at the moment and have been since the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015. In Serbia, while the relationship with the government is perceived as good, it appears to be largely of a ceremonial character and does not offer any meaningful practical advantages for the groups studied for this report.

4. The current aim for the communities in all three countries is to improve the position and perception of Muslims, and further advance their financial backings to continue with the operation of their mosques and centres.

5. According to one expert interviewed on the situation in the Czech Republic, one trace of Muslim Brotherhood influence was visible during the Egyptian Revolution. At that time Muslims from Prague and Brno were among members of the Brotherhood. However, this was not a well-functioning group, as an internal split occurred since some were supporting el-Sisi and others joined the protests against el-Sisi after the military coup. Currently, in the Czech Republic, these individuals have no time or energy, “suffering from cabin fever” because there are simply too few of them and the movement was not going anywhere by meeting the same people again and again. They belong to the younger generation, and have a very different demeanour from the old leaders, who preferred waiting the situation out. This inevitably frustrated the younger activists during the revolution and resulted in them setting up their own small groups apart from the Muslim Brotherhood.

In conclusion, the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Serbia can be characterized as currently dormant and the majority of the organisations studied for this report are only “shadows” of their former selves.
Annex 1

The approximate timeline of the evolution of Islamic organisations in Central and Eastern Europe. The points in time presented here are only of an orientational character and intended to describe an era rather than precise dates of events.

**THE CZECH REPUBLIC / POLAND**

*1980s*

The first students inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood start to settle in the Czech Republic and Poland.

**SERBIA**

*1990s*

With new regimes, new Islamic organisations are established but are not yet recognised as religious entities; some are registered with the FIOE and FEMYSO.

Yugoslav war deepens religious and ethnic divisions; Mosthah in Sandžak established to help guide Serbian Muslims.

**2000s**

The organisations obtain the status of religious entities. A surge in activities follows, among which some bear a similarity to the Muslim Brotherhood’s modus operandi, such as certain publications, causes for protests, etc.

Disagreement between the two Islamic communities becomes the central discussion on Islam in Serbia.

**2015**

Securitisation of Muslims and Islamophobia increases; the Islamic organisations take a defensive stance.

A trend of looking inwards begins, many publications are taken down from websites, there are only sporadic media appearances, relations with the state are at a record low.

**Present**

Relationships with government are good, but ceremonial. Islamic communities focused on catering to the needs of Muslims in Serbia.

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