moonshot

Far-right extremist searches in Bosnia & Herzegovina

October **2020**

Background

Moonshot is a social enterprise specialising in countering violent extremism and other online harms. Our programmes in the Western Balkans region include online interventions with users seeking violent extremist content, and offering support services to those impacted by gender-based violence.

Between 20 March 2020 and 14 September 2020, Moonshot investigated far-right extremism online in Bosnia and Herzegovina and gathered data on specific search queries made by Google users across the country in both Bosnian (romanised and cyrillic) and English. Our prior experience monitoring violent extremism in this region has enabled us to deploy our risk-monitoring software in order to analyse at-risk audience engagement with far-right extremist themes.

From the 9 July, location targeting was implemented at canton level, covering the region's 12 administrative divisions, allowing for granular geographic analysis.

Our research demonstrates that far-right extremism occupies a space in political and social discourse in several countries across the Western Balkans[1], and our data provides us with an understanding of the ways in which the online space is used to disseminate narratives and messages[2]. We found there were searches for far-right extremist themes relating to the region's history of ethnic conflict, as well searches for international far-right memes and narratives.

The recent history of violent conflict and societal trauma in the region only increases the current threat from violent extremist movements. As part of our ongoing work to better understand and counter this threat, this report sets out our findings in detail before making recommendations for future programming.

Key findings

At-risk users primarily search for and engage with far-right extremist terms in the English language, seeking out terms which have their roots in the region but are now used internationally, such as 'Serbia Strong' and 'Remove Kebab'.

Searches increased in late May and early June, coinciding with the Islamic religious festival Eid-al-Fitr, and a number of anniversaries of the deaths of both Bosnian Muslims and Serbs at specific massacres during the 1990s Balkans wars.

The highest number of searches recorded at the local level was in Republika Srpska, the region home to President Milorad Dodik, a Serb nationalist who has advocated for the administrative division's secession.[3]

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[1] Luke Kelly, Overview Of Research On Far Right Extremism In The Western Balkans (University of Manchester, 2019).
[2] Analysis: "Far-Right Balkan Groups Flourish on the Net", Balkan Insight, 2017, https://balkaninsight.com/2017/05/05/far-right-balkan-groups-flourish-on-the-net-05-03-2017.
[3] "Dodik's repeated calls for Republika Srpska secession raise alarm", Al Jazeera, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/18/dodiks-repeated-calls-for-republika-srpska-secession-raise-alarm/
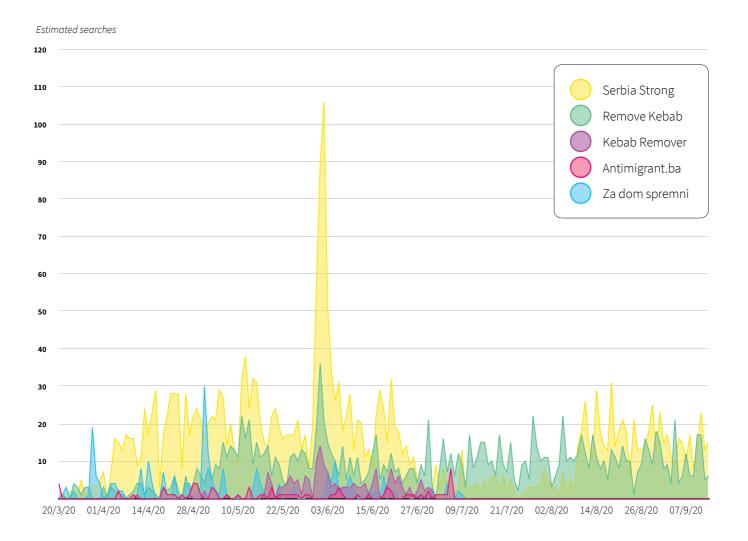
Insights

Top five keywords

In total, we recorded 4,686 searches for far-right extremist keywords during our six-month data-gathering period. Searches remained consistent and averaged 27 per day. However, searches for 'Serbia Strong' and 'Remove Kebab' increased between 24 May and 6 June, recording 700 in total. These dates coincide with a number of anniversaries commemorating the deaths of both Bosnian Muslims and Serbs during massacres of the 1990s Balkan wars, as well as the Islamic religious festival Eid-al-Fitr held on May 24. This represents a 62.0% increase for 'Serbia Strong' searches and 17.0% increase for 'Remove Kebab' searches when compared with the 14 days prior.

The timeline below shows the number of searches for the top five searched keywords between 20 March 2020 and 14 September 2020.

Searches over time / top five searched keywords
20 March 2020 - 14 September 2020

The majority of searches recorded (87.4%) were for two keywords: 'Serbia Strong' and 'Remove Kebab'.

Keyword / Description **/** Percentage of overall searches

Serbia Strong

Unofficial name given to the group of Bosnian Serb army soldiers who featured in a patriotic anti-Muslim propaganda music video during the Balkan wars in 1993. The song was referenced in the live-streamed video of the 2019 Christchurch shootings.

55.5%

Remove Kebab

A phrase and meme that has its origins in a patriotic anti-Muslim propaganda music video which appeared during the Balkan wars in 1993. It is a common anti-Muslim anthem among extremist communities, particularly on image boards such as 8chan. The term was referenced in the live-streamed video of the 2019 Christchurch shootings.

31.9%

Za dom spremni

Nazi-era slogan of the Croatian Second World War fascist Ustaša movement. The phrase translates as 'For home (land) – ready!'

5.4%

Kebab Remover

An alternative construction of 'Remove Kebab'.

3.9%

antimigrant.ba

An anti-immigration website posting highly inflammatory and racist disinformation and hate speech about migrants and minority groups.

1.7%

Keyword analysis

The correlation between the anniversaries of Srebrenica, Tuzla and several others, and the high number of searches for 'Serbia Strong' and 'Remove Kebab' is significant, in that it suggests these commemorative events have the effect of increasing levels of interest in Islamophobic content.

Searches increased substantially in the days after the 25th anniversary of the 1995 Tuzla massacre on 25 May, which also coincided with Eid al-Fitr on 24 May - a Muslim festival celebrating the end of Ramadan. The number of searches peaked on 2 June, the day following the 28th anniversary of the Bijeli Potok massacre, in which 682 Bosnian Muslims were killed.

The use of English keywords is of interest as these terms represent the western Anglicised informal titles of a nationalist song originally titled "Караџићу, води Србе своје / Karadžiću, Vodi Srbe Svoje", in Serbian, or "Karadžić, Lead Your Serbs", in English. Our data shows users in the country predominantly search for the song in its English form, despite the likelihood of them being native to the region and fluent in the original language. The song may be part of the country's far-right discourse as a result of its increased use and popularity in global far-right terminology, including through the live-streamed video of the 2019 Christchurch shootings.

↑
A 'Remove Kebab' meme showing an image of Novislav Đajić who featured in the 'Serbia Strong' music video .

↑
A still from the 'Serbia Strong' music video showing Novislav Đajić (right) and Nenad Tintor (left) in Serbian paramilitary uniform playing the accordion and trumpet.
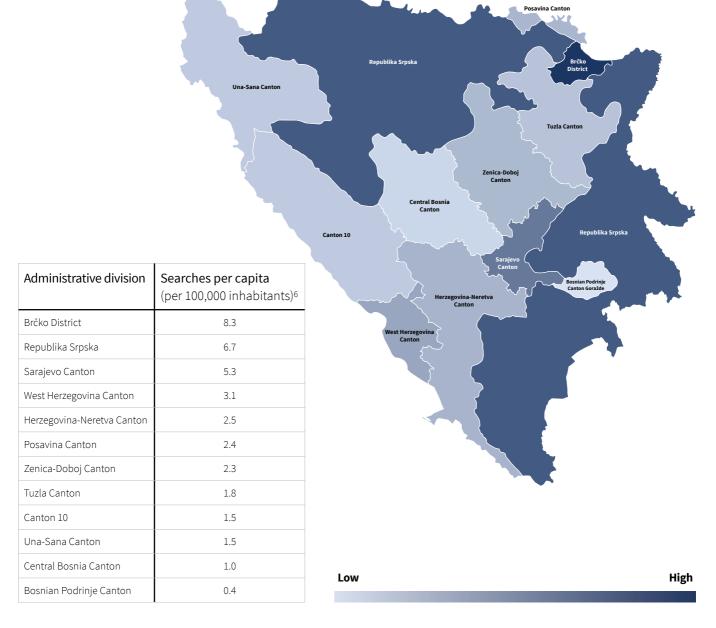
Breakdown by region

During the two-month period in which location targeting was deployed, the Republika Srpska division recorded the highest number of searches, comprising 55.3% of the total searches recorded across the country. Republika Srpska is home to President Milorad Dodik, a Serb nationalist who has advocated for the administrative division's secession[4]. Far-right extremism is known to be present in the region in the form of established groups and online forums which actively promote hate speech[5].

The heatmap below shows the number of searches per capita for each administrative division.

Administrative division	Searches per capita (per 100,000 inhabitants)[6]
Brčko District	8.3
Republika Srpska	6.7
Sarajevo Canton	5.3
West Herzegovina Canton	3.1
Herzegovina-Neretva Canton	2.5
Posavina Canton	2.4
Zenica-Doboj Canton	2.3
Tuzla Canton	1.8
Canton 10	1.5
Una-Sana Canton	1.5
Central Bosnia Canton	1.0
Bosnian Podrinje Canton	0.4

Low   High

[4] "Dodik's repeated calls for Republika Srpska secession raise alarm", Al Jazeera, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/18/dodiks-repeated-calls-for-republika-srpska-secession-raise-alarm/
[5] "Ultra-Right Groups Show Their Face in Bosnian Town", Balkan Insight, 2020, https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/12/ultra-right-groups-show-their-face-in-bosnian-town/
[6] Per capita data is calculated by dividing the area's total estimated searches by its total population, and multiplying this number by 100,000.

Recommendations for future research and programming

Our data indicates that searches for far-right extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina closely align with a subset of far-right memes, terminologies and narratives used globally, with a particular interest in searches specific to the region and promoting Islamophobic content. This shows that far-right extremist narratives based on ethnic divides are actively being sought out by online users in the country.

As discussed in this report, online activity in Bosnia and Herzegovina recorded during our data-gathering period coalesced around two significant themes - 'Serbia Strong' and 'Remove Kebab' - and was most active around the anniversaries of violent events from recent conflicts. This presents an opportunity to create and deploy tailored counter-campaigns during future anniversaries and commemorative events. These could target users searching for far-right/Islamophobic content through the creation of specific - and therefore especially compelling - counter narratives.

By working with local content creators in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we would ensure that these messages are relevant, appropriate and effective in disrupting the far-right extremist online space.

Our findings also show that at-risk users are actively engaging with narratives linked to regional conflict using Google Search. However, a deeper dive into activity on social media platforms and image boards, such as Facebook, 8chan and Stormfront, would generate valuable insights into the levels of engagement and activity among users vulnerable to far-right extremist narratives. These insights could be used to develop suitable interventions tailored to reach those most at-risk of further radicalisation through their engagement with violent extremist material, and offer them a safe, credible and peaceful alternative.