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RESEARCH NOTE



Risk of Romani Radicalization in the Balkans: Freeing the Shackles of a Marginalized Identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the susceptibility of the Romani minority in the Balkans to radicalization, focusing on the Salafi community in a Serbian city. It provides insights into the experiences of a marginalized group that is often overlooked in research on radicalization. Despite the community's commitment to nonviolence, stigmatization and exclusion incentivize individuals to seek alternative forms of belonging. However, adopting Salafism at the cost of abandoning their culture can increase their vulnerability to radicalization. We present a preliminary model of the marginalized identity transformation to illustrate this identity shift. The article uses ethnography and narrative analysis to investigate the phenomenon.

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Even though the topic of Romani Muslim communities in the Balkans has been extensively discussed,¹ very few studies examine the vulnerability of these communities to radicalization tendencies.² Radicalization among the Romani poses a risk in specific marginalized neighborhoods, particularly in Serbia where the religious ideology of pro-Wahhabi Salafism is spread by external actors like Saudi Arabia.³ The members of one such community have become the focus of our research to demonstrate how the need to escape the identity stigma disrupts their sense of belonging to Romani culture. Specifically, we examine how their lived experience as peoples on the fringe has been shaped by their ordeal as the Kosovo War refugees, and how their emotional and physical trauma, along with ceaseless stigmatization, prompt them to embrace the ideology of Salafism as a coping mechanism. The unbearable strain of their stigmatizing identity thus compels them to gradually abandon adherence to their innate cultural code of *romanipen*, which serves as a protective factor against radicalization.⁴ Instead, they assume a new identity within the confines of in-betweenness, which may consequently increase their vulnerability to radicalization into violent extremism or terrorism.

Our study aims to investigate two central concepts: identity and belonging, which are inherently intertwined. We explore the unstable identity of our interlocutors⁵ to discern the unique dynamics of their sense of belonging, which undergoes changes across three distinct modes. These changes may contribute to their vulnerability to radicalization. Specifically, our goal is to address the limited available evidence regarding potential risk factors associated with offering marginalized communities a reconstructed

social identity through community-based support, group belonging, and moral guidance, as observed among the Salafi community.

Previous studies have suggested that such factors may contribute to the radicalization of marginalized communities in the region.⁶ This is especially pertinent due to the failure of public institutions in many post-Yugoslav states to address structural discrimination against the Romani minority and the citizenship status of the numerous internally displaced Romani individuals, hindering their access to public services.⁷

Given the limited scientific evidence available, we aim to deepen our understanding of the dynamics between shifts in belonging, the reconstruction of identity, and the ongoing debate regarding the disputed role of perceived relative deprivation resulting from inequality as one of the root causes of radicalization.⁸ By contributing to this research gap, we hope to shed light on the complex interplay of social, political, and psychological factors that shape the vulnerability of marginalized communities to extremist movements.

The ambition of this paper is not to establish a causal explanation seeking to determine *why* some community members may resort to religiously inspired extremism. Such aspirations would suffer from a specificity problem as it would not be able to establish why only a handful of individuals radicalized⁹ as other factors, such as personal or religious social networks,¹⁰ are likely at play in this case.¹¹ Rather, the main objective is to document *how*, through seemingly mundane accounts, identity and belonging transformation happens for broader communities at risk of radicalization. We acknowledge the limitations inherent in the methodology and sample of this qualitative project, which does not aspire to make generalizations or identify causative factors. However, as the first study built on in-depth interviews from within a Salafi Romani neighborhood it aims to provide deeper understanding of identity and belonging reconstruction and also add to discussions on the contested role and mechanisms of ideology in radicalization.¹² Additionally, the paper seeks to contribute to the field of terrorism studies by introducing concepts and approaches from migration studies to demonstrate what belonging entails.

Theoretical Context

The theoretical section introduces all facets of the significant contextual factors that shape the empirical case of the Salafi Romani communities in Serbia. Therefore, the paper delves into the *how* and *why* of radicalization, including the trajectory of resocialization and the role of various radicalization drivers and risk factors. It specifically focuses on marginalized communities and underscores the significance of protective factors. Furthermore, the role of belonging and identity in the process of radicalization is explored, highlighting how the loss of belonging to a community can make individuals vulnerable to joining extremist groups. The theoretical exposé is further complemented with the explication of ideology as a mediating factor in the process of radicalization that frames the introduction into relevant tenets of the ideology of Salafism so that its role as a cure to remedy the Romani's identity can be understood.

The “How” and “Why” of Radicalization

There are two fundamental questions addressed in radicalization studies – *how* people become violent extremists and *why* they do it. Over more than two decades of extensive academic research into the *how*, the scholarship tends to agree that rather than looking for a linear progression from radical thoughts to extremist or terrorist action, it is more accurate to think of radicalization in terms of trajectories or pathways.¹³ Furthermore, radicalization is often perceived as a resocialization process, where adopting extremist beliefs and behaviors is akin to being reborn.¹⁴ This suggests that individuals undergoing radicalization experience a shift in their troubled identity towards a more desirable one. Orsini¹⁵ contends that the process of resocialization has four distinct stages: disintegration of social identity, reconstruction of social identity, integration in a revolutionary sect, and finally alienation from the surrounding world.

Despite lack of consensus on the conceptual definition and the progression from antisystem ideas to political violence, researchers largely concur in the *why*, i.e. the reasons for radicalization.¹⁶ The causes are often seen as rooted in grievances, ideology, networks, enabling environment and support structures¹⁷ or, similarly, reflect universal human need for significance and mattering, demand for validation by one’s own network, and the presence of value-bestowing narratives.¹⁸ This implies that most scholarship on radicalization drivers acknowledges the crucial role of one’s experience of various types of discrimination (grievances), position in a social structure (networks), and discursive practices through which values are communicated as narratives.

On a more microscopic examination, grievances work as mechanisms of radicalization in response to perceived inequality and injustice.¹⁹ Due to grievances, marginalized individuals and groups are particularly prone to the disintegration of their identity. This typically happens in response to trauma and personal crises that initiate cognitive opening to cope with emotional suffering²⁰ experienced as a result of prolonged exposure to anxiety that consequently increases the risk of radicalization.²¹ As our paper attempts to understand the risk of radicalization among a marginalized community exposed to socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, and political grievances,²² it must be mentioned that the latest research into putative risks and protective factors concludes that even though religious group identity and fundamentalism operate as pertinent risk factors, it is rather the level of integration and cohesion of communities that work for or against radicalization.²³ The findings indicate that difficulties in forming strong social connections within a community, coupled with existential unease²⁴ stemming from issues of identity, significantly heighten the risk of radicalization.

Belonging and Identity in the Process of Radicalization

Identity defined by qualities that distinguish groups or individuals²⁵ and a closely linked sense of belonging pertain to both how and why radicalization happens.²⁶ Scholars applying the identity lens to understanding radicalization often find identity crises to serve as a major factor in the process.²⁷ When environmental conditions like prejudice, discrimination or intergroup conflict render our identity troubled,²⁸ the uncertainty surrounding it needs to be addressed in behavioral, cognitive, and affective

aspects of the self.²⁹ The process of identity recreation then unfolds through social categorization of self and others which enables simplification of the social reality while sharpening intragroup differences.³⁰ Berger³¹ points out that collectivities based on nation, race or religion tend to be particularly conceptually unstable and thus might be more prone to extremist positions when the legitimacy of their in-group identity is challenged.

Groups become especially potent in reducing negative identity-related feelings.³² People suffering from identity issues are motivated to “identify with social groups, particularly groups that provide a distinctive and clearly defined identity and associated normative beliefs and behavioral prescriptions”,³³ such as extremist groups as ideologically strongly committed entities. However, the process of self-categorization related to an individual’s fusion with a group may result in depersonalization, with the in-group prototype assuming a pivotal role in one’s identity.³⁴

Belonging to a group is an inherent part of social identity. It plays a role in self-categorization, but also in the perception of one’s status as a member of a specific group.³⁵ It is argued that belonging to a stigmatized social category prompts individuals to reject their identity³⁶ as was reported with (non-)radicalized Muslim youth in Europe.³⁷ Similar to these communities vulnerable to radicalization, the Romani minority in Europe also belongs to a “*suspect* social category”,³⁸ and therefore we would expect that the Romani people are prone to joining extremist groups. On the contrary, the resilience of the Romani community against radicalization in Central Europe builds on specific social identity attributes that are strongly linked with the processes of belonging.³⁹ These attributes include a strong attachment to family, avoidance of conflicts, and reliance on in-group members, which minimizes potential intergroup conflict and simultaneously reduces the risk of radicalization by extremist groups. These aspects of belonging thus serve as protective factors against radicalization under conditions of social vulnerability.

The empirical analysis in this paper utilizes the concept of belonging as discussed in the field of migration studies that applies a holistic approach based on Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). Krzyzanowski and Wodak⁴⁰ employ the concept of modes of belonging to describe the various ways in which individuals identify with and feel connected to certain social categories, such as ethnicity, race, gender, or religion. In particular, they examine the emotional attachments that individuals form to these categories, which are also referred to as social locations by Yuval-Davis.⁴¹ Through her work, Wodak⁴² explores how individuals negotiate their own identities in relation to these categories. Subsequently, Ahmed⁴³ highlights the role of emotions in the study of belonging as a factor that determines one’s belonging to a certain social category.

Brubaker and Cooper⁴⁴ discuss how social boundaries are constructed and how they affect individuals’ sense of belonging. Building on previous works,⁴⁵ Krzyzanowski and Wodak⁴⁶ (Krzyzanowski 2010; Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2008) distinguish among three modes of belonging – attachments, belonging, and membership. While attachments are more-or-less loose emotional ties with a social category, belonging translates into stronger ties and feelings of membership in a certain community defined by social categories. Lastly, membership is understood as the recognition of one’s belonging by the members of the same community.⁴⁷ Being socially constructed, modes of belonging do not function as a stable condition but can only be understood as processual.⁴⁸

Individuals in this respect must continuously maintain their belonging through social practices (language, traditions, symbols) otherwise it can weaken. Contrary to that, as the analysis section shows, in situations when their belonging is not sustainable, individuals also willingly shift their belonging as a coping mechanism.

As a consequence, shifts in identity can give rise to a state of *in-betweenness*⁴⁹ characterized by individuals oscillating between two or more modes of belonging. In this condition, individuals may question their sense of belonging and grapple with feelings of entrapment and uncertainty. Our empirical analysis demonstrates that this state of belonging could play a crucial role in the vulnerability of communities towards radicalization.

Our empirical analysis utilizes the theoretical construct of mental models proposed by socio-cognitive approaches in CDS.⁵⁰ Mental models can be defined as a way an individual perceives and understands everyday events which are typically influenced by past experiences.⁵¹ They act as cognitive maps that provide frameworks for how people comprehend and interpret these events in their lives. Consequently, through these models, researchers can grasp the subjective interpretations of particular situations. This study focuses on exploring the mental models of interlocutors concerning their sense of belonging to different groups (ethnic, religious, family) and aims to discern any potential changes occurring in this domain. Mental models, therefore, serve as a foundational element for uncovering modes of belonging.

The Ideology of Salafism as Identity Cure

The role of ideology and its contribution to radicalization is the subject of ongoing debates in the field where a number of scholars have acknowledged the importance of ideology in becoming a (violent) extremist. It can serve as a means to restore one's sense of significance loss,⁵² or as a tool for addressing identity-induced uncertainty through unambiguous and inclusive belief systems.⁵³ While there are some who do not consider ideology to be a decisive factor for radicalization,⁵⁴ others emphasize that the influence of religious or secular belief systems may be significant,⁵⁵ but that its explanatory power should always be balanced⁵⁶ and contextualized to discern how ideology works in different environments.⁵⁷

Most members of the Romani community in the researched mahalla in northern Serbia profess the religious faith of Salafism. The ideology of Salafism has been widely debated in post-9/11 scholarship.⁵⁸ The attempt to proselytize the pro-Saudi Salafism in impoverished neighborhoods of the Western Balkans has been well documented too.⁵⁹ The more purist-oriented strands of the Salafi creed, promoted by Saudi Arabia scholars, tend to establish ghettoized Salafi communities in the region. These communities detach themselves from mainstream society and reconstruct their original local identities into the Salafi one defined by the universalist global ummah of true believers.⁶⁰

Since Quintan Wiktorowicz⁶¹ proposed his classification of Salafis dividing them into purists, politicians, and jihadis, scholarship dedicated to studying this broad movement has revised his categorization with the aim of clearly delineating religion from violent ideologies spread, for example by ISIS. The latest conceptualizations thus carefully separate Salafism as a “redemptive philosophy based around an idealized version of Islam that enriches both authenticity and purity”⁶² and Salafi-Jihadism as

a violent rejectionist movement.⁶³ Amghar⁶⁴ contends that Salafism and Jihadism should be treated separately and the relation of Salafism to violent radicalization needs to be questioned.

Even though we acknowledge recent academic contributions seeking to divorce Salafism and behavioral radicalization, we consider earlier works more relevant for studying our case of a vulnerable community primarily with respect to its function as a social fabric.⁶⁵ For marginalized communities specifically, Salafism primarily serves the role of alleviating their identity crisis that stems from cultural association with social groups that are deemed of an inferior status by the hegemonic society. The identity stigma is further amplified by prejudice and intolerance, intensifying the sense of disenfranchisement and perceived grievances.⁶⁶ Salafism then seems to offer a “simple fix” to the identity problem. However, this comes at the expense of renouncing one’s previously embraced culture as it is seen to be antagonistic to pure Islam.⁶⁷ The fact that Salafism is not considered a culture, but a “mere religion that would lose its purity and holistic dimension if embedded in a specific culture”,⁶⁸ compels those aspiring for inclusion in the Salafi community to abandon their previous allegiance to a specific culture and fully assimilate into the epistemic and deontic modes of existence based on the Salafist doctrine. The purpose deculturation seeks to accomplish is to eliminate the practice of folk customs and divorce Islam from any cultural context,⁶⁹ and thus to “transcend local space, traditions, and religious authority by connecting Muslims to an imagined community of true believers”.⁷⁰

Data and Methods

The discursive investigation of the phenomenon is based on empirical evidence obtained through ethnographic data collection methods relying on qualitative interviews, observation, and fieldnotes. For this study, 20 semi-structured interviews⁷¹ held mostly with members of a Serbian Salafi mahalla, a type of Romani district commonly found in the Western Balkans,⁷² were utilized. This district is located on the outskirts of a large city in northern Serbia and is predominantly inhabited by Romani Kosovo War refugees. We selected these interlocutors because reports have indicated that several individuals from these Romani Salafi communities in Serbia were recruited to join the Daesh-raised insurgency in Syria and Iraq,⁷³ making this group particularly vulnerable to radicalization.

The interviewed sample included individuals who identified, to varying degrees, as the Romani, as well as those who identified as Ashkali. Although Ashkali typically distinguish themselves from the Romani, they, along with Egyptians, are generally considered members of the RAE (Romani, Ashkali, Egyptian) ethnic group by broader society.⁷⁴ This self-designated ethnic distinction, however, is primarily a product of political expediency and the specific dynamics of the sociopolitical context.⁷⁵ Therefore, we categorize the Ashkali interlocutors as Romani in our paper, as this is the externally imposed category used by the majority society to perceive the community, regardless of individual preferences for self-identification. While we do not wish to replicate the power pattern of external identity attribution, we consider it relevant to the researched phenomenon, as the externally imposed identity category of a “gypsy”⁷⁶ contributes to the community’s gravitation towards Salafism and opens a window of opportunity for

jihadist recruiters to exploit their volatile identity. However, as the context of the study of identities and the related process of belonging is always crucial,⁷⁷ it is important to recognize the ethnic and religious identity of the interlocutors of the Romani community in order to acknowledge their self-identification needs.

The sample of the research participants was relatively homogeneous. Out of the 20 interlocutors, 18 individuals were males between 15 and 48 years of age. Apart from the Romani residents of the neighborhood, two key informants from Southern Serbia familiar with the context of Salafi districts in the country, and a local religious leader were interviewed to provide helpful contextual information on the community dynamics. Empirical evidence was further supported by an interview with a local security expert who has collaborated on the topic with both international organizations and security agencies. The interview sessions were mostly individual with the exception of two siblings from the studied mahalla and the two informants not belonging to the Salafi community, who were interviewed first separately and then in a joint session. Access to this particular group was gained through a gatekeeper who, being a musician and a local NGO leader, was in the position of a respected local authority.

The dataset we employ in this study is neither extensive nor limited in size, yet we consider it highly valuable. This is particularly significant as the Romani community, especially the Salafi Romani subgroup, is challenging for researchers to access. The social significance of this qualitative research is further emphasized by Campbell's⁷⁸ concept of "informed informants" from his renowned study, referring to respondents who can provide in-depth insights into the lived experiences of community members. Consequently, in qualitative research, attributes like "informedness," the ability to communicate effectively, and willingness to share information hold greater importance than the representativeness typically emphasized in quantitative or survey research.

Data analysis was conducted through an integrated method of analysis combining Critical Discourse Studies⁷⁹ and narrative analysis.⁸⁰ This paper employs CDS as it offers a suitable framework for revealing social inequalities, studying social change, and understanding how the everyday language of our interlocutors influences and communicates their social realities. The use of narrative analysis aids in presenting the findings through a processual explanation of shifts in belonging, illustrated *via* a narrative depiction of this phenomenon. From CDS we employed the tool of lexicalization (searching for words that convey a specific meaning) and discourse markers (explicit or implicit structures expressing attitudes and emotions). Narrative analysis then served to deconstruct the stories of our interlocutors.

During the initial phase of analysis, we thoroughly reviewed the transcripts multiple times and identified preliminary themes related to the sense of belonging of the interlocutors. The analysis at the micro-level of the excerpts⁸¹ primarily focused on identifying discourse structures, such as lexical choices and discourse markers. The interlocutor's lexical choices provide insights into their opinions on everyday experiences within their social environment, underlying emotional stances and their attitudes towards their belonging. Meanwhile, discourse markers in the form of expressions of hesitation and repetition clarify the speakers' intentions, cognitive states and emphasis on specific ideas.

Based on these discourse structures, we delved into the interlocutors' mental representations of their everyday experiences and identified the narratives that influenced

their modes of belonging. This allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in transitioning between these modes, guided by the patterns within the initially identified themes, for instance “fear,” “othering,” “ethnicity,” or “religion”.⁸² The findings are presented using a model illustrating shifts across these modes, offering insights into how members of the studied community undergo identity changes. Finally, we provided selected excerpts from the narratives to demonstrate these transformations empirically.

Setting the Context: Generational War Trauma Forming the Experiences of the Kosovo Romani

Most of the Romani and Ashkali interlocutors from the researched mahalla are direct survivors or come from the families of survivors of the 1998 Kosovo War. The context of this ethnic conflict creates an essential reference point for our analysis and adds a further socio-political dimension to portray the lived experiences of the researched group. Before the outbreak of the armed conflict in February 1998, the Kosovo province of Serbia had recorded the highest levels of the Romani population in the whole territory of former Yugoslavia, estimated to be about 150,000.⁸³ Even though the predicament of the Romani, Ashkali, and Egyptians during the Serbian-Albanian conflict remains silenced, the community is a group on which the war exerted a profoundly devastating impact.⁸⁴

During the war, the Romani faced widespread physical abuse, property destruction, forced evictions, as well as incidents of rape and murder. Despite the presence of the NATO-led international peacekeeping force KFOR, their efforts were inadequate in protecting the Romani population from these acts of revenge.⁸⁵ Already during the conflict, but especially in the aftermath of the NATO military intervention in spring 1999, scores of thousands of Kosovo Romanies fled the country in what is denoted by some as “the worst gypsy pogrom since 1945”.⁸⁶ Since the Romani were regarded as Serbian collaborators, they were targeted by Albanians in retaliation.⁸⁷ The appalling atrocities, also corroborated by the accounts of some of the interlocutors who experienced the traumatic events as children, consequently led to their exodus into Western European countries.⁸⁸ However, the majority of refugees flooded the ex-Yugoslav republics,⁸⁹ with some 26,000 internally displaced Romani amalgamating into the already populous Romani communities in Serbia and Montenegro.⁹⁰

After more than two decades, the plight of the Romani internally displaced persons has not been alleviated mainly as a result of two central issues: the experience of chronic and complex trauma and troubled citizenship status. From the human welfare perspective, on top of permanent encounters with racial oppression, widespread discrimination, and marginalization, the Kosovo Romani were exposed to war crimes that had a devastating traumatic effect on their mental well-being, and empirical evidence suggests that the community are still severely traumatized.⁹¹ Additionally, the Kosovo Romani who have been displaced to different regions of the former Yugoslavia are also affected by a precarious institutional void. In the post-Yugoslav space, the citizenship status of all Romani, particularly those who fled the Kosovo War, is insecure, worsening their situation. Sardelić highlights that the dire circumstances of the ethnic group are intensified by their belonging to the social category of semi-citizens.⁹² She

argues that the specific post-Yugoslav situation of those externally labelled as Romani is inherently determined by the underlying in-betweenness.

Furthermore, it is emphasized that these communities are characterized by a distinct sense of *forced inbetweenness*, unexpectedly resulting from the war conflicts and insufficient policy response to address the needs of the Romani communities across the region.⁹³ Due to the fact that the Romani are de facto semi-citizens without proper documentation, access to healthcare and social welfare services as well as other fundamental citizenship rights is severely restricted or completely denied.⁹⁴ Thus, in comparison with the community position in the Yugoslav era, the state of the Romani relative deprivation has become more profound in the post-Kosovo War period since the likelihood of obtaining stable employment is negligible for numerous Romani individuals, including children, who resort to waste collection as a means of subsistence.⁹⁵

Quest for Rebirth: Breaking Free from a Marginalized Identity

The crux of our analysis is predicated on the understanding of individuals' mental representation of their modes of belonging. From the initial analysis, we identified nine dominant themes that emerged from the discussions with the interlocutors. These themes offer valuable insights into the subjects frequently referenced by members of the studied communities in their everyday life experiences, such as *ethnicity, home, othering, everyday hard life, fear, wish of a good life, grievance, religion, and family*.

Our contention is founded on the notion that the social conditions of the community under study create a risk environment for radicalization due to a shift in their sense of belonging. This change is first initiated by daily experiences of stigmatization, marginalization, and othering. Furthermore, the cognitive maps of the residents of the Serbian mahalla reveal a degree of uncertainty in their affiliation with the Romani identity, which eventually transitions to more loose attachments characterized by emotional ties to their families, not an ethnically defined community. During this period of in-betweenness, individuals move towards a new form of belonging to a Salafi identity while maintaining basic connections to their former identity. Our data demonstrate that members of the neighborhood eventually disassociate themselves from their Romani ethnicity to such an extent that they complete the identity shift and devalue their affiliation with the Romani identity. These changes are visualized *via* a nonlinear five-stage model of marginalized identity transformation (Figure 1). In sum, the process of belonging shift is triggered by experiences of discrimination and dehumanization which consequently lead to belonging alienation. In this cognitive state, community members question their belonging to the Romani identity and start searching for a new one. At this point, external actors represented by Salafi preachers step in as providers of a new identity that requires transformation of one's previous belonging. As a consequence, a new Salafi identity is constructed and the previous one is substantially weakened, being characterized by mere attachments to the Romani ethnicity.

During the initial phase, the interlocutor's mental models vividly convey profound emotions of *discrimination* and *dehumanization*. The subsequent excerpt serves as an example of how the hardships of life within these communities exert significant pressure on individuals, compelling them to distance themselves from their Romani identity.



Figure 1. Nonlinear five-stage model of marginalized identity transformation.

I: When someone sees you and insults you, what do they say to you? What do they say?

Interlocutor 9: Well... “You dirty gypsies!”

I: How do you feel in such situations?

Interlocutor 9: I don’t like it. It’s not fair to me, I’m humiliated, you understand? I’m ashamed of it.

I: What do you do to overcome that shame?

Interlocutor 9: Well, to tell you the truth, I have to put up with it.

I: Do you talk back to them?

Interlocutor 9: I can’t talk back to them because there are some who can hit you with something, threaten you. And then I can’t go out tomorrow to earn money for the children. So I keep quiet. What can I do?

The narrative depicted here exemplifies the themes of *othering*, *fear*, or *everyday hard life*. It demonstrates how the systematic discrimination and social exclusion of Romani

communities lead to continuous psychological distress. This short extract contains emotional expressions that exemplify the frequent insults that individuals belonging to the Romani community experience. The use of discourse markers, such as “Well...” and “you understand?,” reflects the speaker’s hesitation and uncertainty, indicating strong negative emotional connections with the issue. The speaker’s emotional state is further illustrated by the use of lexical choices such as “not fair” and “humiliated.” Additionally, the power dynamics between the minority Romani population and the majority Serbian population are apparent in the interlocutor’s response. The phrase “I have to put up with it” implies resignation and the acceptance of abusive actions by the majority population. Despite expressing frustration and disapproval, the speaker is indirectly trapped in the power dynamics of belonging to the Romani community. Coping mechanisms based on non-action become internalized as a means of protecting oneself and one’s family from further conflict, while also being forced to tolerate abuse and humiliation. These mechanisms are similar to those utilized by Romani communities in Central Europe to avoid conflict.⁹⁶

Feeling of shame also indicates the interlocutor’s growing sense of *alienation* which makes them question their current identity. This was further confirmed by the testimonies of other interlocutors who identified themselves as “Muslim first”⁹⁷ or considered themselves “pure Muslim”⁹⁸ despite having Romani ethnicity. The interviews conducted not only revealed the verbal acts on the themes of *othering* discussed earlier but also provided insight into the degrading experiences encountered within the community. The discrimination and othering experienced by Romani individuals residing in the investigated neighborhood extend beyond psychological pressure. It manifests itself in the frequent need for them to relocate due to their ethnicity, highlighting the themes of *home* and *ethnicity*.

Interlocutor 11: Yes, yes, I’m from here, I was born here. We lived in a village-town nearby⁹⁹ as long as we could. Then we came here.

I: Why didn’t you stay?

Interlocutor 11: Discrimination, the children, this and that.

I: What was that? What kind of discrimination?

Interlocutor 11: Well, how do I explain? Insults, like “Gypsies”; the children go to school and no one will associate with them, “You are Gypsies, we are Serbs, you are dirty.” We had a house there, the late great-grandfather left it to us, and there were a lot of us in that house, so we kind of split up. Everyone went their own way, to make a living. My parents came here to live in this village, I lived there for a while, then I went to a city in Central Serbia for a while to live with my in-laws. Somehow it didn’t work out for me there either, so now I’m back here again, and now we’re trying to find a place of our own.

The account of the interlocutor presented in the excerpt reveals not only the pervasive discrimination against the Romani community in post-Yugoslav space but also underscores the deeper structural issues underlying this discrimination. The frequent need to move and the difficulty in finding a permanent place of residence intensifies the already unstable sense of belonging, reflecting themes of *home*, *family*, and *wish of a good life*, and highlighting the pervasive nature of the issue. The narrative reveals that owing to their Romani identity, individuals are frequently ostracized, exposing a theme of *grievances*, to such an

extent that moving to another place becomes the only viable option. In search of a place to settle, these individuals often adopt new belongings that enable them to escape the negative effects of their previous identity. This stage signifies the need to *search for a new belonging*. Similar to Interlocutor 9, the account reaffirms that members of these communities are compelled to endure humiliation at the hands of the majority population, who implicitly differentiate between “dirty” Romani people and the “pure” Serbs. The reference to “dirt” and “smell” in constructing the Romani identity as impure serves to strengthen the argument. The permanent and omnipresent association with the category of impurity serves as a catalyst for the resocialization process, as it triggers a strong desire among the interlocutors to be “reborn” and fully purified.

I: When they addressed you directly as “Gypsies,” how did you feel?

Interlocutor 11: Very bad.

I: What were the emotions, if you can say?

Interlocutor 11: It is very difficult when someone humiliates you, God gave him everything and I have nothing. And then he humiliates you even more, “You are a Gypsy.” Yes, I am a Gypsy, but I am honest before God. I don’t need anything, it’s enough for me what God gave me in order to survive, and you have problems and issues of your own. I don’t know how to describe it, it’s very awkward, you feel uncomfortable when he tells you “Hey Gypsy, ske-daddle,” or “You smell,” or something. Somehow, it’s very bad. You can’t describe it.

On the backdrop of the theme of *othering*, the narrative structure of the third excerpt highlights the Us vs Them dialectic present within the studied community, where the hegemonic Serbian society is the source of discrimination and marginalization towards the Romani people. The interlocutors’ use of emotionally-charged lexical choices such as “very bad,” “very difficult,” and “uncomfortable” indicates the deep emotional impact of othering on the community. Moreover, the conversation unveils a coping mechanism utilized by the Romani people in the region, revolving around the theme of *religion*. This mechanism involves turning towards religion, specifically the one professed in local Salafi districts, which offers them a sense of *new belonging*. The continuation of the conversation further illuminates this dynamic by focusing on the significance of faith in the life of the studied community:

I: What specifically in that faith helps you personally overcome being Roma? What makes you a man equal to others, and so on?

Interlocutor 11: Look, I’m young. My grandfather used to say to me, in fact it was my late great-grandfather, “When someone humiliates you, you thank him, and he will get what’s coming to him from God.” You have faith in God, you believe in your God, the only one. Now, someone might have two gods, we call him Allah, he says God, it’s one and the same, but you can’t explain that to some people. And then he [the great-grandfather] says “You just pray to God and ye shall receive, but he won’t.” And then when I pray to God, “God, make it alleviate my suffering, don’t make it harder for me,” somehow I feel easier. I’m actually relieved somehow, it gets easier. You can humiliate me all day long, his humiliating words will not enter my brain.

Specifically, the conveyed meaning through lexical choices such as “alleviate,” “relieved,” and “gets easier” highlights how Salafism functions as a coping mechanism against

humiliation from the majority population. This socio-cognitive mechanism forms a crucial aspect of our processual model. When asked about overcoming humiliation, the interlocutor refers to a saying from his great-grandfather. It is worth noting that the interlocutor comes from an Orthodox family that later converted to Salafism. This transformation is indicated by the use of the phrase “we call him Allah, he says God,” which signifies different references to the Orthodox and Muslim deities. Additionally, the quotation from the Bible, “You just pray to God and ye shall receive”,¹⁰⁰ further emphasizes this contrast. Salafism, therefore, serves as a refuge against othering. On a cognitive level, the mental model of these situations reveals that faith acts as a resilience and empowerment factor, as emphasized by the last sentence: “You can humiliate me all day long, his humiliating words will not enter my brain.”

Moreover, the phenomenon of modes of belonging undergoes a significant shift towards the Salafi identity, which in turn reveals a distinct association with the Romani ethnicity. Within the studied community, individuals often suppress their affiliation with the Romani identity and wholeheartedly embrace this newfound sense of belonging to Salafism. This process is vividly depicted through the following exchange:

I: When someone asks you who you are, do you first say...

Interlocutor 2: Muslim.

I: How does being Roma and Muslim work together for you?

Interlocutor 2: Roma and Muslim?

I: Yes.

Interlocutor 2: Well, I don't really know now.

I: That might be a tough question, I'm sorry.

Interlocutor 2: They call us Roma, you understand. But I have my faith, I am a Muslim.

I: Would you say that Islam is a religion and “Roma” is a culture? Or is “Roma” a family? What does being Roma mean to you?

Interlocutor 2: It means nothing to me. They just call us Roma, you understand.

Displayed above, the previous belonging to the Romani identity shifted to the Salafi one while the Romani becomes a mere *attachment* (a loose emotional tie). The interlocutor's life in the community is disclosed through several details in the narrative. The instant answer of the interlocutor identifying himself as a Muslim indicates the completion of the fourth stage in our model. The identity of the interlocutor shifted to the new mode of belonging. Subsequently, the phrase “They call us Roma” implies that the interlocutor does not self-identify as a member of the Romani community anymore, but rather he perceives this identity as being imposed on him by the majority community. In this context, being Roma is elevated to a level of attachments or emotional ties closely linked to family while preserving certain Roma customs. However, it does not necessarily entail experiencing a complete sense of belonging to the ethnicity. Additionally, the interlocutor's uncertainty, as expressed by “Well, I don't really know now,” highlights a sense of ambiguity or liminality that underscore in-betweenness in the sense of being trapped between modes of belonging.

Ultimately, the last line of the extract reveals that the interlocutor identifies solely with their Salafi identity while actively suppressing their Romani identity and reducing it to the level of *attachments*.

Discussion and Implications

The interpretive narrative analysis of empirical data demonstrated *how* belonging to a stigmatized identity is shifted due to the interlocutors' inability to endure their ethnicity. Even though we frame disrupted belonging as a radicalization risk factor, it can also help shed light on trajectories and pathways that may eventually lead to manifestations in terrorist or violent extremist acts. We showed belonging and identity shift within a resocialization process¹⁰¹ when association with a stigmatizing identity serves as a motivating catalyst addressing the need to be reborn and purified. The religion of Salafism with its emphasis on authenticity and purity¹⁰² redeems the community members from this identity trap as the Salafi communities in the Western Balkans are able to provide marginalized Romani communities not only with a sense of belonging, but also inclusion. This is something that public institutions in the post-Yugoslav space failed to accomplish¹⁰³ when the Romani refugees from the Kosovo War sought safe haven and institutional support. Instead, they found themselves trapped in the state of in-betweenness and semi-citizenship with limited access to public services which increases a sense of relative deprivation relative to the perceived majority society.

Life-long exposure of our interlocutors to identity-related anxiety, uncertainty and war trauma creates a cognitive opening¹⁰⁴ that motivates their identity disintegration. Abandoning Romani identity and accepting the Salafi one does not imply that the community members would necessarily radicalize. However, by enforcing highly normative beliefs and behavioral prescriptions¹⁰⁵ of Salafism, the neighborhood residents abandon their practices inherent in the Romani culture that serve as protective factors against radicalization. What then represents a risk factor is the fact that ghettoized communities detached from the mainstream society may signal to potential recruiters that these spaces are inhabited by individuals with identity issues. Radicalization into Jihadist extremism then happens for only a fraction of disenfranchised individuals who are lured into illegal spaces of *para-džemats*, parallel mosques, by extremist recruiters.¹⁰⁶ We maintain that this vulnerability to recruitment is conditioned by socio-political and historical contexts, in this particular case by imported Salafi-Wahhabi ideologies that are alien to the local Muslim ecosystem.¹⁰⁷

The nonlinear five-stage process of marginalized identity transformation presents how systematic othering increases identity uncertainty that creates a cognitive opening for identity alienation. In the state of in-betweenness individuals search for belonging to a more gratifying alternative identity. This anomic state of identity disintegration is then completed by adopting a new identity that is provided by external actors. The embrace of a new identity then shifts into an attachment based on maintenance of loose emotional ties to the previous identity. Despite being preliminary and not causally determined, our conceptual model can serve as a basis for future investigations into other empirical contexts where belonging shift happens as part of identity contestation. We also acknowledge that the model is non-linear, as identity transformation is a decision-making process influenced by humans within a social context where various factors may come into play

at any stage. These factors have the potential to influence the decision to adopt a new identity or return to the old one. This aspect could help policy makers design effective tools based on attractive pull factors for individuals and groups grappling with their marginalized identities. Further theoretical refinements of this interpretative framework can be made to better understand identity and belonging transformation in terms of their role in trajectories and pathways into (violent) extremism.¹⁰⁸

In broader terms, our study makes a contribution to the existing scholarship on the complex relationship between identity and violence. In its various conceptualizations, identity is considered a major factor in the process of radicalization.¹⁰⁹ Our research findings on the fluctuation between unstable belonging to various identities can enhance the ongoing discussion surrounding identity fusion, a leading theory in the study of identity and its connection to political violence. Our conclusions tally with this theory in that social groups offer specific qualities that individuals with troubled identities wish to have.¹¹⁰ However, it adds primarily to the existing literature about the impact of cultural identity on violent radicalization. The research findings affirm the link between individuals from minority backgrounds who feel disconnected from their cultural identity and the increased likelihood of adopting violent extremist beliefs and intentions.¹¹¹ Furthermore, direct policy implications can be drawn out of our study. First, emphasis on acceptance and recognition of diverse identities through policy-making efforts should seek to reduce the stigmatization of ethnic, sexual, religious or otherwise marginalized identities. Our empirical evidence shows that relative deprivation in identity terms matters and can be exploited by external actors who are ready to offer a remedy that aids in resolving the identity issues and restoring a sense of belonging. In different contexts, it can happen in different ways – be it the exploitation of long-term marginalization, identity anxiety and war trauma in the post-conflict settings of the Western Balkans or weaponization of ethnic minorities or otherwise marginalized groups, for example in Central and Eastern Europe as a part of foreign malign influence operations during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. There is recent evidence of a successful application of this approach to de-escalate violent conflict between the Romani and war refugees from Ukraine in Czechia.¹¹² Findings suggesting that a stigmatized ethnic identity under conditions of relative deprivation is a radicalization *risk* factor led Czech policymakers to adopt inclusive strategic communication¹¹³ and establish a system of local Romani ambassadors and councils¹¹⁴ designed to empower the community and prevent conflicts. Our conceptual framework can also be applied to investigating identity and belonging disruption of immigrant populations in relation to acts of political violence in their host societies. Additionally, our model can be used to study identity shifts related to, for example, far-right extremism. Research into radicalization in the military context indicates that a feeling of identity marginalization that accompanies the transition from active service to civilian life may operate as a risk factor that leads to this type of extremism among military personnel.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that a shift in an individual's sense of belonging, moving away from stigmatizing ethnicity towards a religious group, may act as a risk factor

for radicalization within Salafi Romani communities in the Western Balkans. Based on interviews, religion appears to serve as a coping mechanism to navigate persistent pressure and ethnic discrimination. This shift potentially undermines the resilience against radicalization typically observed in Romani communities elsewhere in Europe, making them more susceptible to recruitment by extremist organizations.

Despite the extensive research on the alternative sense of belonging offered by extremist and terrorist groups, this study represents the first examination of this phenomenon within the Romani community, which is the largest ethnic group in Europe. Our theoretical conceptualization of marginalized identity transformation aims to contribute to the under-researched topic of ethno-religious identity uncertainty in the process of Jihadist radicalization. Through the everyday accounts of our interlocutors, the study reveals how Salafism provides a remedy to alleviate the anxiety arising from a state of identity in-betweenness. Additionally, by applying the concepts of modes of belonging from migration studies, we contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the nature of belonging and how its absence may impact immigrant populations. We acknowledge the limitations associated with the sample of interviewed participants and the selected research design, which prioritizes deep interpretative understanding over generalizability.

Finally, we wish to emphasize the potential for future research to explore gender aspects of the case, which manifest in two distinct ways. Firstly, the dominance of male interlocutors who were willing to share their stories from the studied community may introduce a potential gender imbalance into the case. Secondly, due to space limitations, the paper could not delve into the role of women in the analysis, despite the data indicating that wives hold a distinct influence on their husbands' modes of belonging, with many adopting the Muslim identity of their wives. Further investigation into the gender dynamics can offer novel insights into how women may shape men's decisions potentially to join violent jihad.

Research Ethics Disclosure statement

As the research involved human participants, ethical considerations related to data collection and analysis were of utmost importance, with the ultimate goal of avoiding harm and protecting the research participants and their interests. The study received IRB approval from the Committee for Ethics in Research, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, confirming that this report meets all of the requirements concerning the involvement of human subjects. Given the community members' experiences of socio-political oppression and their distrust of formal institutional practices like signing written documents, informed consent was obtained orally and recorded during the interview process.

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76. We are fully aware that the exonym ‘gypsy’ is considered pejorative in most countries with Romani minorities and we are against its use. However, we decided to use it in this study when the lived experiences of the research participants are discussed or when it functionally supports our argument about externally imposed stigmatization.
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81. The excerpts consist of the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews with the interlocutors.
82. A more detailed overview of themes identified as a part of narrative analysis is provided in the findings section.
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84. See: Ranier Mattern, “Roma of Kosovo - Escape, Return, or Stay?” (Report, Social Inclusion and Cultural Identity of Roma Communities in South-Eastern Europe, Swisspeace, 2011), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep11110.10.pdf> (accessed 13 September 2023). Perič, and Demirovski, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. Schulze, *Kynmypa/Culture*.
85. See: Claude Cahn, “Justice for Kosovo,” *Roma Rights Quarterly* 3–4 (2005): 3–9. Schulze, *Kynmypa/Culture*.
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92. Sardelić, *Ethnopolitics*, 159. See also: Elizabeth F. Cohen, *Semi-Citizenship in Democratic Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
93. Sardelić, *Ethnopolitics*, 163.
94. See: Sardelić, *Ethnopolitics*. Schulze, *Культура/Culture*.
95. Schulze, *Культура/Culture*, 134.
96. Kocmanová, *Journal for Deradicalization*, 85–114.
97. Interlocutors 6, 7, 8, 15.
98. Interlocutor 4.
99. To ensure a satisfactory level of anonymization, generic names have been used in place of specific names for all locations referenced by the interlocutor.
100. The interlocutor refers to the verse from Matthew 21:22, see: King James Bible, *The Holy Bible: New Testament* (Albany: AGES Software, 1996), 56.
101. Orsini, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 90.
102. Maher, *Salafi-jihadism: The History of an Idea*, 7.
103. See: Sardelić, *Ethnopolitics*. Schulze, *Культура/Culture*.
104. See: Githens-Mazer and Lambert, *International Affairs*. Hogg, *Social Identity Theory*. Orsini, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Spalek, *Security Journal*. Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*.
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