



Hedayah  
countering violent extremism



1838  
УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БЕОГРАДУ  
ФИЛОЗОФСКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ



# **EFFECTIVENESS OF THE *BUILDING YOUTH RESILIENCE TO RADICALIZATION & VIOLENT EXTREMISM (BYRVE)* PROGRAM**

## **- RESULTS OF THE ENDLINE STUDY -**

Conducted within the project *“Youth for Change:  
Building the resilience of Serbian youth through  
youth engagement, leadership and development of  
cognitive and social-emotional skills”*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

One of the main strategies in countering radicalization and violent extremism is preventing the radicalization of young people, that are targeted as one of the most vulnerable groups and are more likely to engage in extremist groups (Silke, 2008). However, despite the social relevance of the topic in question, there is a lack of studies addressing and exploring drivers of radicalization and violent extremism among youth, especially in Serbia.

Aiming to provide data needed to inform evidence-based programs striving to prevent and reduce radicalization and violent extremism (RVE) and identify protective and risk factors of RVE among youth in Serbia, a comprehensive baseline study was conducted.

Building upon the results of the baseline study and the best practices from previous programs, an evidence-based psycho-educational workshop program for encountering radicalization and violent extremism – Building Youth Resilience To Radicalization & Violent Extremism (BYRVE) was developed. The BYRVE program consists of 10 modules, covering various relevant topics (i.e., identity, communication, discrimination, tolerance, cultural diversity, etc.).

In the present study, we assess the effectiveness of the program introduced using baseline – posttreatment methodology, by comparing intervention (i.e., group who took part in the psycho-educational workshop program) and control group (who did not receive any intervention). In addition, using the contextual and psychological risk factors identified in the baseline study, we report on the unified prediction model for radicalization and violent extremism in Serbian youth.

## METHODOLOGY

The baseline data were collected during September and November 2019. The baseline sample consisted of 288 high school students from Belgrade, Sjenica, and Novi Pazar. They completed a comprehensive battery of psychological instruments including tools for the assessment of proneness to radicalization and violent extremism conceptualized as three-dimensional Militant-Extremist Mindset (Pro-violence – acceptance, justification, and advocacy of the use of violence; Vile world – belief that there is something importantly wrong with the world we live in, and that the present-day world is vile and miserable, and Divine power – beliefs in divine power such as heaven and God, role of martyrdom), various psychological tools examining interethnic perception and interaction, as well as tools capturing potential risk factors for radicalization and violent extremism that were grouped in two broad clusters: 1) contextual risk factors (financial and socio-emotional deprivation and exposure to violence, and hostile school environment), and 2) psychological risk factors (self-concept and esteem-related factors, ideology-related factors, and interaction-related psychological factors).

After the baseline assessment, 166 participants (58%) were randomly assigned to experimental, and 122 (42%) to the control group. From October 2019 to March 2020, the experimental group completed previously described BYRVE, while the control group did not participate in any additional activity between the two assessments.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, endline data was gathered online in the period of May and June 2020. In this time period participants completed the same psychological tools as before to be compared with the baseline results. In total, 251 participants filled out endline questionnaires. However, comparisons between baseline and endline scores could be made for a subsample of 111 participants (67 in the experimental, 44 in the control group) who left valid participant codes in the second assessment, thus enabling us to link their data with baseline results.

In total, the relative response-rate in both the experimental (36%) and the control group (38%) was similar for the Belgrade region. However, for the Sandžak region, a great disproportion was found in the relative response rates between the experimental (45%) and control group (26%). Since disproportion of this size can lead to very unreliable conclusions within the Sandžak region, in all between-groups comparisons presented within this report were examined on a whole sample of participants. In some analyses where global differences were detected on trend-level potential effects were examined within the Belgrade region only.

## RESULTS

We developed and tested a unified model of prediction of radicalization and extremism. The results have shown that within contextual risk factors family dysfunction, as well as a hostile school environment, are prominent predictors of different aspects of radicalization and violent extremism. Within the second, a very heterogeneous cluster of risk factors labelled psychological risk factors Right-wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation accompanied by an interaction-related psychological factor of Loneliness proved to be the most prominent psychological predictors of radicalization and extremism are ideology-related factors.

Obtained results demonstrated that adolescents who are exposed to harsh school environment tend to be lonelier and more prone to social dominance orientation, are more likely to embrace the use of violence, while those that were growing up in dysfunctional families and who are prone to social dominance are more likely to see the world as vile and miserable. On the other hand, those who embrace authoritarianism, but reject social dominance are prone to rely on divine power.

Between-groups comparisons (experimental vs. control group scores) detected a significant decrease in the key factor of Militant Extremist Mindset - Pro-violence within the sample of Belgrade high school students. On the other hand, no significant differences between groups for Vile World and Divine Power were found, probably due to the fact that these two are predominantly influenced by one's early socialization and experiences and thus not likely to be changed by a short-term psychoeducational intervention. In addition, it should be noted that the Divine power is not considered as a predictor of extremist beliefs and actions per se, but rather as an amplifier of aggressive behavior when high Pro-violence tendencies are present. Among psychological predictors of the Militant Extremist Mindset, the only difference was found for Right-Wing Authoritarianism, namely, psychoeducational intervention decreased these attitudes in the experimental in comparison to the control group.

Regarding measures of interethnic perception and interaction, a trend-level increase in inter-group contacts with the Bosniak and Croat group in the school context and an increase in the frequency of contact in free time with the Croat group was identified within Belgrade high school students. In addition, the increase in accepting Bosniaks and Croats as neighbors was detected in the experimental group, while a trend-level increase in acceptance of Albanians as neighbors was found in the Belgrade region. Finally, a trend-level increase in accepting members of different ethnic groups as romantic partners, specifically Bosniaks and Albanians was found in the Belgrade region.

The lack of changes in some of the psychological measures assessed in this study could be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the fact that some of the potential predictors of radicalization and violent predictors are deeply rooted in one's personality and their change requires much more time and a more individual-oriented approach. Secondly, the scores on some of the questionnaires and measures were considerably high (e.g. Egalitarianism) at the base-line assessment so potential changes in those measures could not be detected since no space for improvement was actually present.



Thirdly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and measures introduced (isolation, social distancing, restriction of movement and reduction in social contacts, etc.) just before and during the conduction of endline study limited potential contact with people in general and people of different ethnicities in particular which could possibly lead to practicing of newly adopted attitudes and their strengthening and thus interfered with potential effects of the psychoeducational workshop program.

Finally, based on the study results, recommendations on adjustment and improvement of BYRVE program are suggested, including taking more time for specific topics due to their complexity and relevance, as well as extending the duration of workshops.

# INTRODUCTION

Processes of radicalization that leads to violent extremism have been under growing research interest during the last few decades. OSCE (2019) defines radicalization that leads to violent extremism as a “dynamic process whereby an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as a possible, even legitimate, course of action”.

One of the main strategies in countering radicalization and violent extremism is preventing the radicalization of young people, that are targeted as one of the most vulnerable groups and are more likely to engage in extremist groups (Silke, 2008). Some of the most emphasized individual drivers of radicalization are threatened identity and self-uncertainty (Ellis & Abdi, 2017; Hogg, 2014). The fact that adolescents are in the process of identity-forming which often entails crises makes them more vulnerable and prone to seek stable identity and self-purpose in the extremist groups. Besides identity crises, there are other factors associated with radicalization and engagement in violence, especially among youth, such as social identification, status-seeking, and revenge-seeking (Dandurand, 2015). Also, there are various contextual factors of RVE such as global and regional politics, intergroup conflicts, group inequalities, poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization, etc. (Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Petrović & Stakić, 2018; CeSID, 2016).

In the context of past events in this region and civil war in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, increased violent radicalization and strengthening of right-wing movements in Serbia in the last decade of the 20th century does not come as a surprise. Although there were democratic transitions in Serbia at the beginning of 2000, some authors have argued that right-wing movements continued to grow (Petrović & Stakić, 2018).

Despite the social relevance of the topic in question, there is a lack of studies that assessed and explored drivers of radicalization and violent extremism among youth.

Aiming to provide data needed to inform evidence-based programs striving to prevent and reduce radicalization and violent extremism (RVE), to assess the potential for RVE and to identify related protective and risk factors of RVE among youth in Serbia, a comprehensive baseline study<sup>1</sup> was conducted during October and November 2019, as part of the project “Youth for Change: Building the resilience of Serbian youth through youth engagement, leadership, and development of cognitive and social-emotional skills”.

The baseline study<sup>1</sup> identified that youth in Serbia is not likely to accept, justify, and advocate for the use of violence, but they have a relatively strong perception of the world as a vile and miserable place. Results indicated that those who come from dysfunctional families and were exposed to hostile school environment exhibit more pronounced views on the world as vile and miserable, indicating the importance of contextual factors in shaping this world view. Those supportive of intergroup hierarchies and innate inequalities were also more prone to see the world as dangerous. Psychological factors were the only ones contributing to pro-violent tendencies among youth in Serbia. Acceptance, justification, and advocacy for the use of violence thus seem to be related to attitudes which support favoring certain groups at the expense of other groups, and group inequality. Also, young people who reported feeling more socially isolated and lonely were more likely to endorse violent solutions in intergroup relations.

<sup>1</sup> Comprehensive baseline study report can be found here [https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PIN\\_Youth-for-change-Building-the-resilience-of-Serbian-youth-through-engagement-leadership-and-development-of-cognitive-and-social-emotional-skills\\_Baseline-study-report\\_2019.pdf](https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PIN_Youth-for-change-Building-the-resilience-of-Serbian-youth-through-engagement-leadership-and-development-of-cognitive-and-social-emotional-skills_Baseline-study-report_2019.pdf)

# BYRVE PROGRAM

As there is a growing interest in the phenomena of radicalization that leads to violent extremism, there is also growing interest in countering it, particularly through educational programs. Within the various programs aiming at prevention and suppression of radicalization and violent extremism, different focuses can be identified: 1) those that are directly focused on reducing radicalization and violent extremism in communities that are facing extremist and terrorist acts at the moment (Community resilience to violent extremism in Kenya, 2016; The Kenya transition initiative program, 2014; The Garissa youth program, 2008; Somalia Youth livelihoods program, 2011); 2) programs focused on understanding processes of the radicalization (SAFIRE, 2013); 3) those whose focus is on education programs, teaching methods aiming to counter and prevent radicalization and violent extremism (Teaching approaches that help to build resilience to extremism among young people, 2011; TERRA, 2013; RAN, 2019). One of the programs whose focus is on primary prevention of radicalization by identifying risk factors, rather than focusing on suppression of terrorism and extreme acts as final products of radicalization, is TERRA (Terrorism and Radicalization) composed by European Network Based Prevention and Learning Program. The educational part of the program consists of workshops that cover topics such as personal and social identity, social roles, assertive communication, conflict resolution, empathy, critical thinking, and social change (Sklad & Park, 2016). The aim of the program is to build resilience to radicalization and violent extremism by empowering youth to develop protective skills for radical and violent acting and behavior.

## **BUILDING YOUTH RESILIENCE TO RADICALIZATION & VIOLENT EXTREMISM (BYRVE) PROGRAM**

Aiming to counter and prevent radicalization and violent extremism among youth in Serbia, psychoeducational workshop program<sup>2</sup> *Building Youth Resilience To Radicalization & Violent Extremism (BYRVE)* was developed by the team of experts, within the project *Youth for Change: Building the resilience of Serbian youth through engagement, leadership, and development of their cognitive and social-emotional skills*. The program relies on best practices gained from previously implemented programs addressing radicalization and violent extremism, but it was adjusted in accordance with baseline study results, as well as specific local contextual factors relevant for the regions of interest where the program will be applied. The program contains 10 modules, which are covered by 10 psychoeducational workshops.

- Module I - *Identity*
- Module II - *Strengthening self-confidence and creating positive self-image*
- Module III - *Assertive communication*
- Module IV - *Constructive problem solving*
- Module V - *Perspective taking and conflict resolution*
- Module VI - *Empathy and acceptance*
- Module VII - *Stereotypes and prejudice*
- Module VIII - *Discrimination*
- Module IX - *Cultural similarities and differences and cultural awareness*
- Module X - *Culture and identity*

<sup>2</sup> Handbook for psychoeducation workshop program [https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PIN\\_Youth-for-change-Building-the-resilience-of-Serbian-youth-through-engagement-leadership-and-development-of-cognitive-and-social-emotional-skills\\_Psychoeducational-workshop-program\\_2019.pdf](https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PIN_Youth-for-change-Building-the-resilience-of-Serbian-youth-through-engagement-leadership-and-development-of-cognitive-and-social-emotional-skills_Psychoeducational-workshop-program_2019.pdf)

The BYRVE program was conducted from October 2019 to March 2020. Workshops were delivered twice per month, each one lasted 45 minutes and was delivered during the school time, by psychologists (the experts for delivering the psychoeducational workshop program).

The participants were 251 students from targeted classes in IX gymnasium in Belgrade (3 classes), Technical school “Drvo art” in Belgrade (3 classes), Economic school in Novi Pazar (2 classes), Technical-agricultural school Sjenica (2 classes).

This report includes the results of a study aiming to test the effectiveness of the BYRVE program. In the following sections, methodology, main results, program evaluation and recommendations are presented and discussed.



# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The baseline data was collected during September and November 2019. The baseline sample consisted of 288 students attending high schools and technical schools in Belgrade, Sjenica, and Novi Pazar. High-school students were recruited in coordination with the school psychologists and approached in predefined time during school hours. All participants and their parents or legal guardians were informed about the objective of the study and were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. All participants who took part in the study had the informed consent signed by them, their parents, or the legal guardian. All participants completed a set of questionnaires during group sessions on school premises. In line with recommended practices, we back-translated the questionnaires that were not previously available in Serbian. Data collection was conducted by trained psychologists, and after filling the questionnaires all participants were debriefed. All personal information was kept confidential. In order to remain anonymous, students were asked to leave only their unique code (generated by following simple steps in constructing their unique code). These codes enabled us to link participants' entries from the baseline with the ones in the endline study. After the baseline assessment, participants were randomly assigned to experimental (166, 58%) or to the control group (122, 42%). In the period of October 2019 to March 2020, the experimental group completed previously described BYRVE, while the control group did not participate in any additional activity between the two assessments.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, endline data was gathered online in the period of May and June 2020. Participants completed the same psychological instruments as before in order to be compared with the baseline results. Out of 251 filled out endline questionnaires, in total, 111 students left valid participant codes that enabled us to link their data with baseline results.

All procedures adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki standards, and the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Psychology, University of Belgrade, Serbia (Protocol #2019-037).

**Data analysis strategy.** In this research report, we provide descriptive measures (frequencies and averages) separately for the experimental and control group. In all experimental-control group comparisons, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used, which enables testing the differences between groups by statistically controlling for baseline results. This way any potential differences between the two groups can be attributed to the program delivered to the experimental group. As a statistical threshold, the alpha level of .05 was used, while the alpha level of .10 was interpreted as a trend-level difference. To test the unified model of prediction of radicalization and extremism Path analysis was performed. The following indicators of model fit were used for its evaluation: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (TLI), Tucker-Lewis Fit Index (TLI), Chi-square test (criteria for excellent fit –  $RMSEA \leq 0.06$ ,  $CFI \geq 0.95$ ,  $TLI \geq 0.95$ , non-significant Chi-Square).

# SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHICS CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

The sample consisted of 111 high-school students between 15 and 18 years of age. Most of the students were between 16 and 17 years of age (88%) at the time of assessment. The experimental group consisted of 67 participants, while the control group consisted of 44 participants. The participants were recruited from four high schools in Serbia: IX gymnasium and technical school “Drvo Art” from Belgrade region, Economic-Trading school in Novi Pazar, and Technical-agricultural high school in Sjenica from Sandžak region.

The gender and regional structure of the sample are depicted in Figures 1 and 2, while the ethnic and religious structures of the sample are presented in Figures 3 and 4.

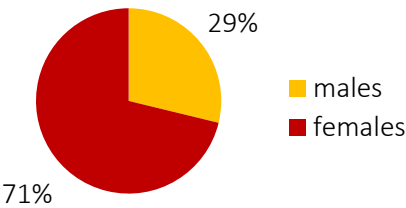


Figure 1. Gender structure of the sample

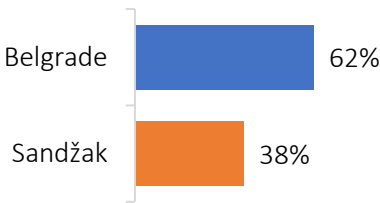


Figure 2. The regional structure of the sample

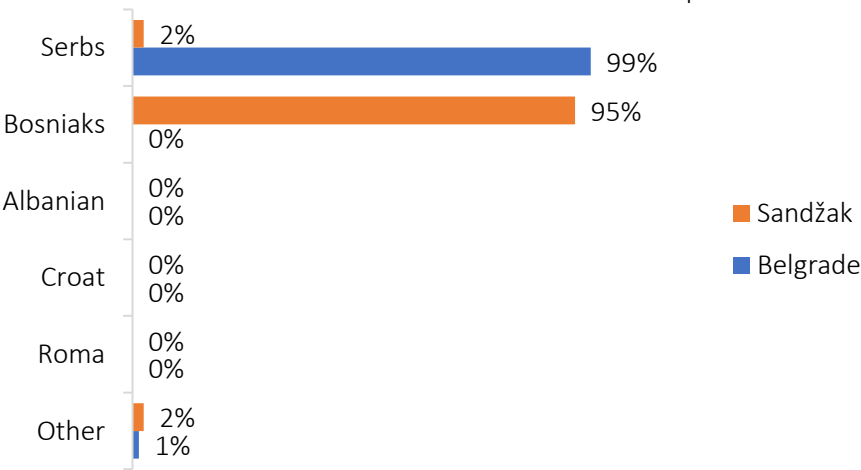


Figure 3. Ethnic structure of the sample

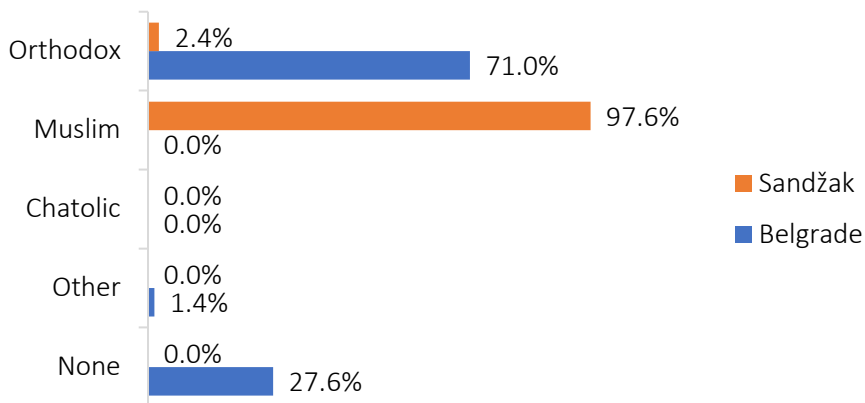


Figure 4. Religious structure of the sample

In addition, a one-item measure was used for self-reported religiosity (*“How religious are you?”*), accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – not religious at all, to 5 – very much religious. The average self-reported religiosity for Belgrade and Sanžak regions is given in Figure 5. As can be seen, participants from the Sandžak region reported being more religious than participants from the Belgrade region.

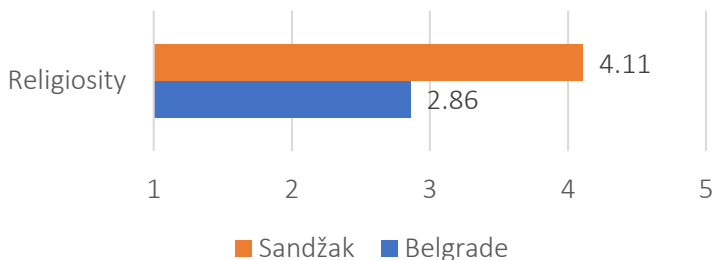
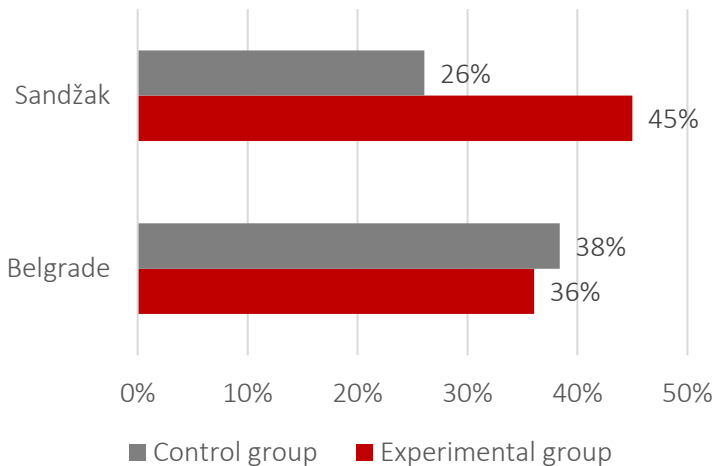


Figure 5. Self-reported level of religiosity

Overall participants' relative response-rate was low in general. In other words, out of 288 participants who took part in the baseline study, only 38.54% of them could be linked to their baseline entry due to invalid participant codes, provided in the second assessment. This happened due to complexity of instruction for making of unique codes which was introduced in order to ensure complete participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

For the Belgrade region, the relative response-rate in both the experimental and control group was similar (Figure 6). However, for the Sandžak region, a great disproportion was found in the relative response rates between the experimental and control group. Bearing in mind that the disproportion of this size can lead to very unreliable conclusions within the Sandžak region, in all further analyses any potential differences between experimental and control groups were examined on a whole sample of participants. In some analyses where global differences were detected on trend-level potential effects were examined within the Belgrade region only.



*Figure 6. Relative response-rate by regions and experimental groups*

# UNIFIED PREDICTION MODEL FOR RADICALIZATION & EXTREMISM

Within the baseline study, two main clusters of risk factors for radicalization and extremism were explored in depth. The first group of risk factors was labeled as contextual risk factors. The results of the baseline study have shown that within this group of factors, family dysfunction as well as hostile school environment are prominent predictors of different aspects of radicalization and violent extremism.

The second, very heterogeneous cluster of risk factors examined in the baseline study labeled psychological risk factors included the variety of psychological predictors, namely, self-concept and esteem-related factors (such as Self-esteem and Self-transcendence), ideology-related factors (Right-wing Authoritarianism (RWA), Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), Egalitarianism, and level of Religiosity), as well as interaction-related psychological factors (such as Intercultural sensitivity and feelings of social isolation and loneliness). The results of the baseline study have shown that the most prominent psychological predictors of radicalization and extremism are ideology-related factors – Right-wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation accompanied by an interaction-related psychological factor of Loneliness.

Broad contextual factors can, at least in part, be considered as precursors of psychological factors that could predispose someone for radicalization and violent extremism. Additionally, in order to gain insight into how these factors lead to violent behaviors and extremist beliefs, it is important to account for their interplay.

Therefore, we propose the unified model of contextual and psychological risk factors which summarizes and accounts for empirical relationships obtained between these clusters of variables. This model is presented in Figure 7. The model has two layers of predictors. The first, contextual layer consists of past (family dysfunction) and current (hostile school environment) adverse contextual effects. The second, psychological layer, consists of ideological factors of Right-wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation, as well as Loneliness as a marker of current social deprivation. Finally, three aspects of the Militant-Extremist Mindset (MEM) are positioned on the third layer of the model as output variables.



For the contextual factors, both direct and indirect effects on MEM were assumed, while for psychological factors only direct effects were assumed. In other words, it's hypothesized that the degree of presence of adverse contextual factors can directly lead to an increase in radicalization and extremism but also indirectly through affecting psychological aspects that could further lead to predisposing someone to extremist beliefs and behaviors.

To test this model a Path analysis was conducted. The results have shown that the model have excellent fit (Chi-square = 13.56,  $df = 13$ ,  $p = .406$ ,  $TLI = .996$ ,  $CFI = .998$ ,  $RMSEA = .012$ ).

Those with a history of family dysfunction have shown higher levels of Loneliness. Those being in a harsh school environment has been shown elevated levels of SDO while RWA proved not to be affected with any of the contextual measures.

Both clusters of predictor taken together accounted for 32.4% of the variance of Pro-violence. More specifically, Pro-violent tendencies have shown to be predicted by elevated levels of favorizing certain groups at the expense of other groups, loneliness, and harsh school environment. Contextual and psychological factors accounted for 13.2% of the variance of Ville world beliefs with those with a history of family dysfunction and elevated SDO demonstrating more pronounced view on the world as vile. Finally, predictors accounted for 31.4% of the variance of Divine power with psychological factors being the only significant predictors. Namely, those prone to Right-wing Authoritarianism and less prone to social dominance demonstrated elevated Divine power beliefs.

Obtained results demonstrated that adolescents who are exposed to harsh school environment tend to be lonelier and more prone to social dominance orientation, are more likely to embrace the use of violence, while those that were growing up in dysfunctional families and who are prone to social dominance are more likely to see the world as vile and miserable. On the other hand, those who embrace authoritarianism, but reject social dominance, are prone to rely on divine power.

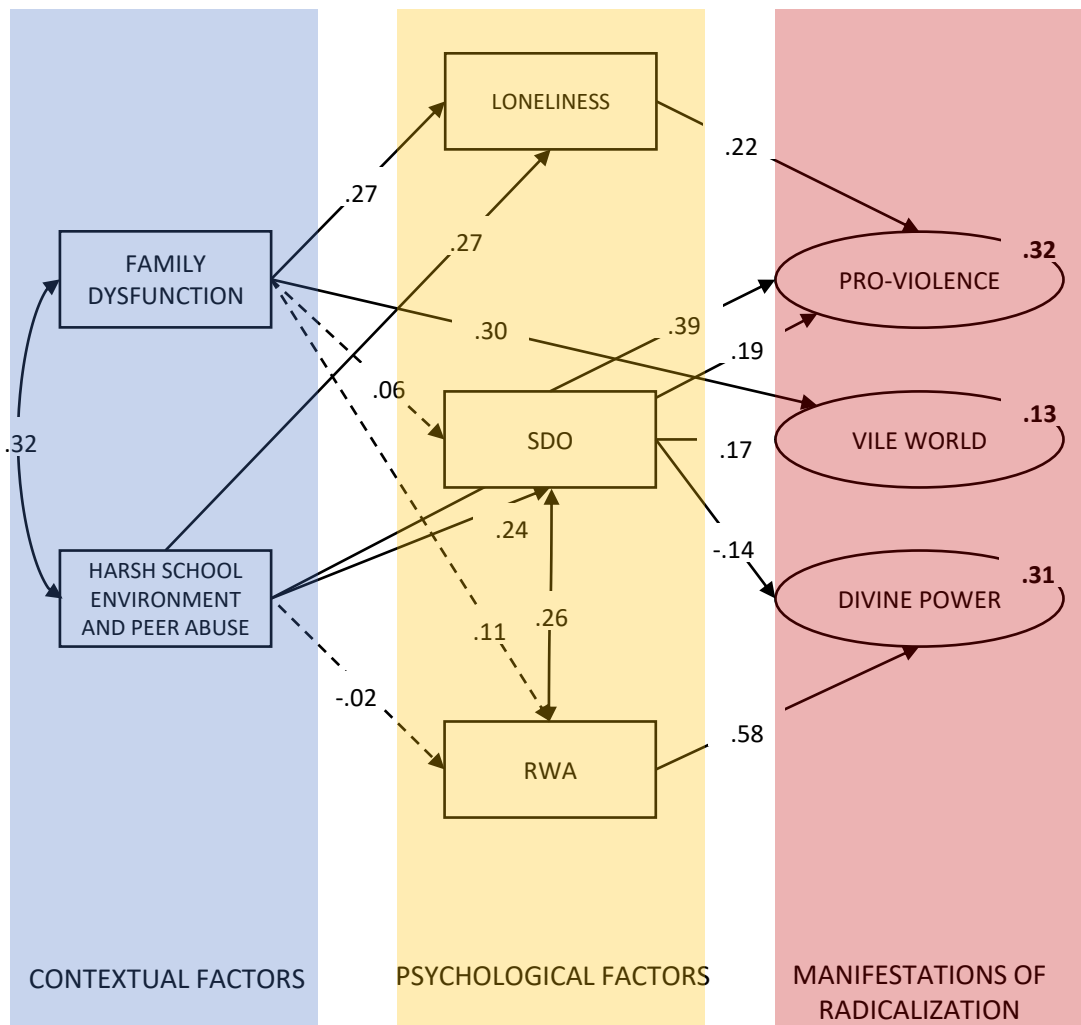


Figure 7. Prediction of MEM

\* Statistically significant regression coefficients and correlations are marked by full arrows

# CHANGES IN INTERETHNICAL PERCEPTION & INTERACTION

## CONTACT BETWEEN ETHNIC GROUPS

Similar to the baseline study, we assessed how often adolescents from different ethnic groups have contact with one another, and how much they enjoy those experiences.

Quantity of interethnic contact (Đorđević, 2015; Zezelj, Milošević-Đorđević, Van Niekerk, & Pavlović, 2019) was assessed using items describing the frequency of contact with one's in-group and outgroup members in different contexts. Assessed groups are those to which social distance is most expressed among the population in Serbia (Albanians, Roma, Croats, Bosniaks, and the majority- Serbian group) (Biro, Mihić, Milin, & Logar, 2002).

The contact was measured as the number of friends of different ethnicities (Albanians, Roma, Croats, Bosniaks, and Serbs). Participants indicated how many of their friends are members of each of these ethnic groups, on a 5-point scale (1 – none, 2 – minority, 3 – half of them, 4 – the majority, 5 – all of them).

The familiarity with the ethnic groups was assessed using a single-item measure where participants were asked to indicate how well they are acquainted with each of the given ethnic groups (1 – not at all, to 5 – very well).

Quantity of inter-ethnic contact across different contexts was examined. Namely, three 5-point items measuring the frequency of interaction were used – contact in school, neighborhood, and in free time.

Quality of contact was assessed using the single-item measure describing pleasantness (positive-negative) of contact with ingroup and outgroup members, if a participant ever had direct contact with different ethnic groups. The participants rated the pleasantness of that contact on a 10-point scale (1 – very unpleasant, to 10 – very pleasant).

In all baseline-endline comparisons addressing interethnic perception and interaction, participants' ethnicities were statistically held constant so potential differences couldn't be attributed to one's ethnicity.

The number of friends remained low for Roma, Croat and Albanian ethnic groups. Comparisons between baseline and endline in the number of reported friends of different ethnicities have shown the absence of significant differences for any of the ethnic groups. The results are depicted in Figure 8.

Regarding knowledge about different ethnic groups (Figure 9), comparisons have shown that despite certain positive trends, for each ethnic group they remained without significant changes.

Due to the low total number of members of Albanian, Roma, and Croat ethnic groups, the frequency of contact with peers of these ethnicities in different contexts remained relatively low.

The frequency of contact in the school context (Figure 10) remained the same with an exception of trend-level increase in the frequency of contact with Bosniak ethnic group primarily deriving from an increase in contact with this ethnic group in Belgrade region found in the experimental group. In addition, a significant increase was found for members of the Croat ethnic group.

The frequency of contact in free time (Figure 11) remained the same for members of all ethnic groups. The exception was the trend-level increase in contact with members of the Croat ethnic group found in the experimental compared to the control group .

Comparisons between the experimental and control group have shown that the frequency of contact in the neighborhood (Figure 12) remained unchanged for all ethnic groups.

Finally, results of contact pleasantness comparisons (Figure 13) have shown that ratings for all ethnic groups remained approximately the same, i.e., no significant changes in the pleasantness of the contact were detected.

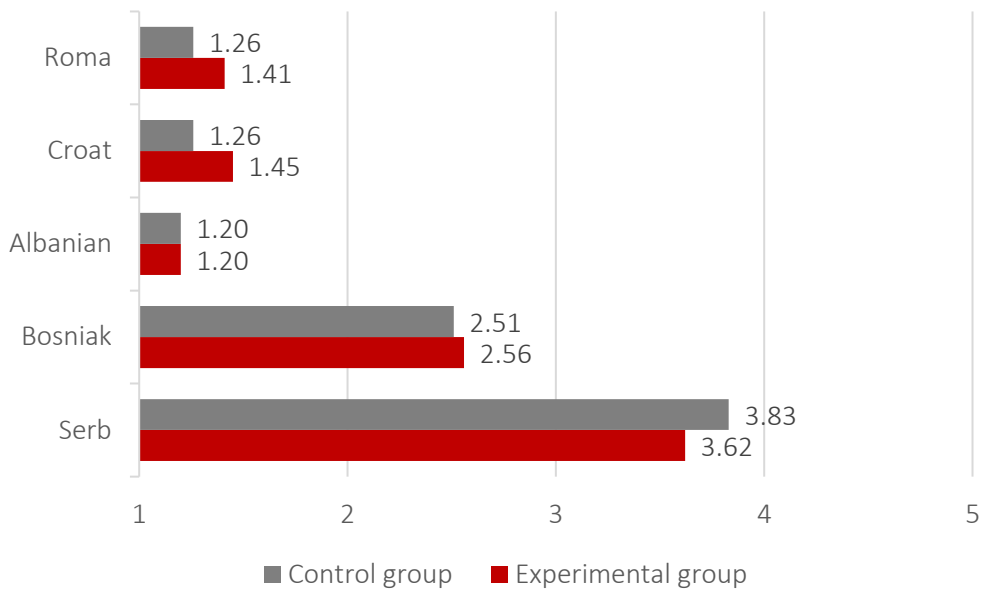


Figure 8. Number of friends of different ethnicities

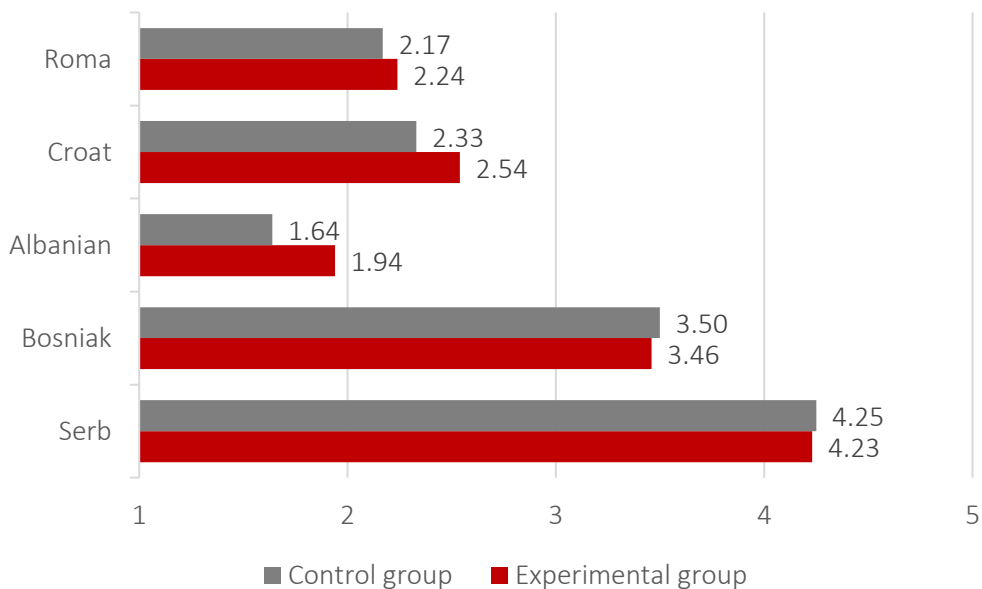
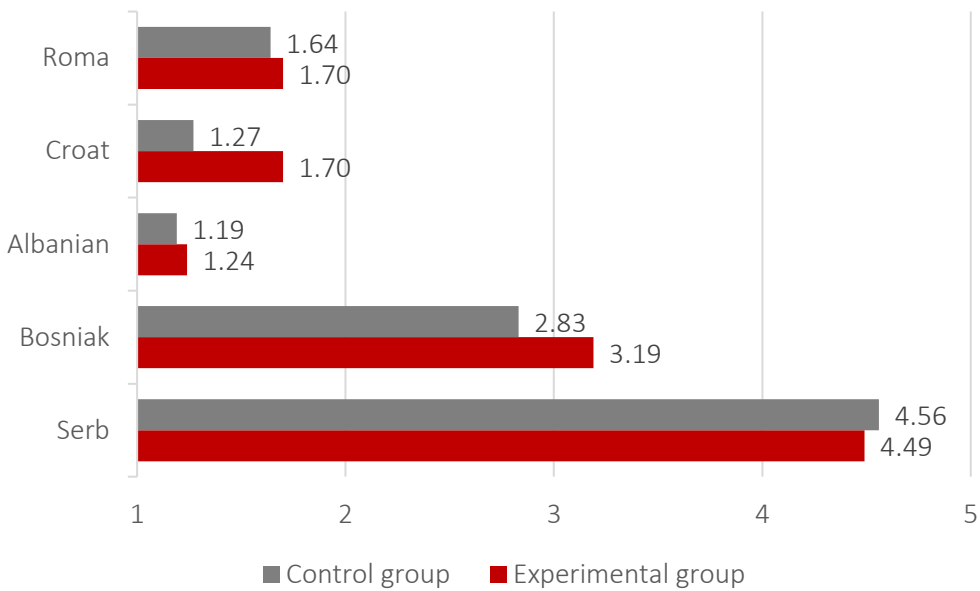
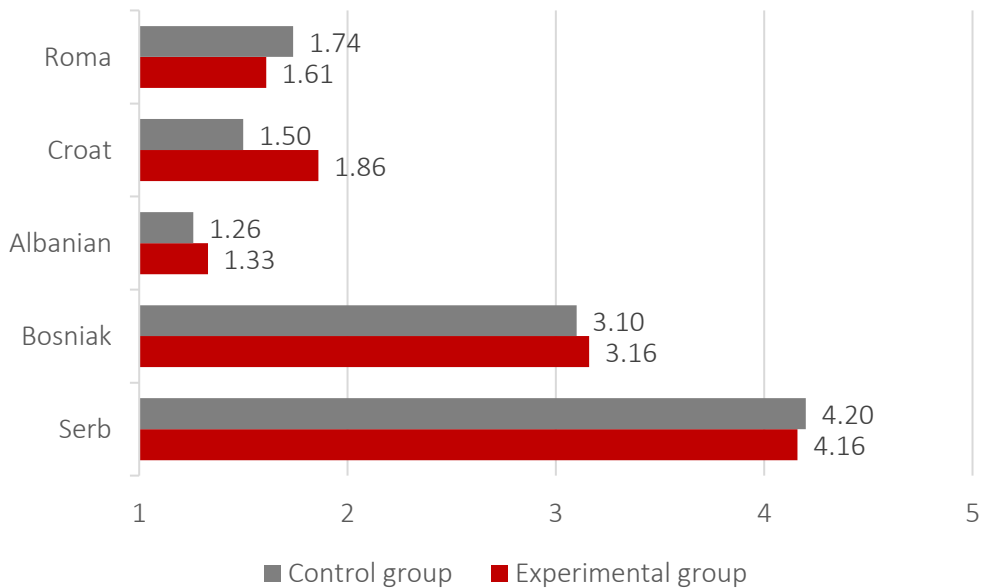


Figure 9. Perceived knowledge about different ethnic groups

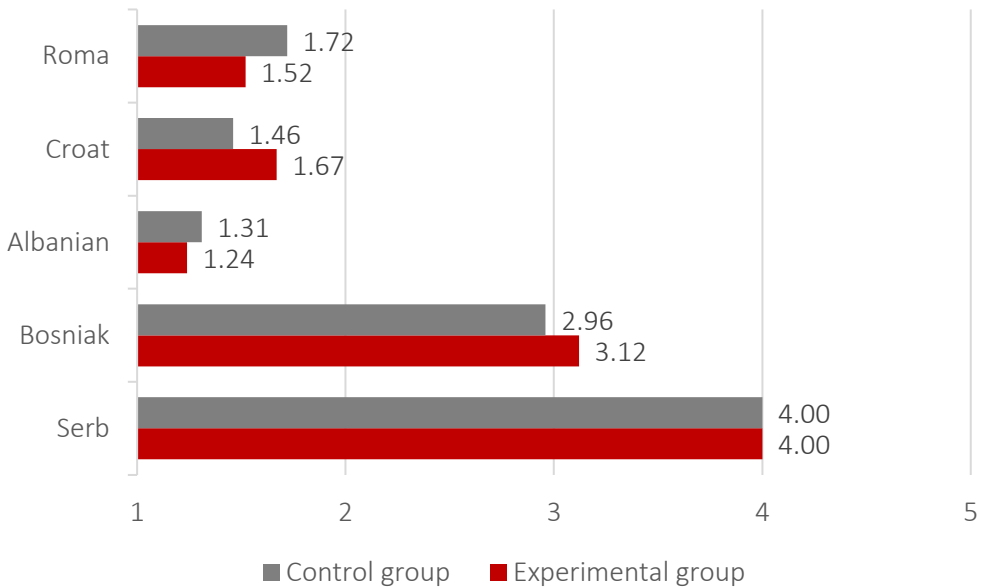


*Figure 10. Contact in school context*

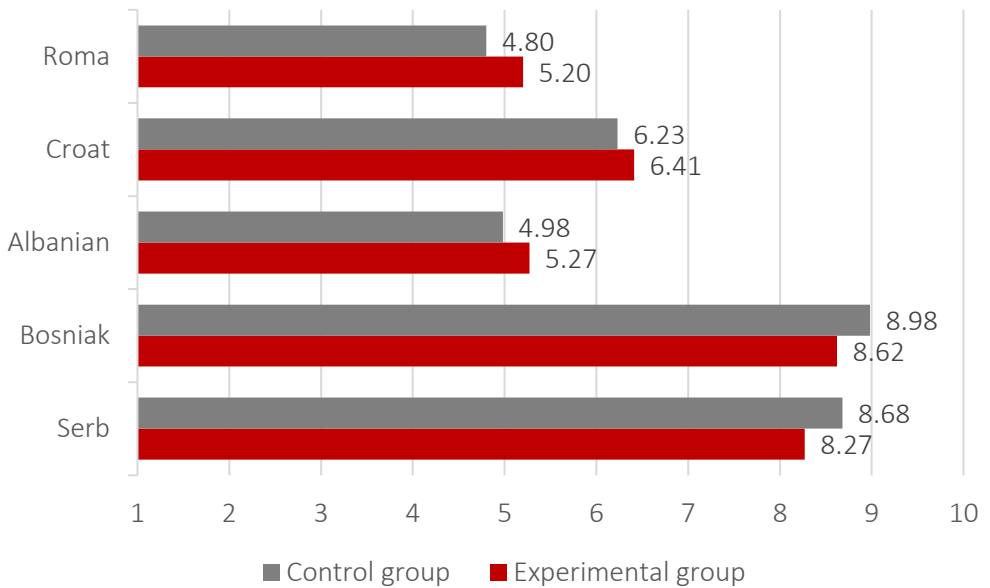


*Figure 11. Contact in free-time*





*Figure 12. Contact in neighborhood*



*Figure 13. Overall contact pleasantness*

## ACCEPTANCE OF OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS

**Group acceptance** (as adapted in Žeželj, Milošević-Đorđević, Niekerk, & Pavlović, 2019) was measured by 4 items describing readiness to engage in various relations with people from five ethnic groups (e.g. *“I would not mind having a Serb/Bosniak/Albanian/Croat/Roma: as a neighbor/sharing a school desk with me/ as a close friend/ as a romantic partner”*). Each statement was accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree, to 5 – strongly agree, so that higher scores suggest higher acceptance of a relationship.

Regarding the acceptance of sharing the same neighborhood with members of different ethnic groups (Figure 14), baseline-endline comparisons have shown the absence of change for Serbian, Albanian, and Roma members. However, an increase in the experimental group regarding accepting members of the Bosniak ethnic group was detected, while for members of Croat ethnicity positive increase was detected on a trend-level, predominantly deriving from the Belgrade subsample. Additionally, a trend-level increase in acceptance of Albanians as neighbors was detected in the Belgrade region.

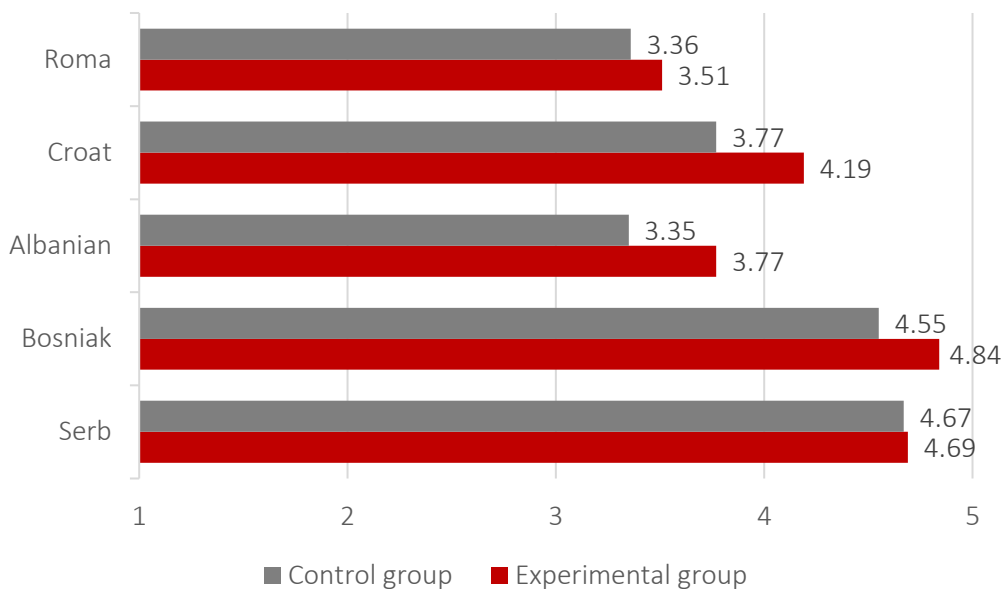
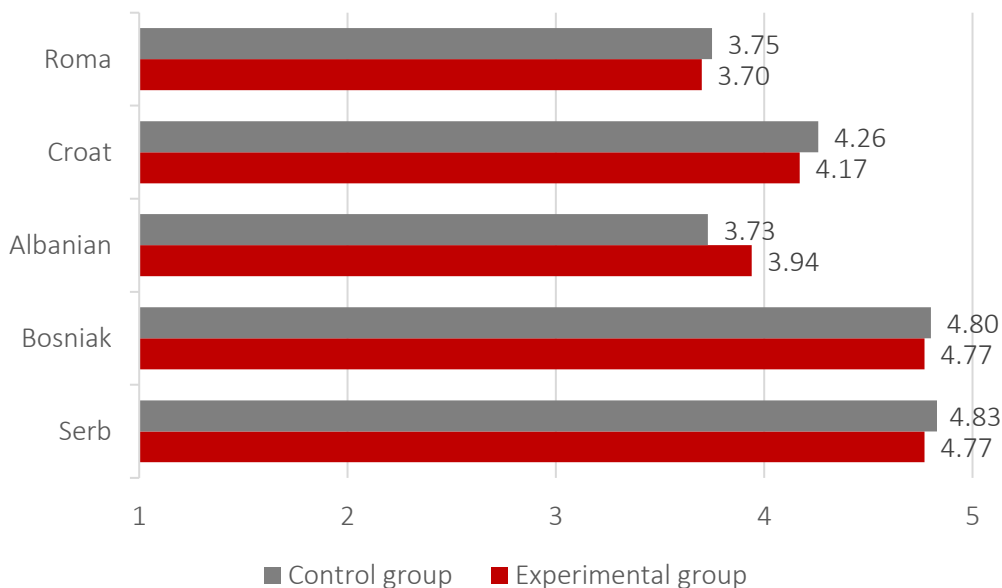


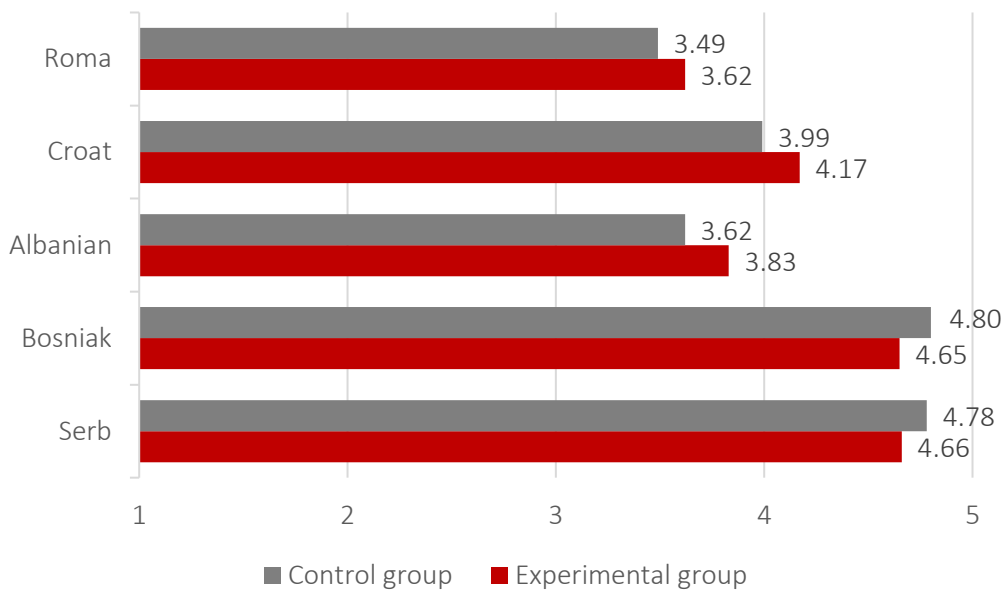
Figure 14. *“I wouldn’t mind living in the same neighborhood with...”*

Regarding readiness to share the classroom environment (Figure 15) no changes for any of the ethnic group was found most probably due to very high ratings in both baseline as well as endline for the majority of ethnic groups.



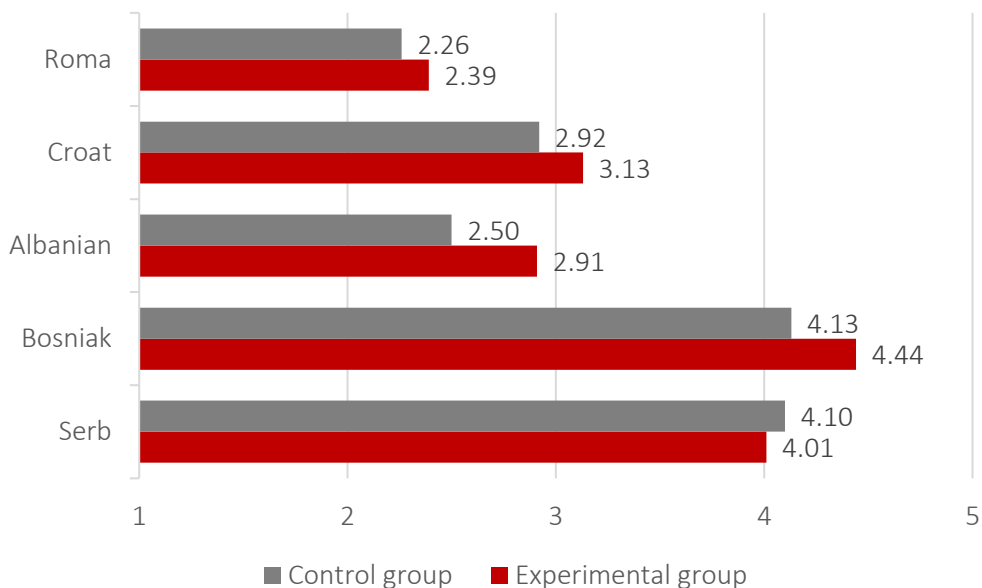
*Figure 15. "I wouldn't mind sharing the school desk with.."*

Similarly, no differences between the experimental and control group were found for the average acceptance of different ethnic groups as friends (Figure 16).



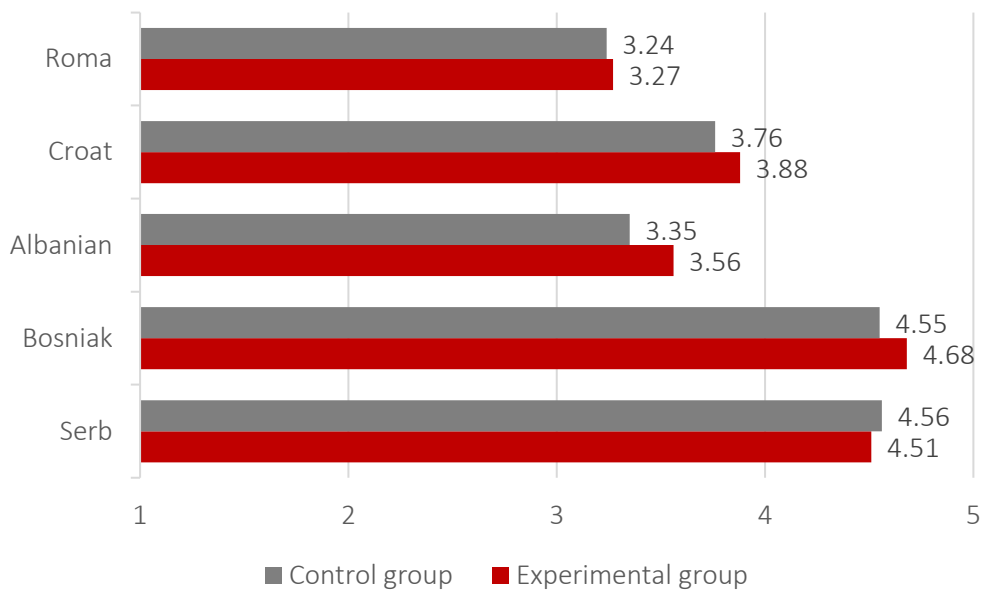
*Figure 16. "I wouldn't mind having a close friend who is..."*

Finally, changes in acceptance of members of different ethnicities as romantic partners (Figure 17) were not detected on a global level. However, a certain trend-level increase for accepting members of the Bosniak ethnic group as romantic partners was found in experimental in contrast to the control group in the Belgrade region. A similar trend-level increase was found in the Belgrade region for Albanian ethnic group.



*Figure 17. "I wouldn't mind dating a..."*

Global social acceptance ratings, i.e., ratings aggregated across different contexts of social acceptance are depicted in Figure 18. Overall, despite generally positive trends found in experimental in contrast to control group, significant differences were not observed for any of the ethnic groups examined. This leads to the conclusion that effects found for individual ethnic groups and aspects interaction are probably limited to increase in acceptance of more distant interactions (sharing the same neighborhood vs engaging in more closer relationships).

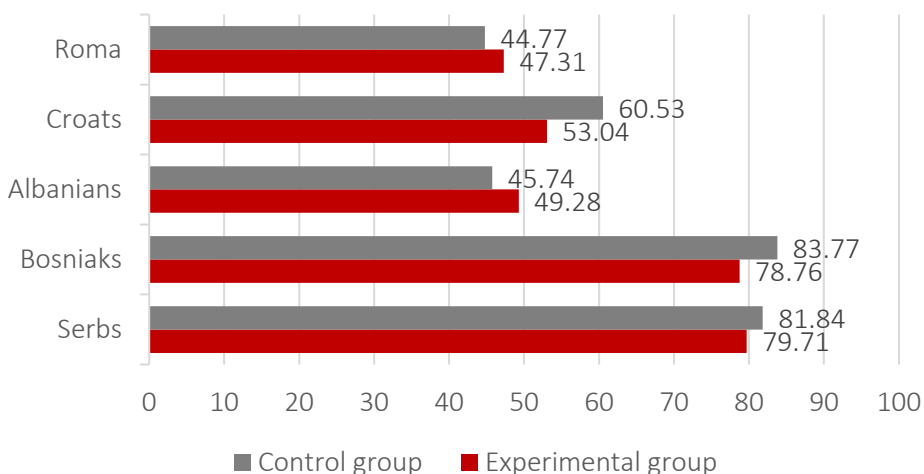


*Figure 18.* Global social acceptance

## FEELINGS TOWARDS OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS

Finally, to measure feelings towards different ethnic outgroups, we adapted the so-called “feeling thermometer” (Wilcox, Sigelman, & Cook, 1989). In this subtest, participants are required to mark how they feel about members of each of the five aforementioned ethnic groups. Responses are given on a scale ranging from 0° (very cold) to 100° (very warm).

Comparisons between the experimental and control group, depicted in Figure 19, have shown that feelings towards different ethnic groups in two assessments remained mostly the same, with none of the differences reaching statistical significance.



*Figure 19. Feeling thermometer*

## CHANGE IN PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS



## SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION

**Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)** (Pratto et al. 1994; adapted in Todosijević, 2013) is a general attitude toward intergroup relations, accepting or opposing hierarchies as a natural world order. The SDO scale consists of two subscales: 1) Group dominance (e.g. *“Some groups of people are just less worthy than others”*) and 2) Egalitarianism (e.g. *“All humans should be treated equally”*), both consisting of 5 items. Each statement is accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – completely false, to 5 – completely true, where low scores on Group dominance scale and high scores on the Egalitarianism scale indicate attitudes supporting group equality.

Comparisons pointed to the absence of differences between experimental and control groups for both Social dominance and Egalitarianism (Figure 20). Overall, results have shown that youth in Serbia on average scores relatively low on Group Dominance while scoring relatively high on Egalitarianism.

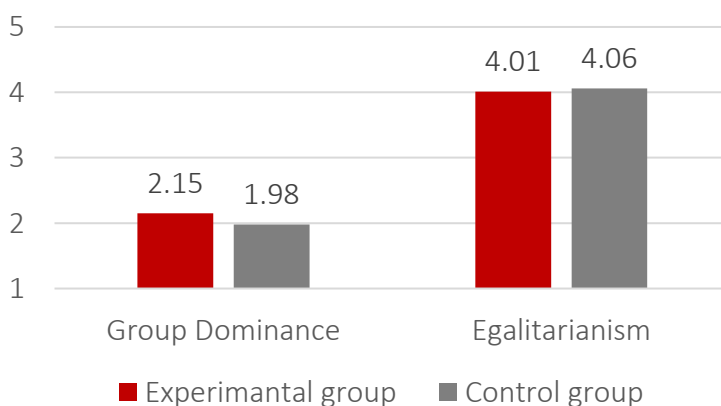


Figure 20. SDO scores

## AUTHORITARIANISM

**Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA)** is a tendency to respect and obey authority and support conservative values. In this study, authoritarianism is measured by the **RWA scale** (Altemeyer, 1981, 1996; adapted in Todosijević, 2013). It consists of 9 items (e.g. *“The most important values that children have to learn are obedience and respect for authority”*). Each item is accompanied by a 5-point scale ranging from 1 – completely false, to 5 – completely true.

The results have shown that youth in Serbia remained to demonstrate moderate levels of right-wing authoritarianism. A full-sample comparison between the experimental and control group revealed the absence of differences in the RWA level attributable to the program introduced in the experimental group (Figure 21). However, a systematic trend-level decrease in authoritarianism was obtained in experimental in contrast to the control group that can be attributed to the program introduced.

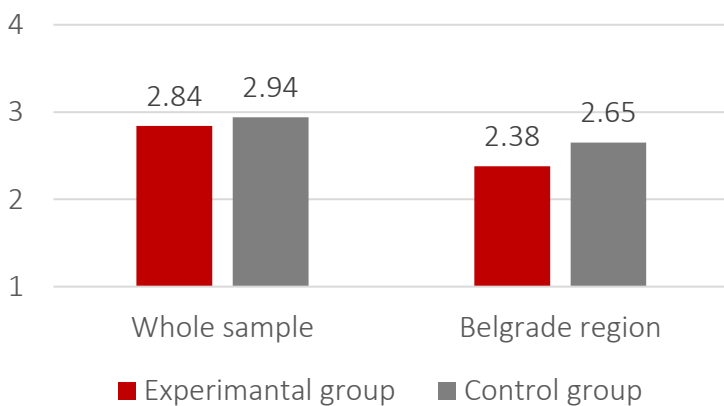


Figure 21. Right-wing authoritarianism scores

## SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem was assessed by the **Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale** (Rosenberg, 1979), a widely used and cross-culturally validated instrument. It consists of two subscales 1) Self-liking (e.g. *"I take a positive attitude toward myself"*) and 2) Self-competence (e.g. *"I am able to do things as well as most other people"*). Each subscale consists of 5 items and the overall score can be used as an indicator of General self-esteem. Each item is accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree, to 5 – strongly agree.

Comparisons have shown that self-esteem in both of its aspects, as well as in general, didn't differ in experimental from the control group (Figure 22). In other words, self-esteem remained at a high level in both groups. This is not surprising since one couldn't expect to change the level of self-evaluation which is deeply rooted in one's personality structure using a short-term intervention such as the one delivered within this project that included ten 45 minutes lasting workshops that were conducted over the course of six months.

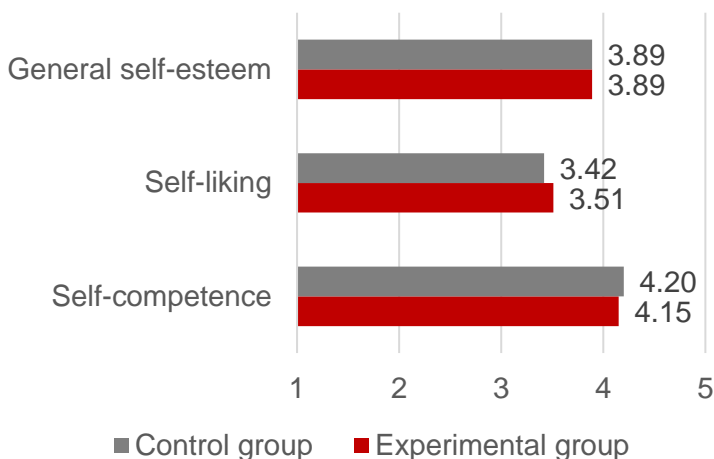
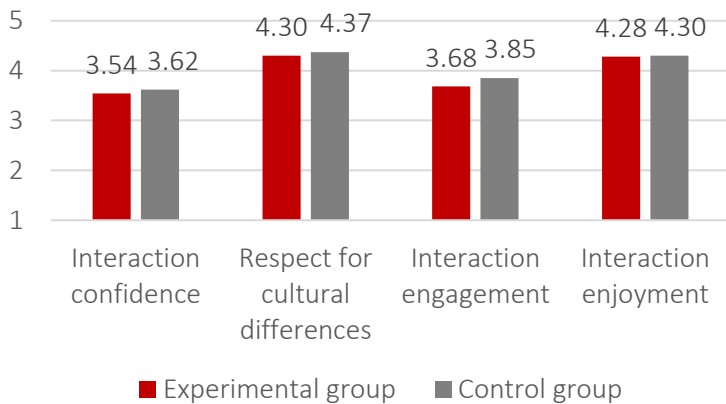


Figure 22. Self-esteem scores

## INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Intercultural sensitivity was assessed by the Serbian version of the short **Intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS)** (Petrović et al., 2015). The ISS consists of 15 items and four subscales: 1) *Interaction enjoyment* has four items that describe positive or negative reactions toward communication with people from different cultures (e.g. *"I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures"*), 2) *Interaction engagement* has four items referring to one's feelings toward people from different cultures (e.g. *"I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures"*), 3) *Respect for cultural differences* subscale includes four items describing tolerance and respect for people from different cultures and their opinions (e.g. *"I think people from different cultures are narrow-minded"* – reverse keyed item), 4) *Interaction confidence* has three items measuring one's confidence when interacting with people from different cultures (e.g. *"I am pretty confident in interacting with people from different cultures"*). Each item is accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree, to 5 – strongly agree.

Comparing the average scores in the experimental and control groups revealed that no changes between the two groups occurred in none of the aspects of intercultural sensitivity (Figure 23). These results could most probably be attributed to the lack of incremental experiences and interactions with individuals from different cultures for which conducted program aimed to create favorable grounds and facilitate it. Additionally, very high scores on Respect for cultural differences as well as Interaction enjoyment obtained in baseline made very little space for improvement in these aspects of Intercultural sensitivity thus limiting the possibility of their detection.



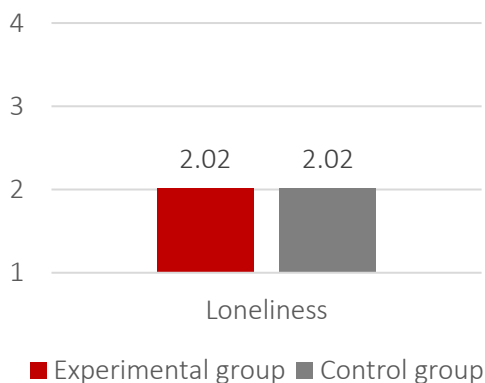
*Figure 23. ISS scores*

## FEELINGS OF LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Subjective feelings of loneliness and feelings of social isolation were assessed by the UCLA **Loneliness Scale** (Russel, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). It consists of 20 items (e.g. *"I lack companionship"*), accompanied by a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 - never, to 4 - often.

Overall, the comparison has shown that participants from the experimental and control group demonstrated the same levels of loneliness and social isolation (Figure 24). In other words, those being exposed to the program haven't demonstrated the reduction of loneliness in comparison to those not being exposed to such a program.

These findings could be potentially attributed to the global pandemic, whose effects somehow interfered with a potential effects of experimental treatment.



**Figure 24.** Loneliness scores

## PERSONAL MEANING

A sense of personal meaning was assessed with **Personal meaning profile – PMP** (McDonald, Wong, & Gingras, 2012). The 3-item subscale *Self-transcendence* was retrieved from the PMP scale. It was used for assessing interests that go beyond oneself and are related to meaning and purpose of life (e.g. *“I believe I can make a difference in the world”*). Each item is accompanied by a 5-point scale ranging from 1 - strongly disagree, to 5 - strongly agree.

As can be seen in Figure 25, results have shown absence of effects on any of the Personal meaning indicators that would be attributable to the program conducted.



Figure 25. Personal meaning scores

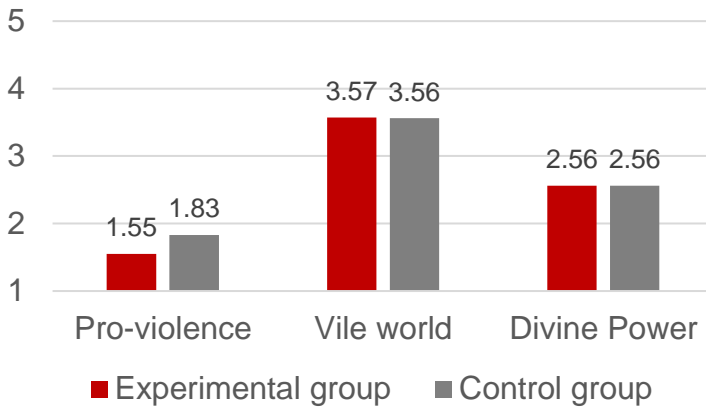
# EFFECTS ON RADICALIZATION & EXTREMISM



## MILITANT EXTREMIST MINDSET

**Militant Extremist Mindset - MEM** was assessed via the revised MEM scale (Stankov, Knežević, Saucier, Radović, & Milovanović, 2018; Stankov, Saucier, & Knežević, 2010), consisting of 24 items that measure beliefs typical of the militant extremist thinking pattern. MEM items are grouped into the following subscales: 1) *Pro-violence* (10 items), referring to acceptance, justification, and advocacy of the use of violence in certain circumstances - like revenge or to gain redemption (e.g. *“Armed struggle is the only way that youths can redeem themselves and their society”*), 2) *Divine Power* (8 items), assessing beliefs about heaven and God, role of martyrdom, and afterlife pleasures (e.g. *“At a critical moment, a divine power will step in to help our people.”*), and 3) *Vile World* (6 items), referring to the belief that there is something importantly wrong with the world we live in, that the present-day world is vile and miserable, and heading for destruction (e.g. *“The world is headed for destruction”*). Each statement is accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 - strongly disagree, to 5 - strongly agree.

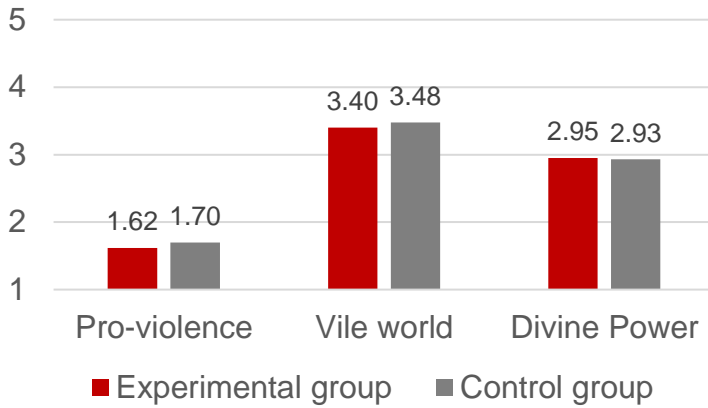
Comparisons between experimental and control groups examined on a sample in Belgrade are presented in Figure 26. It turned out that the program delivered to the experimental group significantly decreased the key aspect of MEM – proneness to Pro-violence in the Belgrade region only (Figure 26). The results have shown that average scores between the two groups on the whole sample remained approximately the same (Figure 27).



*Figure 26. MEM scores for Belgrade subsample*

This finding should not be interpreted as the ineffectiveness of the program in the Sandžak region. Namely, as noted before, the low response rate of participants in the control group from the Sandžak region greatly limits testing the differences for this subsample separately and, as can be seen, can lead to an interfering effect on a whole sample by masking existing effects. Additionally, the fact that Pro-violence scores were initially higher in the Belgrade region left a space for detecting potential improvement in this subsample comparing to the Sandžak region.

Finally, it should be noted that Pro-violence scores remained at low levels in general.



*Figure 27. MEM scores for the whole sample*

Figure 28 presents the comparison between average scores for items where significant effects and trends were registered for the Pro-violence subscale between the experimental and control group. The results have shown a significant decrease in acceptance of statement: *“War is the beginning of salvation”*, and trend-level decrease for statements: *“If violence does not solve problems, it is because there was not enough of it”*; *“The only way to teach a lesson to our enemies is to threaten their lives and make them suffer”*, and trend level increase in acceptance of items: *“We should never use violence as a way to try to save the world.”* and *“A good person has a duty to avoid killing any living human being”*. All trend-level effects are detected in the Belgrade subsample.

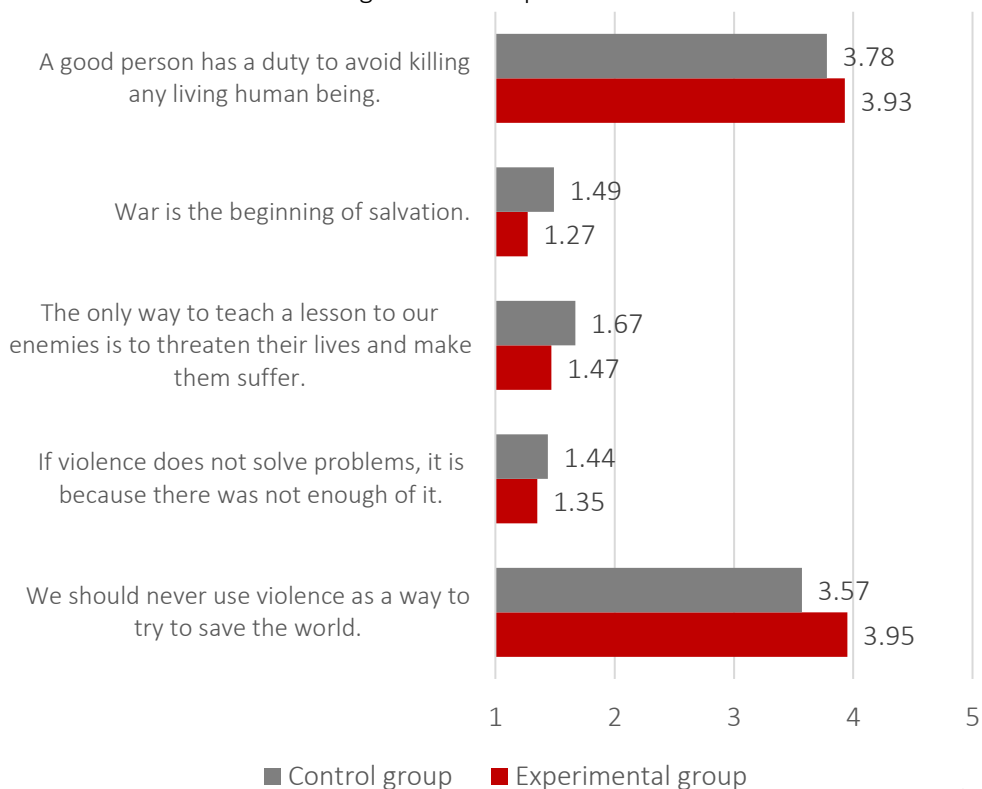


Figure 28. Items of Pro-violence

The program proved to be ineffective in changing beliefs that the world is vile. It could be expected these beliefs are deeply rooted in one's world view and therefore hardly affected by the short-term program such as the one delivered within this project. Similarly, beliefs in Divine power remained at the same level in both experimental and control groups. Bearing in mind that this aspect of MEM is most strongly influenced by one's religiosity (see results of the Baseline study) it shouldn't be expected that those tendencies could be prone to change easily, and the program itself was not aimed at addressing nor changing this aspect of MEM. Moreover, the Divine power should not be considered as a cluster of beliefs that predispose a person to extremist beliefs *per se* since the results showed that it's not positively related to Pro-violence tendencies. However, it can be expected that in persons prone to Pro-violence high levels of Divine power can fuel aggressive tendencies and lead to destructive behaviors.

Figure 29 shows the average score for the only significant difference for statement: *"Evil has been re-incarnated in the cult of markets and the rule of multinational companies."* for which a decrease in acceptance in the experimental group was detected in a whole sample.

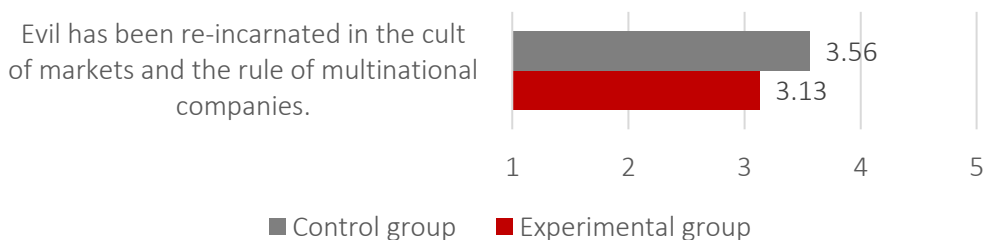


Figure 29. Item of Vile World

For Divine power items, results have shown the absence of statistically significant differences between the experimental and control group (Figure 30). The only trend-level difference was found for the statement “*Our leaders are decent people*”, for which certain increase was detected in the experimental group.

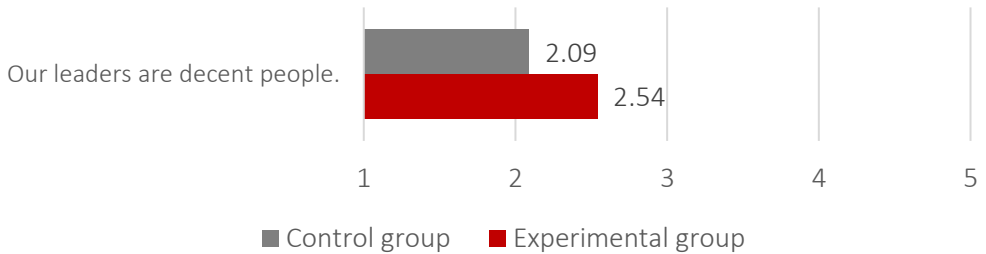
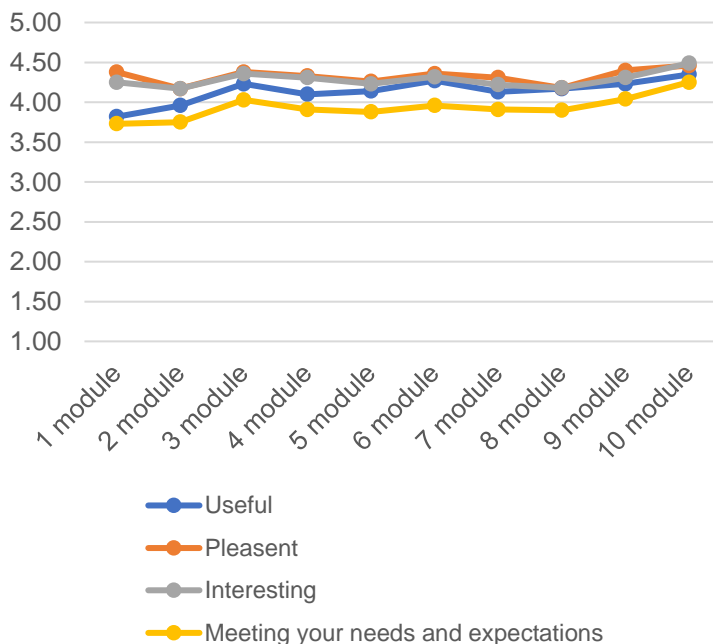


Figure 30. Item of Divine power

# BYRVE PROGRAM EVALUATION

In order to evaluate the BYRVE program, after each delivered workshop students were asked to anonymously rate in which degree on the scale from 1 to 5 (from 1 - not at all, to 5 - extremely), they found each specific workshop to be useful, pleasant, interesting and to what extent it met their needs and expectations. Students were encouraged to share their thoughts, comments, and feedback on each workshop, as well as to share if they found something to be particularly useful or harmful.

The mean scores from evaluations, presented in Figure 31, show that students found all program modules to be useful, pleasant, interesting, and in line with their needs and expectations. The best-evaluated modules are the ones on topics of identity, assertive communication, culture, cultural similarities and differences and cultural awareness.



*Figure 31. Evaluation scores for delivered modules*



Qualitative data showed that students found workshops particularly useful for gaining a chance to learn new skills which could be applicable in resolving different personal problems, or problems within peer group (e.g. *"We can use this exercise when facing everyday problems with friends in school"*). In addition, they pointed out that workshops help them in learning strategies they can use in order to properly respond to peer pressure (e.g. *"We learned how to defend ourselves from our friends if they try to talk us into something we don't want to do."*).

Based on program evaluation results, it can be concluded that students found the entire BYRVE program to be useful, pleasant, interesting, and adjusted to their needs and expectations.

## CONCLUSION

In order to counter and prevent radicalization and violent extremism among youth in Serbia, several components within project *“Youth for Change: Building the resilience of Serbian youth through youth engagement, leadership and development of cognitive and social-emotional skills”* were designed and delivered:

- ❖ A baseline study was conducted aiming to assess radicalization and violent extremism and provide information on protective and risk factors. Results of the baseline study showed that adolescents who are exposed to a hostile school environment tend to be lonelier and more prone to social dominance orientation, are more likely to justify and embrace the use of violence. Those that were growing up in dysfunctional families and who are prone to social dominance are more likely to see the world as a vile and miserable place. On the other hand, those who embrace authoritarianism, but reject social dominance are prone to rely on divine power<sup>3</sup>. In addition to enabling a better understanding of phenomena in question, the baseline study results were used as a foundation for the development of an evidence-based program for encountering radicalization and violent extremism.
- ❖ In order to encounter radicalization and violent extremism psychoeducational workshop program Building Youth Resilience To Radicalization & Violent Extremism (BYRVE), was developed based on 1) the best practices from previous programs and 2) baseline study results. The BYRVE program consists of 10 modules, covering various relevant topics (i.e., identity, communication, discrimination, tolerance, cultural diversity, etc.<sup>4</sup>. Effectiveness of the program was assessed based on baseline – posttreatment methodology, by comparing intervention (i.e., group who took part in psycho-educational workshop program) and control group (who did not receive any intervention).

<sup>3</sup> For more details see [https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PIN\\_Youth-for-change-Building-the-resilience-of-Serbian-youth-through-engagement-leadership-and-development-of-cognitive-and-social-emotional-skills\\_Baseline-study-report\\_2019.pdf](https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PIN_Youth-for-change-Building-the-resilience-of-Serbian-youth-through-engagement-leadership-and-development-of-cognitive-and-social-emotional-skills_Baseline-study-report_2019.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> For more details see [https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PIN\\_Youth-for-change-Building-the-resilience-of-Serbian-youth-through-engagement-leadership-and-development-of-cognitive-and-social-emotional-skills\\_Psychoeducational-workshop-program\\_2019.pdf](https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PIN_Youth-for-change-Building-the-resilience-of-Serbian-youth-through-engagement-leadership-and-development-of-cognitive-and-social-emotional-skills_Psychoeducational-workshop-program_2019.pdf)

Bellow are presented results of BYRVE program.

- Results within the sample of Belgrade high school students showed a significant decrease in the key factor of Militant Extremist Mindset - Pro-violence. No significant differences between groups for Vile World and Divine Power were found. This result does not come as a surprise since both factors are deeply rooted in one's view of the world and it is not likely they could be easily changed over the course of a brief psychoeducational program. More precisely, Divine power and Vile world attitudes are predominantly determined by one's early socialization and experiences. Namely, as the results of the baseline study show, Divine power is predominantly rooted in one's religious beliefs, while Vile world attitudes can to a large degree be understood as the consequence of one's adverse childhood experiences. Moreover, it should be noticed that Divine power is not considered as a predictor of extremist beliefs and actions per se, namely, it can only be the amplifier of aggressive behavior when there are already high Pro-violence tendencies. Finally, results showed a trend-level decrease in Right-Wing Authoritarianism in the experimental group, when compared with the control group.
- A trend-level increase in inter-group contacts with the Bosniak and Croat group in the school context and an increase in the frequency of contact in free time with the Croat group was identified within Belgrade high school students. As for the acceptance of different groups, the increase in accepting Bosniaks and Croats as neighbors was detected in the experimental group, a trend-level increase in acceptance of Albanians as neighbors was found in the Belgrade region. Also, a trend-level increase in accepting members of different ethnic groups as romantic partners, specifically Bosniaks and Albanians was found in the Belgrade region.

The lack of significant changes in other measures assessed within this study could be attributed to various factors. First of all, psychological traits such as self-esteem and self-concept are deeply rooted in one's personality and their change requires much more time and a more individual-oriented approach.

In addition, the scores on some questionnaires and measures were already high (e.g. Egalitarianism) at the base-line assessment, so there was not much space for improvement. When it comes to loneliness, lack of improvement could most certainly be attributed to the global COVID-19 pandemic just before and during the conduction of endline study, where most of the people were overwhelmed with feelings of isolation and loneliness. Moreover, restriction of movement and reduction in social contacts introduced during the pandemic most certainly greatly limited potential contact with people of different ethnicities which could possibly lead to practicing of newly adopted attitudes and their strengthening. In line with that, the lack of experience and interaction with different ethnic groups probably caused no improvement on some aspects of intercultural sensitivity scale, but it should also be pointed out that the scores on some aspects of this scale, obtained within baseline study, were very high and left little space for improvement.

Finally, based on the study results and lessons learned, main recommendation for adjustment and improvement of BYRVE program would include leaving more time for working through some of the topics in question (i.e. Identity, Constructive Problem Solving, Discrimination, Culture and Identity), due to their complexity and relevance. It is recommended that all workshops would be extended to two school classes instead of the standard class duration in Serbian schools (45 minutes), where possible, especially the mentioned topics.

It can be concluded that the baseline study provided valuable insights into radicalization and violent extremism among youth in Serbia, as well as risk and protective factors, which are important for both understanding of this phenomenon as well as for the development of data-driven programs for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism. In addition, developed psycho-educational BYRVE program was proven to be effective in countering various aspects relevant for radicalization and violent extremism and was evaluated by students as pleasant, interesting, adjusted to their needs and expectations, and in particular, useful for gaining a chance to learn new skills which could be applicable in resolving different personal problems, or problems within their peer group.

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