



## Office of Transition Initiatives

### BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA RESILIENCE INITIATIVE (BHRI)

#### QUARTERLY REPORT (FY 2019 Q1, OCTOBER 1 – DECEMBER 31 2018)

### Quarterly Quick Facts

<b>15</b> Cleared Grants
<b>13</b> Completed Grant
<b>3</b> Closed Grants
<b>\$ 8,266,873</b> Total Amount Obligated
<b>17,136</b> Total Planned Beneficiaries
<b>Areas of Operation</b>
Banja Luka Region
Bijeljina Region
Brčko District
Central Bosnia Canton
Herzegovina-Neretva Canton
Prijedor Region
Sarajevo Canton
Trebinje Region
Tuzla Canton
Una-Sana Canton
West Herzegovina Canton
Zenica-Doboj Canton

### I. Context

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and other countries in the Western Balkan region continue to face major challenges, including socioeconomic gridlock, perceived corruption within a wide range of sectors, unresolved legacies from the 1990s conflicts, and youth disenfranchisement. At the same time, a hardening of positions across communities along ethnic lines limits the ability of key decision makers to respond to challenges with solutions that benefit all members of society. These and other factors have created a conducive environment for the proliferation of fundamentalist extremist ideologies across the Balkan region, where small, yet vocal and active groups have developed around these ideologies. This has led to an increase in different forms of violent extremism (VE), both ethnic and religious in nature, placing already precarious intra-community relations in BiH, post-war arrangements and, ultimately, peaceful coexistence in the country and the surrounding region at risk.

This reporting period has continued to be marked by the high number of irregular border crossings through BiH and the region, which still has the potential to undermine the country's stability. The elevated level of migration coincided with BiH's general elections in October 2018 and as such the migration issue was one of the tools of political manipulation. According to the international election observation mission, 2018 general elections in BiH were genuinely competitive but characterized by continuing segmentation along ethnic lines. By 31 December, the Council of Ministers of BiH was not formed, nor were a few lower level governments.

In this context, the Bosnia and Herzegovina Resilience Initiative (BHRI) implements small grants to deliver high-impact programming designed to reduce the threat of violent extremism in BiH and counter extremist efforts to deepen or exploit communal tensions. BHRI aims to: increase community resilience to radicalization and recruitment by violent extremist actors; to dilute and disrupt the influence of radical narratives; and to strengthen the ability of institutional and community actors to mitigate and respond to escalatory violence. This flexible, adaptive and focused approach promotes positive interactions between local authorities and communities and, in so doing, mitigates the drivers of VE and undermines recruitment efforts overall.

## II. Project Updates

A total 32 activities were under implementation across BiH during the reporting period, with three highlighted below:

**Veterans' Stories of War and its Consequences:** In BiH there are multiple interpretations of the war in the 1990s, with the most prominent narratives reflecting the positions of the country's three main ethnic groups. Splintered accounts surrounding the conflict and a lack of an effective reconciliation process are key factors preventing citizens from constructively moving forward, while war-time "myths" are fueling radicalism and extremism in BiH today. By bringing youth to interact with war veterans from opposing armed forces during storytelling workshops on the wartime mentality, atrocities, and the consequences of violence, this activity is developing space for compassion among young people, averting the focus from responsibility and blame to empathy. Before this activity, workshop participants had very few chances to discuss the consequences of the war among themselves, even less to hear the "other side of the story." The project is implemented in five communities rife with grievances born out of war-time atrocities at the local level with an aim to increase the participants' resilience to violent extremist influence and recruitment.

**Unpacking Communities Stigmatized by Violent Extremism:** This activity is being implemented in two of BiH's most stigmatized communities when it comes to radicalization, violence, and violent extremism. The two communities suffer from extremely negative public perceptions and prejudice in relation to religiously motivated violent extremism and extreme ethno-nationalism respectively. To increase resilience to radicalization and recruitment by VE actors in these communities, BHRI is in the process of bringing marginalized youth from these areas together and creating a short documentary about their lives, interactions with one another, and the everyday challenges they face as a consequence of where they live. Upon completion, the film will be presented in both towns to raise awareness concerning shared hardships and stories of resilience and, in doing so, create a sense of community between young people from two vastly different towns. As a result, young people will be able to overcome the stigma and isolation they suffer owing to where they are from, which are often exploited by VE actors.

**Online Youth Activism to Prevent Violent Extremism:** BHRI is supporting a youth-initiated and youth-led online campaign to engage their peers in a conversation about the prevention of radicalization and VE in communities across the country. By adapting photographs of animals into clever and thought-provoking memes (humorous image that rapidly spread via the internet) that address topics of peace, cooperation, and tolerance, this project is spreading a positive alternative to radicalizing and VE narratives in BiH's online space. During the reporting period, BHRI has worked with the youth leaders behind the campaign to provide them with technical and analytical skills to understand and grow their viewer-base, to increase engagement with their online content, and to strengthen the impact of their messaging. Based on preliminary analysis, it appears that the demand for such content is high: their Facebook page had a reach of nearly 200,000 people in the month of October alone. Furthermore, this project encompasses training of youth activists to empower them to speak up against violence and hate speech in their communities as well as in the online world.

## III. Programmatic Highlights

**First BHRI Strategic Review Session (SRS):** From 29 October to 1 November 2018, the first BHRI SRS was organized to identify lessons learned to date and to clarify the program's focus as it builds on previous programming and moves into new areas. The SRS was a combination of multiple approaches including open presentations, workshops, action planning and evaluation. To achieve the program goals it was discussed how to better identify and define the problems, identify and support the right partners and apply the right approaches in implementing projects.

**Action Plans:** One of the conclusions from the SRS was to create action plans for the regions where projects are ongoing, as well as for the regions where BHRI will expand its scope in 2019. The action plans will serve to identify potential fields of cooperation, partners and goals. Every action plan will consist of time frames that will guide the program in achieving its strategic goals. So far, action plans are being developed for seven regions in BiH. Besides regional action plans, the BHRI research unit developed a Research Agenda which articulates the research priorities as well as the tools that will be utilized, products developed and audiences for whom the research is primarily intended.

**Program Objective 3:** During the SRS, a new formulation of Program Objective 3 was presented and discussed with the BHRI staff, with new impetus being given to the program's endeavors to shape institutional and community response to escalatory violence. The reporting period witnessed an increase in research and assessment activities focusing on Program Objective 3, the recommendations of which will be acted upon in 2019.

**Banja Luka Branch Office:** During the reporting period, an Area Development Officer for Banja Luka region was hired and will serve to expand the program's activities and drive stakeholder engagement in the area. The first activities in Banja Luka are expected to start in the beginning of 2019 to address VE related issues and to help build relationships with a wide variety of partners.

**Follow-On Activities:** During this quarter BHRI initiated its first follow-on activities, most notably through support to an administrative neighborhood council in rural central BiH. BHRI had previously helped them establish a community center in an area vulnerable to VE recruitment. New activities are now being implemented to include marginalized young people who were not reached previously.

**Layering Activities:** BHRI has begun layering its activities within communities of intervention by using different tools to engage target groups. By doing so, the program is approaching a problem set and/or target communities through multiple, mutually reinforcing activities that utilize different approaches and awardees. This will allow more sustained engagement, stronger relationships with different community actors, and a testing of the effectiveness of different approaches.

**Clusters:** BHRI cluster level objectives, aiming to ensure a coherent link between activity outcomes and program objectives, have been revised during the reporting period. The clusters have been revised to capture better the complex nature of the factors affecting resilience to VE among diverse groups in BiH. The first cluster is focused on empowering youth for community / civic engagement by increasing their motivation and providing them with the necessary tools and knowledge. The second is focused on advancing key stakeholders' capacities to address VE and the third cluster is focused on debunking VE narratives by increasing critical thinking skills.