By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Why is Eastern Europe immune to the wave of Islamic extremism and anti-Semitism?

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A wave of pro-Palestinian protests, often accompanied by anti-Semitic incidents, has bypassed the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe, even though in many countries, Muslims make up a significant part of the population. Unlike Western Europe, in the capitals in the south and east of the continent, protests in support of the Palestinians were held sporadically only in the first week of the conflict between Israel and Hamas, with an incomparably smaller number of participants than in the West. Most of the governments in the region expressed their explicit support for Israel in its conflict with Hamas. In the recent UN General Assembly vote on the Jordanian resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian truce in Gaza, 45 states abstained following the example of the EU members', and some (Croatia and Hungary) opposed it, just like Israel and the US. Most regional capitals have not faced mass street protests in support of the Palestinians, as have centres in Western Europe. Somewhat more numerous protests were recorded in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where thousands of people gathered on the streets on several occasions, demanding the end of the Israeli operation in Gaza and the protection of civilians.

Ban on pro-Palestinian gatherings

Sofia is one of the first European capitals to explicitly ban protests in support of the Palestinians. Mayor Yordanka Fandykova made that decision on October 14, based on a warning from the public prosecutor who requested "not to allow mass events that invite violence and may cause radical actions, justify terrorist acts and war crimes". Even though nearly 70% of the population of around 2.8 million are Muslim, there have been no mass pro-Palestinian street protests in Albania, except for a few hundred protestors in the capital, Tirana, and several other cities during the first week of the conflict. "Terrorism can never be normalised. Those who view the situation from different perspectives must not forget that those people [the Israelis] fought

for thousands of years to have a home and to return there," said PM Edi Rama, whose country is a member of NATO, leading a policy of strong support for Israel, in a podcast after the Hamas attack on Israel. In neighbouring Kosovo, where even 95% of the population is Muslim - primarily Albanian - there are also no mass outpourings of support for the Palestinians in the conflict with Israel. In this case, Kosovo also emphasised its firm adherence to US policy and its strong support for Israel in the war against Hamas. In North Macedonia, whose population of around 2 million consists of Muslims (mainly Albanians and Turks), there were also no major pro-Palestinian protests, and the government immediately condemned Hamas' terrorist attacks on Israel.

Tensions only in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo, where about half of the population is Muslim, witnessed only the confrontation between the public and local authorities connected to the Middle Eastern crisis. The mayor, Benjamina Karić, otherwise a representative of the moderate left, experienced significant criticism in the media and on social media for relativising Hamas's terrorist attacks on Israel, as estimated by her critics. "For me, it is hypocritical to condemn only the Hamas attack on Israel while not condemning everything that happened before and after it," she said in the first days of the conflict in the Middle East, which caused an avalanche of discontent. "If you support the Palestinians, why don't you condemn Hamas", Israeli ambassador Galit Peleg replied to her, alluding to the fact that the mayor of Sarajevo also participated in pro-Palestinian protests.

The tradition of moderation

Numerous Muslim communities in the Balkans and Southeast Europe are traditionally moderate and not inclined to support extremist movements in the Middle East and

North Africa. Some radicalisation happened only in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a result of the civil war in the 1990s, when members of extremist Islamic factions from the Middle East fought on the side of the Bosniak Muslims. The Jewish population played a significant role in the social life of this area throughout history, leaving a very colourful ethnic and cultural mosaic. Sarajevo, for example, was home to one of the oldest and most influential Jewish communities in Europe. Albania is the only country on the continent where the number of Jews after World War II was greater than at its beginning. Therefore, anti-Semitism does not have such deep roots in the political and social culture of the region as it has had throughout history in other parts of Europe or Russia, for example.

Migration did not bring extremists

The fact that Southeast Europe was not the end destination of mass migration from the Middle East and North Africa in the past decade is another factor for the lack of widespread, even violent, pro-Palestinian and pro-Hamas protests in this region. Despite being situated on one of the busiest migration routes from East to West, which was traversed by around 1.5 million migrants in 2015 and 2016, the proportion of migrants who remained in the area is negligible. As a result, the extremist groups that came to Western Europe together with other migrants and are primarily behind the violent actions of recent weeks did not take root in the region. Governments in Southeast Europe are loyal to their membership in the EU and/or NATO (Bulgaria, Croatia, Albania, North Macedonia etc), and their policies reflect the overwhelming majority of the population. They discourage extremist movements and actions, following the course of their Western partners, while leaning on the tradition of political moderation of their Muslim population. Therefore, the countries and capitals of Southeast Europe will not be a place for the manifestation of extremism and anti-Semitism in the future either - not to the

extent as in the West of the continent.