
Providing active-shooter response training to civilians and educational institutions in the Western Balkans

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Purpose:

A spate of mass-shooting/active-attack events that took place in public schools in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have left the authorities and administrators scrambling to adopt new strategies and procedures to curb such incidents.

Design/Methods/ Approach:

Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training [ALLERT], created by Texas State University in 2002 following an active-shooter event at Columbine High School in 1999. The training was soon introduced for a variety of agencies and institutions in the USA, and for the training of civilians it was also adapted in the Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events [CRASE] programme.

Findings:

The ALERRT programme was recently introduced in the three countries, with the subsequent training of certified trainers allowing the CRASE programme to also be taught within local educational institutions, the majority of which are woefully underequipped and undertrained with respect to the types of violent events they refer to. Adaptions made to both types of training in the region include enhanced first-aid/casualty evacuation modules, situational awareness, first response, incident command, and communication strategies. A particularly beneficial outcome of the programme's acceptance and implementation is the building of trust and interdependency among the educational institutions, law enforcement, and emergency medical care facilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Practical implications/Value:

The findings are relevant because of the CRASE programme implementation by selected high schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and is to be introduced to schools in Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.

Keywords: Active-shooter response training, ALERRT, CRASE, Western Balkans, Education

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Zagotavljanje usposabljanja za odziv na napade z aktivnim strelcem, namenjenega civilistom in izobraževalnim ustanovam na Zahodnem Balkanu

Namen:

Zaradi niza množičnih streljanj/napadov z aktivnim strelcem, ki so se zgodili v javnih šolah v Srbiji, na Hrvaškem in v Bosni in Hercegovini, so morali pristojni pohiteti z uvedbo novih strategij in postopkov za preprečevanje takšnih incidentov.

Zasnova:

Program *Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training* [ALLERT] državne univerze v Teksasu, ustanovljen leta 2002 po dogodku z aktivnim strelcem na srednji šoli Columbine leta 1999, se je hitro razširil na številne agencije in institucije v ZDA, prilagojen pa je bil tudi za usposabljanje civilistov prek programa *Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events* [CRASE].

Ugotovitve:

Nedavna uvedba programa ALERRT in posledično usposabljanje certificiranih inštruktorjev sta omogočila možnost izvajanja programa CRASE v lokalnih izobraževalnih ustanovah, od katerih je večina žal premalo opremljena in usposobljena za soočanje s tovrstnimi izrednimi dogodki. Oba programa, ALERRT in CRASE, sta v regiji prilagojena tako, da vključujeta izboljšane module prve pomoči evakuacije poškodovancev, situacijsko ozaveščenost, takojšnji odziv, vodenje v času incidentov in komunikacijske strategije. Pozitiven rezultat sprejetja in izvajanja programa je krepitev zaupanja in medsebojne odvisnosti med izobraževalnimi institucijami, organi pregona in službami nujne medicinske pomoči v Bosni in Hercegovini.

Izvirnost/pomembnost prispevka:

Program CRASE se trenutno izvaja v izbranih srednjih šolah v Bosni in Hercegovini ter uvaja v srednje šole na Hrvaškem, v Srbiji, Črni gori in Severni Makedoniji.

Ključne besede: usposabljanje za odzivanje na napad aktivnega strelca, ALERRT, CRASE, Zahodni Balkan, izobraževanje

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1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the paper is to show how effective training in police response, along with civilian vigilance and preparedness, may increase the chances of surviving mass-shooting/active-attack events. Based on 20 years' experience with mass-shooting events in the USA and the statistics-based approach to training, the goal is to determine how that pool of knowledge can be effectively transferred

and translated to a region (i.e., Western Balkans, Europe) that is only beginning to witness such attacks.

The unimaginable does happen, and in relatively short order, with the region of the Western Balkans having experienced multiple active attacks around the same time: the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade, Serbia (May 2023); villages of Dubona and Malo Orasje (May 2023); Daruvar retirement home in Croatia (July 2024); Sanski Most High School in Sanski Most, Bosnia and Herzegovina (August 2024); Precko Elementary School in Zagreb, Croatia (December 2024), and Cetinje, Montenegro (2022, January 2025). The grim total of 52 dead and 46+ wounded in a relatively small space of time and narrow geographical region has brought the dangers of mass-shooting/active-attack scenarios to public and legislative attention (Anisin, 2023).

For over 20 years, the USA has dealt with a mass-shooting crisis, that reached nearly alarming levels by 2023 (Donnelly et al., 2023). The rising number of attacks and mounting casualties called for a novel and thorough approach to policing, resistance and response. Thus, in 2002 the ALERRT was introduced as a partnership between Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas Police Department, and the Hays County, Texas Sheriff's Office to address the need for active-shooter response training for first responders (Martindale & Blair, 2019). The evolving, research-based training programme encompasses both law enforcement and civilian preparedness aspects (Duron, 2021). Some of these concepts have now been transplanted to the Western Balkans to address the nascent, yet developing evolving threats, which are expected to grow in frequency and severity.

2 PROBLEM

The Western Balkans is a region awash with guns, where firearm (and light weapon) ownership is ranked among the top in the world (Grillot, 2010), and many are left over from the Yugoslav succession wars (1990–1995) parallel to them holding a considerable cultural value, particularly in Serbia (Cvetković, 2006) and Montenegro (Moffic, 2023). It is anticipated that when the hostilities in Ukraine eventually come to an end, even more firearms and military equipment will flow into the region (Januta, 2025). Moreover, taking into consideration the long duration and manifestation of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and generational trauma caused by the Yugoslav succession wars (Comtesse et al., 2019), the present time is the prime risk envelope for active attacks.

Active-shooter attacks have been thoroughly dissected by various authors with respect to: a public health and survivability perspective after 23 years in the USA (O'Connor et al., 2025), motivating factors discerned from 1,725 cases worldwide between 1900 and 2019 (Brucato et al., 2023), prevalence and policy considerations (Schildkraut & Geller, 2023), a typology and evolution of the attacks, notably on college campuses (Childs, 2025) and the annual categorisation and classification conducted by the US Department of Justice (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2025). At present, the Elsevier SCOPUS database shows 133 peer-reviewed articles were published between 1999 (Columbine High School massacre) and 2025, mainly stressing the evolving phenomenology in the USA

(Kim et al., 2021), with some recent additions on mass shootings in Europe (Anisin, 2023) and how they diverge from those in the USA with regard to the motivations and the choice of firearms and targets (Duquet et al., 2019). The published articles suggest that mass shootings are far fewer in Europe and appear to be driven by a toxic mix of disinformation, prolonged strain and disenfranchisement, rather than mental illness, which seems to be the biggest cause in the USA. Simultaneously, firearms, ammunition, and other available means are (currently) considerably less available than in the USA. Social factors, such as family bonds, inclusion vs alienation, racial tensions and so on, also play a role in active-shooter prevention and mitigation (Watson, 2022).

Given that certain socio-political elements have a role in European mass shootings and that the Western Balkans are somewhat of an outlier in terms of the increasing reach of various extremist narratives (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2023) via social media, as well as the availability of firearms and explosive-making components, the situation today may be described as a potentially dangerous environment, particularly for emergency services personnel. The lack of funds and specific training on how to respond to an active-attack scenario mean such an event could bring disastrous consequences. Undergraduate, graduate and even postgraduate students are deficient when it comes to the development (type, duration, quality) of practical skills, especially with hands-on occupations like fire, rescue, emergency, and law enforcement services (Smailbegović & Korajlić, 2021).

The victims of mass shootings have a very limited window of time to survive the incident (Blair & Martindale, 2024). In a short-emergency-response jurisdiction such as the United States (national average: 3–4 minutes), the on-site stabilisation of victims is an important element for their overall chances of surviving. However, in the Western Balkans, where the response time of medical professionals often exceeds 15 minutes (Šljivo et al., 2024), reliance on in-situ assistance and stabilisation is paramount. Even more importantly, actively denying and resisting the active attacker appear to be better, preventive options than reliance or expecting a quick response from law enforcement or emergency services.

3 ACTIVE ATTACKS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Attacks falling in the category of an active attack/mass shooting are generally described as a premeditated criminal act involving the use of one or more weapons in an attempt to kill or injure multiple people in a single incident, typically in a public area. It is common for any such event entailing a weaponised attack in a public place or the killing of three or more persons, excluding gang violence or terrorism, to be classed as an active attack (Cohen, 2024). In the Western Balkans region, the first attacks of this nature occurred in 2023. The table and figure below present the locations of such attacks between 2023 and 2025 in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro.

Location	Date	Outcome
Cetinje – Multiple locations	12 August 2022	10 dead, 2 injured, Perpetrator dead
Belgrade – Elementary school	3 May 2023	9 dead, 7 injured, Perpetrator alive
Belgrade – Mladenovac	5 May 2023	8 dead, 13 injured, Perpetrator alive
Lukavac – Elementary school	14 June 2023	1 injured, Perpetrator alive
Gradacac – Multiple locations	11 August 2023	3 dead, Perpetrator dead
Daruvar – Retirement home	22 July 2024	6 dead, 7 injured, Perpetrator alive
Sanski Most – High school	21 August 2024	3 dead, Perpetrator alive
Zagreb – Elementary School	20 December 2024	1 dead, 7 injured, Perpetrator alive
Cetinje – Multiple locations	2 January 2025	12 dead, 3 injured, Perpetrator dead
Sarajevo – Migrant camp	27 May 2025	1 dead, 6 injured, Perpetrators alive

Table 1: Mass Attacks in the Western Balkans



Figure 1: Map of mass attacks in the Western Balkans between 2022 and 2025 with the number of dead for each location listed in Table 1.

A shared aspect of all the attacks is that none was effectively stopped by law enforcement within the “killing window” of the first 15 minutes. Many of the after-action reports on the response of law enforcement from Cetinje in Montenegro through to Zagreb in Croatia refer to the slow, unprepared and

ineffective reaction/response (Milic, 2025). This shared aspect points to the need for avoidance, denial and defence scenarios to be implemented by members of the general public given the inadequate law enforcement response in the crucial early moments of an active attack.

4 APPROACH

Local educational institutions recently introduced Texas State University's ALERRT programme, with the subsequent training of certified instructors allowing for the teaching of an add-on CRASE programme. The majority of these institutions are woefully underequipped and undertrained to deal with such attacks. The ALERRT and CRASE type training in the region have both been adapted to include enhanced first-aid/casualty evacuation modules, situational awareness, first response, incident command, and communication strategies. The presented development of skills reflects some new approaches in the adoption of effective strategies to address the described threats. The key factor was to re-establish the mentoring and hands-on elements in development of the curriculum and the engagement of various subject matter experts to deliver and evaluate specific skills (i.e., incident command). Another noteworthy element is the collaborative research outreach with numerous research institutions, foundations, networking organisations, and educational partners in the region to create cohesive, modular and interoperable programmes in public safety.

4.1 Evidence and Scenario-Based Learning: the ALERRT Way

Since its inception, ALERRT has trained over 300,000 first responders, coming from all 50 states of the USA. Although the majority of these are police officers, ALERRT also provides integrated training that prepares police, fire, emergency medical services (EMS), and dispatchers to work together.

ALERRT is today the largest active-attack response training programme in the United States. The programme may be distinguished from other initiatives (FBI, n.d.) with respect to a commitment to a robust research programme, which directly informs both curriculum content and teaching methods (Martindale & Blair, 2019). The described integration of research and practice assures that what is taught is grounded in evidence and experience, not tradition or assumption.

The research programme is organised around three complementary areas: events, tactics and training. Events-based research analyses individual incidents to identify lessons learned, while combining multiple case data to detect broader patterns and trends. Tactical research addresses practical questions concerning how officers respond in high-risk encounters, often through controlled experimental studies. Training research examines how skills are best acquired, testing both new technologies and innovative learning theories. The integration of research with training creates a feedback loop: research shapes training, training generates new questions, and findings are fed back into practice.

Beyond this foundational work, ALERRT has conducted a series of tactical studies addressing practical questions of officer safety and effectiveness. These

include: the best direction to move while entering a room (Blair & Martindale, 2013) the effects of flashlight position while searching in the dark (Blair et al., 2022) trying to distract an attacker immediately before performing a room entry (Blair & Martindale, 2017); how far officers need to be from a suspect armed with knife in order to be able to draw and shoot their weapon before the suspect can stab the officer (Sandel et al., 2021); and the impact of different breathing techniques on stress response (Dillard et al., 2023). Together, these studies illustrate the research approach of ALERRT: challenge assumptions, quantify the risks, and identify evidence-based tactics. They not only inform the curriculum but also add to broader academic and practitioner debates on how best to prepare officers for life-threatening encounters.

While ALERRT offers several distinct courses, the focus in this paper is on the Level I Law Enforcement Response Class and subsequent civilian CRASE course; namely, the programmes implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Designed as entry-level law enforcement and civilian courses for an active-attack response, they provide officers and civilians with the fundamental skills and understanding they need to stop an attack and deliver life-saving medical care to victims. The law enforcement course is offered in two formats: a 16-hour (2-day) operator class and a 40-hour train-the-trainer class, whereas the civilian course is a 90-minute information class or a 4-hour instructor class.

Lying at the heart of the programmes is a two-phase response framework (Blair & Martindale, 2024). In the initial phase called “stop the killing”, officers prioritise preventing the attacker from causing any more casualties. This requires moving quickly to the location of the crisis and instantly engaging to neutralise the threat, often involving the use of deadly force. Skills taught in this phase include arrival procedures, approach to the attack site, interior movement, and room entry techniques. Critically, during this stage, officers are trained to move around both injured and uninjured victims to reach and stop the attacker as soon as possible.

The second phase is called “stop the dying”. Once the attacker has been stopped, the focus shifts to saving lives via immediate medical intervention and providing rapid transport to appropriate medical care. Officers and civilians are trained in the areas of bleeding control, airway management, hypothermia prevention, triage, casualty movement, and transporting victims to suitable medical facilities (in the US context, often Level I trauma centres). The emphasis is on providing point-of-wounding care to stabilise victims before transporting them, so they receive proper medical care.

4.2 Administrative complications

Bosnia and Herzegovina is administratively complex, comprised of three (3) semi-independent administrative entities (Federation, Republika Srpska, Brcko District). Further, the largest entity – the Federation – is made up of 10 cantons, each with an independent judiciary, law enforcement, and administrative ministries (including education).

To successfully organise and conduct any training involving state-funded entities (i.e., law enforcement, public schools, public facilities) approvals (or at least non-objections) from across the entire spectrum (federal, cantonal, municipal) must first be obtained.

Certain administrative units (primarily smaller, rural cantons) tend to have a more straightforward approval granting procedure, while in the bigger urban centres (i.e., Sarajevo) there is often a myriad of competing jurisdictional approvals for the training to be realised, notably in the realm of public schools.

On the law enforcement side, police agencies from Republika Srpska are currently declining to participate in any activity that has a potentially integrative or US element in the training (Björkdahl, 2018). The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control has imposed several sanctions against persons and organisations in Republika Srpska based on the "threats to withdraw the Republika Srpska members of the armed forces from the military" (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024).

Similarly, in the Federation entity, the biggest police department in the Sarajevo Canton was also excluded from receiving direct US assistance due to its gross violations of human rights and breach of the Leahy Law¹ (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Constraints of this nature mean that any training, especially if (in the future) it uses US funds (public or private), may require detailed screening and prior approvals when working with local law enforcement agencies and/or individuals.

4.3 Operational complications

Police and emergency services' response time, upon which the ALERRT and CRASE programmes are based, is relatively uniform in the USA, ranging from 3–10 minutes depending on the location (Schwerin, Thurman, & Goldstein, 2024). In former Yugoslav states, particularly those outside of the EU (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro), response times are substantially longer and further complicated by the lack of a standard emergency number (112) (Jurisic, 2024). Based on the qualitative responses given by police and security professionals attending two ALERRT trainings and four CRASE trainings, the estimated response times are as follows.

¹ *The Leahy Law, in particular the section applying to the US Department of Defence (DoD), prohibits the use of US funds for training or assistance to a foreign security force unit if the Secretary of Defence holds credible information that the unit has committed a gross violation of human rights. The law also applies to the Department of State (DoS).*

Location	Response Time	Reason
Tuzla Canton	Police: 15 minutes Fire/EMS: 30+ minutes	Large volume of people, poor infrastructure
Sarajevo Canton	Police: 20 minutes Fire/EMS: 20 minutes	Competing jurisdictions
Central Bosnian Canton	Police: 20 minutes Fire/EMS: 45 minutes	Large, rural area with poor infrastructure
City of Sarajevo	Police: 10 minutes Fire/EMS: 10 minutes	Integrated comms, traffic
City of Zenica	Police: 5 minutes Fire/EMS: 10 minutes	Integrated comms, traffic, small urban area
City of Mostar	Police: 15 minutes Fire/EMS: 20 minutes	Competing jurisdictions

Table 2:
Qualitative assessment of emergency services’ response times in certain areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina based on a professional assessment and information from the police/fire/EMS personnel attending ALERRT and CRASE training in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Given the much longer time for help to arrive at the scene and other tactical considerations (i.e., incident command, police procedures), it is reasonable to expect that any active attack will continue for some time or already be resolved before the emergency services arrive. US statistics suggest the majority of active attacks are over in 10 minutes or less (FBI, 2025). Relying on available data on active-shooter events in the region, the length of an attack ranged from 8 minutes (Sanski Most, Bosnia and Herzegovina) to over 1 hour (Belgrade, Serbia). Accordingly, any training and potential civilian response must account for quite lengthy efforts and a strategy for protecting and saving lives.

4.4 Conceptual complications

Former Yugoslavia placed considerable emphasis on civilian preparedness and protection, especially first aid (both via civilian training and mandatory conscription), and although some of those residual training and doctrine elements are still present among older members of society, they have largely been lost with younger generations (Smailbegović & Brown, 2024). Very few courses on first aid, triage and so on are offered, which further complicates possible victim assistance in the wake of an active-shooter event. The 4-month military conscription service ended in 2005 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the neighbouring countries (Croatia and Serbia) re-instituted military conscription in 2024, with an accent on emergency preparedness and first aid. There are no such plans in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the lack of national-level cohesion and agreement on defence or emergency matters.

In the area of self-defence and what is deemed a necessary level of self-defence, the bar is set considerably high in Bosnia and Herzegovina and is at the discretion of the local prosecutor’s office, at least for members of the general public; the prosecutor determines whether the level of self-defence was appropriate and charges are to be pursued against a person invoking the right to self-defence.

Pursuant to Article 26 of the Criminal Code of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (36/03) – necessary self-defence is described as occurring “only if it is absolutely necessary for the defender to avert a coinciding or direct and imminent illicit attack from himself or from another, and which is proportionate to the

attack". Article 27 of the Code prescribes that an extreme necessity exists "only when an act was committed for the purpose of averting from the perpetrator or from another a coinciding or direct and imminent unprovoked danger that could not have been averted in any other way, provided that the harm resulting from such act did not exceed the harm threatened". In either case, it is up to the prosecutor to decide whether the level of self-defence was appropriate, and charges will be pursued against a person invoking the right to self-defence. The attacker and the defender are in essence treated equally in the eyes of the law ("Kazneni zakon Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine", 2003)

4.5 Technical complications

Alongside strategic-level challenges and management opportunities in establishing viable active shooter training in Bosnia and Herzegovina, several technical complications have been noted, in particular during the ALERTT training programme for law enforcement personnel and first responders.

- **Language and Communication:** like with any international training effort, the first barrier is often the language, especially technical jargon and/or acronyms. All course materials were translated into the local language and interpretation was used during the instruction. Although this slowed the rhythm of the training, the translation process also created opportunities for reflection and clarification. Participants actively engaged in the discussions, with key information appearing to have been communicated effectively. Following the initial introduction of the curriculum in English, it was later translated and adapted to incorporate local idioms to boost understanding.
- **Cultural Expectations of Policing and Working with Police:** a notable divergence between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the USA concerns expectations to do with hierarchy and the role of law enforcement. In the USA, officers who arrive first are expected to act decisively, without waiting for orders. Yet, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the strong tradition of centralised command made many participants initially hesitant about rapid independent action. This is also evident among non-law enforcement public with respect to who will take charge and how to interact with the police. These decisive, take-charge moments proved to be some of the most valuable learning opportunities in the courses because the participants increasingly recognised that the principle was not about undermining authority, but about saving lives in the critical minutes before specialist units or additional help can arrive.
- **Legal Constraints, Use of Force, and Self-Defence:** the most significant challenge in the curriculum arises from the substantial differences in legal frameworks. Legislation in the USA permits officers (also certain licensed civilians and private security forces) to use deadly force when they reasonably believe a suspect poses an imminent threat of death or serious injury. In contrast, legislation in Bosnia and Herzegovina restricts the use of firearms to exigent circumstances when no other means to

protect life exist. This narrower standard has made scenarios viewed as straightforward in a US context legally ambiguous in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to, as mentioned above, doubts as to what constitutes necessary self-defence.

5 TEACHING CRASE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

With the features described above in mind, one must approach CRASE training with an emphasis on the *avoid* and *deny* aspects, and less so on the *defend* part (since even after successfully defending themselves against an active shooter, at the discretion of the prosecutor an individual could still be charged with a capital offence(s) if they applied a disproportionate level of force against the attacker).

To date, four CRASE workshops have been run in Bosnia and Herzegovina – two at institutions of higher learning, one in a public administrative building and one in a corporate setting (banking, private security etc.).

Even though avoidance of an attack is generally the most applicable action, it is also the last one to be implemented or considered – most entrances are unlocked, rarely covered by surveillance (in daytime hours) and any strangers are seldom (if ever) challenged by staff upon entering. The current mindset of the staff is to interfere as little as possible and mind their own business. The majority of schools and public buildings (e.g., hospitals, post offices, public administration buildings) are very lax on security, usually with just one entrance, no clear evacuation routes, and could entail a death-trap during an active-shooter response. To effectively address this, it is necessary to show exact examples and seek to illicit a response from workshop attendees about potential threats and ways to overcome them within a given institution and its floor plans.

The denial of an active armed attack by way of locking, hiding, barricading etc. is also complex since many internal doors do not have functioning locks or are outwards-opening (or double-swing), making them very difficult to effectively lock out an attacker or create a barricade. One saving grace is that many public buildings still possess several heavy, soviet-style racks, desks and lockers for archiving documentation, while a considerable number of people could harness such furnishings as effective anti-personnel barricades capable of withstanding much of what is fired by the available small arms and light weapons.

Many older (pre-1990s) buildings have rooms with corner-fed entryways and the walls made of concrete, which provide areas of good cover during an active attack. Nevertheless, since most modern buildings (i.e., banks, shopping areas built since the 2000s) are structurally soft and provide very little cover or concealment (glass, aluminium), one must stress situational awareness and various avoidance/distraction strategies.

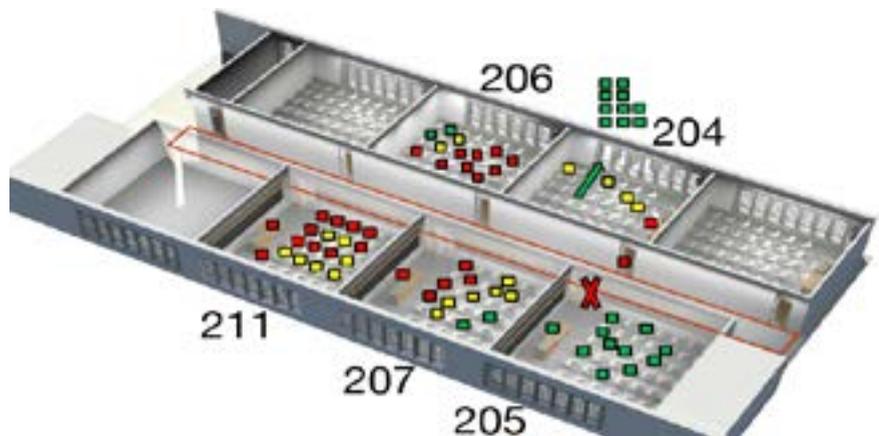
Given the legal repercussions, the *defend* portion of the CRASE curriculum is dealt with but framed in the context of the ambiguous self-defence framework. The fact that a considerable share of the populace still vividly recalls the effects of the war in the break-up of Yugoslavia means the issue of self-preservation is quite ingrained in the common psyche and greater attention should be paid to making the surroundings safer and more attack-resilient. At the same time, a significant

accent is given to the first-aid portion (stopping the dying part) with the proper application of bandages, makeshift bandages, tourniquets, and movement to safety. Some lessons arising from having survived the Yugoslav dissolution war and rendering aid have been quickly forgotten in the recent period of peace.

5.1 Successful examples of CRASE instruction

A key element of teaching the relatively new concept of “active-shooter response” is for workshop attendees to visualise the effectiveness of avoidance and denial. To illustrate the point, an incident at Norris Hall, Virginia Tech is used, which often gives the most revealing example of the avoid, deny and defend principle. Norris Hall is also very similar to the type and style of classrooms and hallways found in the Western Balkans and serves as an excellent illustration of the proper action as well as suppression of the normalcy bias (as discussed below).

Figure 2:
Norris Hall,
Virginia Tech
Result of an
active attack
by rooms
– dead (in
red), injured
(yellow), safe/
uninjured
(green); image
courtesy
ALERRT
Center,
Texas State
University.



The suspect first entered room 206, then 207, and 211 after that. Every single person in room 211 was shot (11 killed, 6 wounded); this was the third room to be attacked and was re-visited by the suspect twice more. Room 204 was Professor Liviu Librescu’s classroom; he held the door closed while 10 of his students escaped. The professor and a student were killed and four were wounded; however, their delaying action by holding the door saved numerous lives. The suspect’s access to room 205 was completely denied, with students lying on the floor and using their feet to hold the door closed. Even though the suspect shot through the door, no one in the room was injured by the gunfire.



Figure 3:
Effective
barricading
of outwards-
opening
doors using
a classroom
chair.
Image co-
urtesy City
University of
New York.

5.2 Addressing cover vs concealment

Despite the region having experienced considerable destruction and small arms fire during the wars following the break-up of Yugoslavia, the idea of effective cover vs concealment is lost on the younger generations. Moreover, even older generations seem to have forgotten about it in the 30 years of peacetime. An important element of the CRASE curriculum is teaching the benefits of effective cover, especially when firearms are involved.

Statistics show that hiding (concealment) is not an effective survival strategy during an active-attack incident (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2024). Many victims who have chosen to hide were easily located by the shooter and ended up being shot from close range. Likewise, the lessons learned from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Baumann et al., 2004) demonstrate which areas of cover were most effective from multiple sources of small arms fire (concrete walls, concrete planters, building columns, steel bridge constructions, heavy duty metal or oak furniture, thick tree trunks etc.) and the same applies in an active shooter response and drills. Cover is likely to stop or deflect incoming fire; simple concealment will not.

Figure 4
Difference
between
cover and
concealment
in an active-
shooter
incident.
Image adapted
from: Center
for Violence
Prevention
and Self
Defense



5.3 Addressing normalcy bias

In an active-shooter situation, “normalcy bias” refers to the psychological phenomenon whereby the affected individuals dismiss or rationalize the threat, delaying their response and making them more vulnerable in the attack’s initial phases (Drabek, 1986). The experience in the Western Balkans with relatively recent wars and over 4 years of intense gunfire has led the bias towards dismissing gunfire as “celebratory” or “normal” on the levels of complete indifference.

As part of the CRASE curriculum, the instructor demonstrates the sounds of gunfire just outside the classroom and asks whether the participants find the noise concerning; astonishingly, only a minority does while the majority considers it a normal occurrence. In the generations which experienced the war (<1990), the result probably reflects a deeply-entrenched psychological coping mechanism that requires further study, whilst the post-war generations do not even understand gunfire, with their attention largely consumed by smart-phones and social media.

In the four CRASE workshops held, very few participants had any visible reaction to the simulated gunfire in the hallway. Only about one-quarter of the participants in any of the workshops showed a visible reaction to the sudden outburst of unannounced, simulated gunfire in the hallway – the majority was either oblivious to it or talked themselves out of it, despite being in a workshop that was discussing such attacks.

Although this is an insufficient experimental source-pool, it shows that even while discussing active-shooter events people still lean heavily towards the normalcy bias and delaying the action that is needed; also, when “active-shooter events” are the topic.

6 RESULTS

The successful delivery of the initial courses at Center for Business Studies College in Kiseljak, Bosnia and Herzegovina has set the foundations for deeper collaboration in Bosnia and Herzegovina and potentially the wider Balkans and Europe. An immediate priority is to support the newly certified instructors as they start to lead independent classes. The transition from learner to instructor is a critical phase in which new trainers often require mentorship, feedback, and technical assistance to ensure both fidelity to the model and adaptation to their local realities. ALERRT intends to provide this support via follow-up visits, remote consultation, and ongoing dialogue with the local stakeholders. The outreach via the civilian CRASE-training programme is designed to give civilians practical knowledge and strategies for them to survive during the critical period between the onset of violence and the arrival of first responders. CRASE is especially relevant for schools, hospitals, public institutions, and other potential soft targets. Recent incidents in the Balkans reveal that civilian preparedness could provide an important complement to police training and help foster broader societal resilience.

At the conclusion of the CRASE sessions, participants were asked to complete simple evaluation and feedback forms. The results were overwhelmingly positive with high levels of engagement, satisfaction with the course structure, and appreciation for the scenario-based learning design. Many participants emphasised that this approach was a significant departure from their prior training experiences of a similar nature (e.g., fire emergency drills).

Material pertinent to the audience?	90% Strongly agree; 10% Mostly agree
Presented in an understandable way?	75% Strongly agree; 15% Mostly agree; 10% Agree
The scenarios were immersive?	100% Strongly agree
A novel type of instruction?	90% Strongly agree; 10% Mostly agree
Learned new techniques?	100% Strongly agree
Pertinent for Bosnia and Herzegovina	65% Strongly agree; 30% Mostly agree; 5% Agree
Optimistic about its wider, national use	55% Mostly agree; 10% Agree; 35% Disagree
Ratings scale	5 – Strongly agree 4 – Mostly agree 3 – Agree 2 – Disagree 1 – Strongly disagree

Table 3:
Qualitative assessment of CRASE training workshops in Bosnia and Herzegovina based on 4 training workshops and approximately 100 responses

The immersive, hands-on nature of the CRASE training was viewed as a core strength. Participants noted that being placed in dynamic, uncertain scenarios forced them to think and act in real time, bridging the gap between abstract principles and operational reality. However, a considerable number of participants were pessimistic about the coursework becoming broadly accepted or eliciting government support due to the fragmented nature of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

7 DISCUSSION

The ALERRT training for law-enforcement and CRASE training for civilian personnel were the first such types of training conducted in Europe using the US model of a statistics-based and research-based training curriculum. In turn, there are very few benchmarks against which their metrics can be compared. Based on the findings that socio-economic strain factors and political-extremism rather than mental illness play a role in mass shootings in the Western Balkans region, situational awareness and a fast response in an incident appear to be the main factors for mitigating the situation and adding to the chances of surviving the event.

The described training shows that certain skills translate well from the USA to the Western Balkans, particularly in the civilian realm: denying access, barricading, reducing the normalcy bias, vigilance etc. All of these factors can significantly improve the prevention and survivability of an active-shooter attack. Although within the law enforcement sphere, the escalation of force, reaction times, transfer of command etc. vary somewhat, congruent procedures and solutions can be identified and adapted to suit the local law enforcement.

ALERRT and CRASE training are both currently underway across various jurisdictions and end-users in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with possible expansions to Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia. It may be expected that a wider pool of trainees, trainers as well as exposure to the public will identify other elements to adapt and adjust the curriculum to the new operating environment and overcome any shortcomings and obstacles that could arise during the implementation, notably from procedural shifts or legal frameworks.

8 CONCLUSION

The concept and threat of an active shooter/active attacker in a peacetime setting is quite novel in the Western Balkans. Having endured almost 4 years of no-holds-barred ethnic conflict, even though people still recall the deadly effects of gunfire, they are also woefully unprepared to deal with it in peacetime conditions. Many of the life-saving lessons concerning first aid, transportation and triage were quickly forgotten once the wars ended.

The keyelements in the successful teaching of CRASE concepts are situational awareness, avoidance and denial, with plenty of visual cues as to why certain strategies and responses are better (from the survival standpoint) and that the presented strategies are built on almost 20 years of research and statistics. It is only when the general public is presented with an actual situation or scenario that they start to realise the gravity of the situation they are caught in.

Based on the modest amount of interaction with the CRASE training participants (totalling 16 hours in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and relatively limited number of trainees (approximately 120 individuals to date), it is clear that there is a need for such instruction on various levels, especially the undergraduate level I. A great number of students today are completely devoid of the situational awareness and life-saving skills they might need to rely on in an active-attacker scenario. Integrating the CRASE training curriculum on all educational levels is

thus recommended, particularly given the lack of other courses or training (e.g., first aid).

Hope is not a viable strategy, and one should not hope the limited skills taught in the CRASE curriculum will be sufficient during an actual active-attacker scenario. In any case, statistics show that after the ALERRT and CRASE courses were taught to over 2 million trainees, the number of casualties has been reduced, and overall survivability has increased (FBI, 2025). Perhaps some of these life-saving skills led to individuals being able to effectively avoid, deny and ultimately defend themselves against an active threat, whatever that may have been.

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