



CONNEKT COUNTRY REPORTS

National Approaches to Extremism

NORTH MACEDONIA

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COUNTRY REPORTS ON NATIONAL APPROACHES TO EXTREMISM

Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans

NORTH MACEDONIA

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Overview

COUNTRY PROFILE

The Republic of North Macedonia has at least two characteristics that its citizens share: a complex ethnic structure and a strategically important geopolitical location in the Balkans. Most recently, as of 2017 and the formation of the new political government, the country reached two significant bilateral benchmarks: the Greco-Macedonian Prespa Agreement (17 June 2018) and the 2017 Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria.¹ This turn of events marks an important milestone in the Macedonian EU integration process.

Since the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991 until today, six changes have been made with 32 amendments. Constitutional changes reflect the dynamism of social change, which shapes the democratic pluralist, economic and legal system of the Macedonian state and its multicultural society.

The amendments to the Constitution that were made in 2018 for the purpose of applying the Prespa Agreement and the national legislation changes that followed are a necessary instrument of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country.²

1

With the reforms and the conclusion of the Treaties of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation with the Republic of Bulgaria and Greece, the Republic of North Macedonia is approaching its goals: accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) membership, following the opening of negotiations this year. The intensification of the process of Euro-Atlantic integration of Macedonian society presupposes the achievement of a general agreement that must take place as a continuous legal reform, which means harmonisation of the Macedonian legal system with EU law and NATO standards for development of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and freedoms and a consistent security system, as well as the creation of efficient, impartial and authoritative institutions that guarantee the rule of law.

By signing and then implementing these agreements, the Republic of North Macedonia sets an example for the reality and perspectives of the new model of regulating relations between the Balkan states, which only guarantees lasting peace and overcoming the deadly historical paradigms that still float over this area. The Republic of North Macedonia, with its geo-political position and natural multiculturalism developed over the centuries, is most called upon to move initiatives to conclude such agreements with its other neighbours (Albania, Kosovo and Serbia) as the first step towards concluding a pan-Balkan agreement on mutually permanent friendship, cooperation and good neighbourliness.

¹ On 1 August 2017, the two governments of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia signed the Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation expressing common ground and determination to build a better future between the people and citizens of both countries. The Republic of Macedonia Assembly ratified the Treaty on 15 January 2018.

² On 27 March 2020, the Republic of North Macedonia became NATO's newest member, upon depositing its instrument of accession to the North Atlantic Treaty at the US State Department in Washington DC. NATO Allies signed North Macedonia's Accession Protocol in February 2019, after which all 29 national parliaments voted to ratify the country's membership. More in NATO (2020).

Our multicultural, multinational and multiconfessional society faces serious challenges and threats to human rights and freedoms, peace, tolerance, and other values. The creators of public policies face a historical responsibility for the consequences of their unreasonable actions – a responsibility before the generations that created the modern Macedonian society through mutual peace and tolerance and real multicultural life together. Hence, the authentic meaning of the idea of multiculturalism and tolerance, which is not derived from a theoretical book but emerges from our most distant history of the common life of citizens, cultures, religions, and languages in this area. That is the only answer to all the challenges, from terrorism to xenophobia and authoritarian political regimes (more in Taševa 1998; 2000; Atanasov 2003).

Government system

The Republic of North Macedonia is a sovereign, independent, democratic, and social state and its sovereignty is indivisible, inalienable, and non-transferable. The referendum on independence and autonomy was held on 8 September 1991 when the citizens freely manifested their will to separate from Federal Yugoslavia and afterward, on 17 November the Constitution was adopted. The rule of law, human rights, freedoms, ethnic parity as well as permanent co-existence and equality among all nationalities are the fundamentals of the government system of the Republic of North Macedonia. It was built as a unitary republic.

The political system as a parliamentary democracy is based on the principle of power divided into three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial with elected president who leads and represents the state at home and abroad. The Constitution and laws define the role of the President of the Republic of North Macedonia. The President is obliged to sign the decrees if, according to the Constitution, the laws are adopted by a two-thirds majority vote of the total number of MPs.

2

The Government is composed of a Prime Minister and Ministers who cannot be representatives in the Assembly. The Government exercises its rights and competence on the basis and within the framework of the Constitution and laws, but also proposes laws to the Assembly. It is the Government's responsibility to propose laws to the Parliament on prevention of radicalisation and countering terrorism and support its implementation.

The Assembly is in permanent session and works in meetings, which are coordinated and controlled by the President of the Assembly. It monitors the operation of the state administration bodies and the state administration. The Macedonian Assembly is unicameral with 120 MPs elected in direct parliamentary elections every four years. The Assembly elects its own president, who holds a second position in the political hierarchy of the state. The Parliament adopted the Laws on PVE/CT and through the work of the parliamentary commission should facilitate inter-ethnic issues.

Population

Since the independence of the country in 1991, demography and census have been critically important. Dissolution from former Yugoslavia has changed the ethnic composition and balance although, even as a constituent part, Macedonia is defined as multi-ethnic state of the Macedonian people. The contested nationalistic positions of Macedonians and Albanians erupted in violent conflict in 2001. After a six-month confrontation between government security forces and the National Liberation Army (NLA), the peace

agreement known as the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) was signed in August 2001.³ Constitutional changes were made to improve the status and rights of the Albanians living in Macedonia (Popovska and Ristoska, 2015). Ethnic relations have improved since 2001 (Georgieva, Memeti and Musliu, 2017) but ethno-political mobilisation of two main ethnic groups and the influence of radical groups in the region creates fertile ground for radicalisation and for extremist groups to gain followers on both the ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian sides (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, 2018).

According to the last formal census conducted⁴ from 1 to 15 November 2002, the population in the Republic of North Macedonia was 2,022,547.

Main ethnic/religious groups

According to official data from the last census conducted in 2002, of the total population of 2,022,547, according to the citizens' declaration of nationality:

1,297,981 (64.18%) are Macedonians;
509,083 (25.17%) are Albanians;
77,959 (3.85%) are Turks;
53,879 (2.66%) are Roma;
35,939 (1.78%) are Serbs;
17,018 (0.84%) are Bosniaks;
9,659 (0.48%) are Vlachs;
20,993 (1.04%) other groups.

3

Overall, 33.3% of the population is Muslim. Religious beliefs are predominantly divided along ethnic lines, with most ethnic Macedonians practising Eastern Orthodoxy and ethnic Albanians practising Islam (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, 2018).

CONTEXTUALISATION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION IN THE COUNTRY

Overview of radicalisation and violent extremism

According to North Macedonia's Ministry of Justice's Directorate for Execution of Sanctions (DES), by 9 April 2020 14 people were found guilty of joining a "foreign army, police, paramilitary or parapolice formation," 36 were found guilty of terrorism and joining a terrorist organisation, 15 of threatening the constitutional order and security and four persons were held in custody (Ministerstvo za pravda, 2020). The DES is the most relevant national institution for gathering and compiling the data on the people found guilty of issues related to terrorism or terrorist grouping. Therefore, a multidimensional approach that focuses on preventing violent extremism and radicalisation (PVE) leading to terrorism is inevitable. As a small country, it cannot influence

³ Since the signing of the OFA, the country has had occasional ethnic clashes in the 2010s – such as beatings, attacks on police officers, ethnically-motivated killings, and violent protests – usually in a pre-election period, as some political parties have exploited nationalist sentiment as a rallying cry in support of their political agendas. More in Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski (2018: 4-5).

⁴ The data included in the report is the last official data from the latest legal census in the country, which was held in 2002. Since then, due to constant migration from the country, the size and ratio between ethnic communities have been changed and there was no political will for a new census. The State Statistical Office is compiling some predictive data, but this is not official. The current population of the Republic of North Macedonia is 2,083,374 as of Wednesday 1 July 2020, based on Worldometer preparation of the latest United Nations data. Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/macedonia-population/> (accessed on 1 July 2020)

geopolitical trends but as a matter of interest to geopolitical actors, it has to build a policy and support actions that will strengthen its geostrategic position and increase stability in response to violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism, as an evident growing international threat (Kambovski 2018b).

Citizens reported to have joined ISIS and other violent movements inside and outside the country

In 2017, a report by the Soufan Center (2017) counted 135 Macedonian foreign fighters in Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) between 2011 and 2016. As a break-down, the study counted 80 returnees out of these 135 foreign fighters, 27 killed and 35 still in the conflict zone. By comparison, the number of Macedonian foreign fighters is close to the number of Albanian foreign fighters (136), lower than the number of foreign fighters from Bosnia and Herzegovina (260) and Kosovo (316), and higher than the number of foreign fighters from Serbia (42) and Montenegro (up to 30).

The erstwhile President of North Macedonia, Gjorgje Ivanov, announced on 22 June 2016 a number of “110 Macedonian foreign fighters, and additionally to that 25 had been killed in Syria, and 86 fighters had already returned to Macedonia” (Ivanov 2016). There were three women among these 110 Macedonian foreign fighters, according to high-ranking personnel from the Macedonian State Security Agency, information presented by Selimi and Stojkovski (2016) in their report on the Macedonian civil society efforts in countering violent extremism. In addition, several other studies produced figures on the Macedonian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Vasko Šutarov (2018), quoting “various security sources” in his publication from 2017, counted “around 135 citizens” who departed to Syria and Iraq, “some 27 died, and around 80” who returned.

4

In 2018, as part of the Extremism Research Forum regional report on the Western Balkans, Vlado Azinović (2018) published data “reported to researchers in early 2018 by intelligence and police officers in the region,” which was picked up by the majority of researchers in the following period. According to Azinović, the number of Macedonian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq was 140 men and 14 women, amounting to 154 foreign fighters in toto in the period from 2012 to 2017. There is no exact data provided for children foreign fighters in the study. By comparison, these figures are higher than the number of Albanian (109), Serbian (49) and Montenegrin (23) foreign fighters, while lower than the numbers of Kosovar (303) and foreign fighters from Bosnia & Herzegovina (BiH) (240). Contextualised per million citizens, the figure of Macedonian foreign fighters is 77 per million Macedonian citizens. On the other hand, the study finds that the number of 22 Macedonian foreign fighters per Macedonian Muslims, 1 in 4,545, is one of the highest in the region, alongside Serbia. Finally, according to Azinović’s study (2018), there are 80 returnees out of the total number of 154 Macedonian foreign fighters, which again is fewer than Kosovo (130) but ahead of BiH (50) and Albania (40).

The latest research, conducted in the wake of the disintegration of the ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq, shows a clear decline in the number of Macedonian foreign fighters from 2017 onwards.⁵ However, the end of ISIS as the world has known it, according to Azinović, “does not mean an end of the radicalisation and recruitment into extremism and violence in the region,” in general, and in North Macedonia, in particular

⁵ These departures “effectively stopped” in 2018, according to the findings presented by Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdzioska (2018). The reasons for these developments, besides the demise of the ISIS controlled territory, are reported to be the new legislative on terrorism in North Macedonia, as well as the novel and practical obstacles for reaching the war zones in Syria and Iraq. See also the National Counterterrorism Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia (2018-2022) by the Macedonian Government and the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism published in February (2018).

(Azinović 2018). Moreover, in 2018, seven Macedonian citizens were arrested for having participated in the war in Syria and Iraq (Perry, 2020).

Moreover, Savevski and Sadiku (2012) stress that in North Macedonia there is a radical wave of Islam, which on certain occasions can mobilise many citizens, but that there are few, if any, organised groups. In the aftermath of the waves of protest in May 2012, there was an attempt to politicise such a presence in the media and fuel speculations about the emergence of an Islamist party that would represent the interests of such groups, but this has so far come to nothing. It is thus impossible to speak of any serious tendency towards voicing radical Islamic views in a political framework, such views being largely confined to the private sphere and individual religious practice. The only exception is moderate religious messages conveyed to the public by some public figures and media. Therefore, we can say that no real religious rhetoric has been established in public discourse, although this discourse does have greater religious content than before.

On the other hand, as Houry (2019: 59-81) argues, in the absence of a collective agreement for transferring detainees to their home countries, the United States began transferring some of the detained men to their country of origin through bilateral arrangements. The American officials did not provide specifics about the countries involved in this operation, but the media reported that Macedonia had taken back some of their nationals. Additionally, as of 2019, 11 Macedonian citizens were charged for their foreign fighting activities in Syria and Iraq with 33 years of imprisonment in total. The average number of years of imprisonment per individual foreign fighter is the second lowest in the region, after Montenegro (Azinović, 2018).

5

During the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, the media frequently raised the question of the number of ISIS fighters among the people crossing North Macedonia, one of the states on the so-called Balkan refugee route. Deliso (in Trajanovski, 2017) summarises this argument in a rather clear manner, stressing that “with the incessant wave of illegal migrants coming across the Turkish and thereafter Greek border into Macedonia, it is impossible to tell how many more ISIS fighters have entered the Balkans since”. An unpublished study from 2016 shows that the public broadcaster was one of the major proponents of this discursive stance, while a critical focus was in general deficient (Trajanovski, 2017).

Presence of radical and violent groups in the country

The most recent radical groups in North Macedonia are pinned down, by various researchers, to the names of two “influential imams in Macedonia”: Rexhep Memishi and Shukri Aliu. According to Qehaja and Perteshi (2018), the two imams have both “embraced a violent form of fundamentalist Islamic ideology and spearheaded the creation of youth groups, bringing in jamaats or para-jamaats. Many of the men active in those networks ended up in Syria and Iraq,” while “the rest continue to spread the fundamentalist ideology through online content.” The authors also marked the existence of several social media platforms, mostly on Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and YouTube, as the major contemporary challenge of the Macedonian state. Herein, the case of Abdullahu, who included the ISIS narrative on social media and religious events in order to mobilise Macedonian foreign fighters centred around the imam’s self-sacrifice for the *ummah* and the Muslim Brotherhood, is one of the most pertinent cases in these regards. In general, the violent content posted on social media includes “calls to Jihad” and attacking the “crusader” Jews and Shiites, supports terrorist attacks in the West and supports the arrested imams, in combination with reports from the ISIS battlefields.

Politically, North Macedonia, as a new democratic state, did not, heretofore, ban any party, even though the state has developed a legal mechanism invoking justifications for banning political parties. In the state, those rationales stress an eventual anti-democratic ideology and violence (Bourne and Casal Bértoa, 2017). There are, however, several fringe organisations, which oftentimes evoke certain violent symbols and use militant discourse and hate speech. The March 2019 case of the arrest of the leader of the Macedonian Christian Brotherhood, a far-right formation, after his public threats to the erstwhile Macedonian Prime Minister is one of the most prominent examples (Mkd.mk, 2019).

Framing radicalisation and violent extremism

Scientific and academic state of the art

It is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to stress how utterly important the fight against violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism is in the Republic of North Macedonia.⁶ Although these phenomena raise concerns in all countries and regions, the Macedonian policy-makers and executive authorities have an even more difficult task – that is not just to prevent violent extremism radicalisation and terrorism within the state's borders but to also prevent individuals from joining foreign terrorist (i.e. paramilitary) organisations.

As Kurseni (2019) notes, up until 2016 the “research on violent extremism in the Western Balkans was not thoroughly grounded in evidence-based research”. Azinović (2018) aims to create an informed and nuanced picture of the violent extremism activity within the country, with a final goal of informing policy development. With the regional scope as a background, Azinović claims that the CVE phenomenon should be treated in a locally specific manner, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches.

6

In the words of Stojkovski and Kalajdzioska (2018), CVE is a result of a set of factors, and thus a “soft approach” – as opposed to the exclusive, top-down approach – is necessary in order to understand the phenomena of radicalisation. As a result, the authors state that this approach reveals the need to engage as many local actors as possible to broaden the research perspective on ethno-nationalist and rightist discourses and, finally, to further research the relationship between ethnicity, the perception of power and its social distribution. The final approach can be found in the study conducted by Qehaja and Petreshi (2018). Namely, this research approach is focused on one targeted group and aims to understand a certain aspect of its development. In the case study, the authors look at the relation between radicalisation, violent extremism and the practice of Islam. The three study groups use multi-methodological perspectives combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, as well as various data collection techniques.

One can clearly state that there is a wide range of institutions with a direct or indirect agenda related to the issues of radicalisation and violent extremism in present-day North Macedonia – from state-sponsored institutions on a central level and research institutes to local municipalities and NGOs. Yet, several studies indicate the gap and the lack of a more structured form of cooperation between all stakeholders in the national setting.

Prominent studies

Besides these academic and research institutions, a set of various international institutions and agencies, as well as domestic actors and stakeholders, are actively contributing to the scholarly discourse on violence,

⁶ The name Republic of Macedonia is used when referred to the period before Amendment XXXIII of the Constitution came into force.

peace studies and national security in the North Macedonian context. The Intelligence Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Military Service for Security and Intelligence within the Ministry of Defence can be mentioned in these regards as official institutions that frequently publish data that is picked up by various researchers. Most recently, several regional and country reports were published by the Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum, funded by the British Government; the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Federal Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Austria published a guide for civil society and their role in CVE and radicalisation in 2018; the Democracy Lab and the Berghof Foundation published a country case study in 2018; while the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, supported by the German Marshall Fund Balkan Trust for Democracy programme, the Slovakian Stratpol, as well as the US Embassy in North Macedonia, have also published separate country reports on terrorism over the course of the last few years. The US Embassy also funded several organisations researching the various means of countering violent extremism in the country.

The concluding remarks in regards to the Macedonian case study can be roughly divided into two categories, the first one opting for a better understanding of the Macedonian multicultural and multiconfessional context (OSCE publications, Democracy Lab publication and the KCSS publication) and the second one calling for a better understanding of the gradual shift of the radicalisation processes and the dissemination of extremist narratives into the less visible online spaces (WB Extremism Research Forum publications).

7

Defining violent extremism and radicalisation

The definitions on violent extremism and radicalisation have thus differed in the recent literature dedicated to the study of these social phenomena in the national, Macedonian context.

A 2018 study published by the OSCE (2018) in Macedonian language provided a compound definition of “radicalisation towards terrorism” as a “dynamic process in which a person accepts the terrorist violence as a possible, even legitimate action”. This approach towards radicalisation was recreated in the governmental and ongoing National Counterterrorism Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia (2018-2022) (National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (2018: 11).

On the other hand, several Macedonian researchers depart from Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins's (2015: 260) definition radicalisation as a process which “involves adopting an extremist worldview, one that is rejected by mainstream society and one that deems legitimate the use of violence as a method to effect societal or political change”. For the studies by the Macedonian researchers using this definition, see Stojkovski and Kalajdzioski, “Perspektivi na Zaednicata”, Selimi and Stojkovski, “Assessment of Macedonian efforts” and Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, “Report on Macedonia”.

Analytic, a local think tank conducted the first policy study in 2016 and brought attention to the issues in the country that correlates with foreign fighters from North Macedonia, i.e. current trends, institutional and legal responses and the impact of constitutional amendments, relevant stakeholders, de-radicalisation and resocialisation. The policy paper issued specific recommendations for the Government and stakeholders based on findings and good practices in the region.

As for the other constructs, a 2018 study on the foreign fighters' issue in the Western Balkans provides a literature review and a concept operationalisation on the subject matter (Wagner, 2018).

Definition targets

There is a clear lack in the data on the Macedonian youth joining the FF in the war zones in Syria and Iraq. This aspect was pointed out by most of the latest research on the subject matter.

In addition, several studies concluded that in the Balkan states with relative Muslim minorities, such as Serbia and North Macedonia, the mobilisation of prospective FF appears to be more successful. This point further leads to various interpretations. Several studies thus juxtapose the radicalisation process with the Christian Macedonian ethno-nationalism in the state. On a different note, Azimovi collocates the developments within the Muslim minority groups in the Balkans and the diaspora groups as social groups "often most susceptible to radicalisation into violent extremism." Both the aspects were highlighted as research gaps and thus require further investigation.

Finally, the bulk of the literature points out the capital city of Skopje and its surrounding municipalities as the centre of the mobilising and recruiting activities. A 2017 research study by the Atlantic Initiative provides a particular break-down of the Macedonian FF within ISIS, highlighting not only Skopje (air, Gazi Baba, Saraj and Aradino) but also the cities of Kumanovo and Gostivar as regional centres of these activities. In these regards, a more nuanced perspective on the developments beyond the city of Skopje and the regional centres is certainly lacking in the scholarly discourse.

Ethnic or religious communities considered by violent extremism and radicalisation approaches

To grasp these developments, one should take into consideration the socio-political constellation in post-OFA North Macedonia. Namely, with the intra-ethnic demands institutionalised in 2001, violent extremism within the country was significantly settled – with only a few cases in the time period of two decades. On 12 April 2012, five Macedonian civilians were killed near the lake of Smilkovci, in the vicinity of Skopje – an attack which the Macedonian Ministry of Internal Affairs defined as a "deliberate terrorist act aimed at destabilising the country." In early May 2015, a shootout between the Macedonian forces and a self-identified ethno-Albanian National Liberation Army erupted in the Macedonian town of Kumanovo, taking the lives of eight policemen and 10 militants and leaving 37 officers hospitalised. As outcome result, 28 men were arrested and charged with "terrorism-related charges" by the Macedonian authorities. The two events were often put in the context of transnational, Kosovar-Macedonian cross-boundary network of radicals (Shtuni, 2016).

Another regional network was publicised in 2017, after a failed terrorist plot in Albania that was targeting the national football team of Israel and involved accomplices in Kosovo and Macedonia (Azinović, 2018).

The aforementioned "refugee crisis" from 2015 was also used regarding the ongoing war in Syria and Iraq. According to the state statistical data presented by North Macedonia's Media Information Agency (MIA) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), approximately 27,000 people entered the Macedonian territory in the first half of August 2015 alone, while approximately 41,000 people from the start of July 2015. These numbers will provoke heated reaction within some rightist outlets, who will start highlighting the number of terrorists crossing Macedonian territory. It was the erstwhile President Ivanov who also picked up this discourse in

February 2016 by stating that a significant number of people who crossed North Macedonia's state borders are "terrorists and foreign fighters" (Krstevski, 2016). This statement should be put in the immediate social and political context. Amid the contested Greco-Macedonian relations in the mid-2010s, Ivanov criticised the Greek side for its failure to enclose the logistical information on the people crossing Greco-Macedonian state borders, which in turn can result in a poorly monitored day-to-day development by the North Macedonian authorities. The statement was, however, further amplified by the rightist media and the anti-migration voices.

Finally, even though the Republic of North Macedonia officially refused to apply sanctions and restrictive measures on Russia for annexing Crimea in 2014 "for different reasons unrelated to the problem of foreign fighters," according to Beslin and Ignjatijevic, there was no Macedonian foreign fighters reported to be in the war zone in Ukraine. It should be clearly stated that North Macedonia, alongside the other Balkan states, declaratively supported the Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea (Beslin and Ignjatijevic 2017).

Methodologies employed to study violent extremism and radicalisation

As for the methodological approaches, it can be noted that the authors of the recent set of studies employed various tools for grasping the socio-political phenomenon. The first group of studies aims to widen the scope of the research, putting the national case studies into the regional context. This approach is close to the "methodological nationalism" research approach. One of the most paradigmatic cases, here, is Azinović (2018) take on the regional CVE developments. A similar, holistic approach was employed in a second group of studies, whose authors also recognise the complexity of the issue and opt for a more comprehensive understanding.

Most studies employ qualitative research methodologies, predominantly expert interviews, focus groups and secondary literature analysis.

What is missing is a multidisciplinary approach to the phenomena of violent extremism and a focus not only on particular case studies but also a comparative one, as well as research on the full scale of the process from risk assessment of violent extremism, prevention, suppression and reintegration.

Strategies to Counter/Prevent Violent Extremism and Radicalisation (C/PVE)

C/PVE INITIATIVES

The National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism 2018-2022 (NS/CVE) and National Strategy for Countering Terrorism 2018-2022 were adopted by North Macedonia's Parliament in March 2018. In order to implement the National Strategies, the Government declared its commitment to develop appropriate procedures and regulations. However, the implementation and the impact of the NS/CVE on the process of radicalisation are mostly analysed by various civil society organizations (CSOs) supported by international donors rather than policy analysis and research supported by government institutions.

Following the recommendations issued by national and regional actors, the government created and appointed a 44-member National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Counterterrorism (CT). The government tasked the Committee and Coordinators to revise the 2017-2020 National CT Strategy and to draft a new National CVE Strategy as well as CT and CVE National Action Plans. The National CT/CVE Committee and Coordinator met for the first time in November 2017 to map out a plan to draft the National CVE Strategy and Action Plan, but the government failed to provide funding to implement this plan.

The National Committee for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism (NCSNEBPT) leads the initiatives to implement the Action Plans (with input from relevant institutions and ministries of the Government: the Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Local Self-Government, ZELS (Local Self Government Units Community), Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Agency for Youth and Sports, Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Religious Groups, as well as other institutions, are involved in the work of the National Committee. The representatives of 22 institutions serve as members/deputy members of the wider National Committee. These members act as inter-ministerial liaisons, managing the implementation of activities outlined in the National Strategy and Action Plans. Civil society, led by NGOs, religious leaders, local communities, youth, women, the media, and others, according to the Strategy has an additional role to play and is responsible for coordinating and communicating the efforts of different actors. In 2019 the National SNBPT Coordinator and two Deputy National SNBP Coordinators were appointed. The NCSNEBPT coordinates (non) state (institutional) capacities in efforts to prevent violent extremism and the fight against terrorism. The NCSNEBPT promotes inter-institutional co-operation to counter and prevent violent extremism in line with the recommendations of the EU, the US and the UN Secretary-General's Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Extremism.

Public policies and programmes

The recent analyses on public policies and programmes concluded that when it comes to combating violent extremism, the first association for many is law enforcement and the criminal justice system. A key aspect of the fight against violent extremism is the revamping of existing laws to better address the problem of foreign fighters and violent extremism, which in turn leads to terrorism. The criminal justice system must be able to respond to terrorism-related activities through fair and effective investigation, prosecution and punishment for acts of terrorism. It is also necessary to have an approach that includes preventive measures, such as

prosecution of individuals for terrorist attempts, complicity, funding, recruitment and training. While law enforcement is always important, preventive measures are equally as, if not more, important. The Western Balkan Extremism Research Forum in 2019 published a report and identified several important aspects of public policies. First, it points to the gaps in analysing P/CVE; second, it analyses driving factors and returnees; third, it emphasises the remaining gaps.

The important conclusion is that the lack of primary research has prevented policy-makers and other stakeholders from knowledge about drivers of violent extremism; the narrow focus on individual cases prevented a more complex regional policy towards P/CVE; the focus is on FF and not on all driving factors of violent extremism; on Islamic radicalisation but not on other forms of violent extremism. The multidisciplinary and multilevel character of violent extremism needs the same complexity of policy answers.

The National Strategy for PVE is based on the latest grassroots research on community dynamics regarding extremism, conducted by CSOs in North Macedonia. The general mission of the Strategy for PVE and FAT is to develop effective, accountable and comprehensive government and social capacities and activities for the prevention, protection, prosecution and response (PPPR) of radicalisation and violent extremism that can lead to terrorism, in line with the values of the state, in order to enable/promote a safe and prosperous State.

The specific mission for the prevention of violent extremism is to ensure and promote a safe, secure and prosperous state through coordinated activities that prevent, protect, execute and respond to the early identification and detection of factors contributing to radicalism, extremism and violent acts in the form of terrorism and/or terrorist activities.

The Strategy is mainly focused on the executive and the judiciary, with little attention to communities or wider social actors. This is a challenge, as it does not sufficiently involve preventing radicalisation, but rather dealing with its consequences. Community involvement is needed to find the roots of the problem, gain insight into why people are embarking on violent extremist pathways, and the opportunity to work to prevent radicalisation.

Official definitions of violent extremism and radicalisation

The legal framework contained provisions to combat terrorism but there were no specific provisions criminalising the participation and recruitment of foreign troops. The legislation covering the field of terrorism comes from Articles 394-a, 394-b and 394-c of the Criminal Code and the Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism.

According to the amendments adopted on 3 September 2014, Article 322-a of the Criminal Code now reads:

One who creates, organises, recruits, transports, organises transportation, equips, trains or otherwise prepares a person or group to participate in foreign military, police or paramilitary formations, in organised groups or individually outside the territory of the Republic of Macedonia shall be punished with imprisonment of at least five years.

The law does not apply retroactively.

These statutory provisions do not apply to persons holding the nationality of the countries in which their military or police formations participate, or to Macedonian nationals participating in military formation under the control of an internationally-recognised government or international organisation.

According to the National Strategy for PVE, violent extremism:

...refers to the beliefs and actions of people who support or use ideologically motivated violence to pursue radical ideological, religious, or political views.

Civil society

CSOs in North Macedonia were not immediately engaged and recognised by state institutions as relevant actors in PVE or Fight against terrorism. Due to this, there was almost no involvement of civil society in this process up to the adoption of the National Strategy in 2018. Even after the National Strategy identified civil society and other NGOs as important, the number of CSOs working on this issue is still extremely limited. Thus, there is a lack of knowledge on this issue within the CSOs themselves. It seems that Analytica think tank is the only organisation in the country that provides insight and research on the issue related to civil society in Macedonia (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, 2018; see, as well, Stojkovski 2019).

The NEXUS Civil Concept is implementing a research project called *Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) Phenomenon: Challenges of rehabilitation, resocialisation and effective reintegration of FTF Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia*. Having this category of sanctioned individuals in the penitentiaries, the project needs to anticipate the country's ability to undertake and administer adequate activities for rehabilitation, resocialisation and reintegration (RRR) of convicts from this category with the optimistic goal of eventually de-radicalising and disillusionment (Nexus, 2019).

The first training Module 1 for Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism (LIVE) is intended to benefit people with leadership potential who are well-connected in their communities, actively contributing to a positive change, and motivated to make an impact against violent extremism. It is designed for persons whose potential can be leveraged, rather than for persons who are already experts in preventing violent extremism. The LIVE training is intended to strengthen their skills and knowledge, so they can further contribute to building resilience of local communities to violent extremism (Nexus International Broadcasters Association, 2020).

The Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) in cooperation with the Initiative for European Perspective (IEP) and the "Institute for peace, security and policy research Konica", is implementing the project *Building resilience against violent terrorism and extremism through reinforced journalists, media and government officials* in the period from December 2019 to December 2020. The main objective of this project is to strengthen the capacity of the media and state authorities to communicate violent extremism and terrorism in a way that reduces the threat. The AJM budget for the implementation of this project is 34,098 € (Association of Journalist of Macedonia, 2020).

Religious communities

There are two major religious communities in contemporary North Macedonia, Orthodox Christian and Muslim, led by the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community (IRC); and several smaller

ones: the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Jewish community and the Evangelical Methodist Church.⁷ According to the Macedonian legal system, the religious communities are separated from the state and equal before the law.⁸

The Macedonian Orthodox Church, its claim to autocephaly and the Serbian Orthodox Church's denial of that claim represent what is probably the single most important challenge to the Macedonian Orthodox Church. In 1967 an assembly of the Church proclaimed autocephaly. Although there are statements this issue is exclusively between two churches, it becomes politicized regularly and touches nationalistic feelings on both sides. Thus interethnic relations are closely related to interreligious relations and rise of nationalism.

In North Macedonia, 83.5% of Macedonians consider themselves members of a Church; of these 81.9% believe in God and 45.8% are "strongly attached" to their religious community and only 12.6% "faintly attached" (Bezomrazno, 2014).

Muslims account for 33% of the population. North Macedonia has the 5th highest proportion of Muslims in Europe. Most of the Muslims in the country are Turks, Roma or Albanians, although there is a small number of Macedonian Muslims. Thirty-three different religious teachings have been registered in North Macedonia. Five churches and religious communities are listed in the Constitution as religions that have a great traditional and historical connection with North Macedonia (Relijiga, 2020).

The Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM) is the official Islamic religious community in North Macedonia. They are against the use of violence in the name of any religion. The IRC is active in countering violent groups and has developed a draft project to prevent radicalisation and terrorism in collaboration with the Hilal charity. The project's strategy is to strengthen moderate attitudes by raising public awareness and reaching out to the Muslim community in Macedonia, and at the same time working on the resocialisation of former foreign fighters. The project aims to counter the "twisted version of Islam" narrative preached by radicals. The IRC believes that strengthening the religious voice that transmits what it believes is the true message of Islam to Muslims in Macedonia should be the first and most urgent intervention in Muslim communities. The proposal also includes elements of support for families that have members affiliated with foreign armies. These families face a great deal of psychological burden and social exclusion from the community. The last pillar of the project is to facilitate the reintegration of foreign fighters back into Macedonia. This project, however, never received any funding and is currently on hold. ICM representatives have expressed concern that state authorities are not cooperating with them on the Strategy on Violent Extremism (SVE) and that they have been invited to only one meeting (with the former President Ivanov). According to them, the high unemployment rate, and the overall bad economic situation of young people in Macedonia is one of the

⁷ The remaining 28 religious teachings, recorded in the register, are mostly Christian-Protestant churches. There are also those that are traditional religions from the East. For five years now, the Mormons, the fastest growing religion in the world, have been operating in North Macedonia as registered. They call themselves the "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints". There are 1,952 churches and 580 mosques in present day in North Macedonia, and at least 50 churches and 10 mosques are either under construction or renovation. This means one church or mosque per 831 residents, unlike the European average, where there is one religious object for every 10,000 to 12,000 members of the population. However, the Islamic Community is adamant that the 580 mosques in Macedonia do not match the current needs of its flock. "Muslim believers of different ethnic backgrounds make up to 40% of the country's population," Afrim Tahiri, General Secretary of the IRC, maintained.

⁸ The Law on the legal obligation of the church, religious community and religious groups regulates the establishment and legal status of the church, the religious community and religious group, arrangement of worship, prayer and religious rite, religious instruction and educational activities, income of the church, religious community and religious group, as well as other issues.

reasons when it comes to radicalisation. In a situation where young people see no hope for a better tomorrow, they become an easier target for manipulation. ICM said that it incorporated counter-narratives into Friday sermons with Muslim worshippers. ICM also conducted one Countering violent extremism training session for approximately 12 imams. Local think tanks continued to research the drivers of terrorism. The Macedonian municipalities of Aracinovo, Cair (Skopje), Gostivar, Kicevo, Kumanovo, Ohrid, Struga and Tetovo are members of the Strong Cities Network.

On a different note, the local religious communities depicted previously, which were vocal in the initial processes of radicalisation in North Macedonia, were reported to be organised by two “illegal” imams who, after their stays in the Middle East, started mobilising religious groups, *jamaats* and para-*jamaats* in North Macedonia (Oehaja and Perteshi 2018). Finally, the aforementioned Macedonian Christian Brotherhood, even though not registered as a religious community, employs religious and far-right narratives for mobilising potential affiliates.

Methodologies

Stakeholders involved

The general approach of implementation of the National Strategy on P/CVE is that the National Committee is the main national actor that coordinates activities of other governmental and civil society actors in the implementation of the Action Plan on local, national and regional level. According to some recent analysis, the main improvement in public policy on P/CVE is that the National Strategy complemented the preventive approach to security that was dominant before 2018/19. Still, we can suggest that prevention of violent extremism deserves a complex and integrated approach of all actors.

The reference to the methodology also means changes in the current approach that is reduced to the definition of the main actors and activities, outputs and time-frame of the Action Plan on implementation. The methodology should be improved and translated into a process of risk assessment from violent extremism and identification of key risk factors, development of monitoring capacities and exchange of information, financing of the Action Plan activities, evaluation of success, good practices, sharing, and so on.

The focus is on various issues at the local government level, pointing to several areas where state and local authorities and institutions need to work together to prevent the emergence of violent extremism and terrorism. These include improving trust and cooperation between government security services and religious leaders; clarifying comprehensive training and support for religious communities to oppose online radicalisation; improving training in communities, families, prison staff and religious leaders in order to identify the early signs of violent radicalisation; developing means and measures to counter the volume of misinformation highlighted by polarising narratives in vulnerable categories of citizens; and creating processes and procedures to encourage programmes in communities to support social cohesion, which prevents violent extremism and terrorism.

Three municipalities in Macedonia – Cair, Gostivar and Kichevo – will establish community action teams. These teams will be responsible for developing local plans, including activities to build partnerships and links between communities and central government. The programme is piloted in these municipalities as outlined in the recently adopted National Strategy and Action Plan for Preventing Violent Extremism in Macedonia. The programme is implemented by the Search for Common Ground from October 2018 until October 2020. It is co-funded by the United Kingdom and the Netherlands more in Ministerstvo za vnatrešni raboti (2017).

On the regional level, North Macedonia and countries in the region are part of the EU Initiative for the Western Balkans in the Fight against Terrorism: An Integrative Action Plan initiated by the Council of the European Union. The initiative aims to “eliminate further duplication and overlap in the fight against terrorism and activities of violent extremism in the Western Balkans.” The initiative assumes that the fight against violent extremism in the Balkans requires a coordinated approach by all stakeholders active in the region.

North Macedonia is a member of the Council of Europe's Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism, a Financial Action Task Force (FATF)-style regional body. North Macedonia's Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), the Money Laundering Prevention Directorate (MLPD), is a member of the Egmont Group of Financial Intelligence Units.

Enforcement mechanisms for the C/PVE initiatives

As discussed above, 86 fighters have returned to the country, 11 have been sentenced to prison terms, and four are facing trial. But some of them did not even get home. Mohamed Zekiri, from Ohrid, was arrested by Turkish police (2015) after returning from a training camp in Syria with three other jihadists. Two police officers were killed in the shootout, after which he was sentenced to life in prison. Another Macedonian citizen has been arrested for recruiting soldiers in Italy. To prevent violent extremism, the study recommends an effective re-socialisation programme implemented by prison penologists.

The long prison sentences received by returnees from the battlefields of the Middle East have reduced the number of like-minded people leaving the country to fight in Iraq and Syria, according to a survey by the NGO Analytica. However, the problem has not been eradicated, as more than 100 people still stand by ISIS with a handgun (2016).⁹

The results of the research (Analytica) showed that after the police actions “Cells 1 and 2”, in which 15 people accused of participating in foreign army, police, paramilitary or parapolic formations were arrested, the number of young people from Macedonia who go to the battlefields in the Middle East has decreased.

Available resources and main objectives of the strategies or initiatives implemented

The National Strategy is not supported with a budget in addition to regular one from the main actors i.e. government institutions and ministries and local institutions.

The National Committee activities in implementation of National Strategy 2018-2022 are supported by donor projects including one described above.

⁹ A five-year prison sentence for four defendants, a five-and-a-half-year prison sentence and a seven-year prison sentence were assigned to the six suspects in the “Cell” case, who pleaded guilty at the first public hearing to the indictment and reached a plea agreement with the Prosecutor's Office. The highest prison sentence was imposed on the first suspect, Rev. Medzepe Memishi, who is suspected of participating in foreign military, police, paramilitary or parapolic formations, according to Article 322-a, paragraph 1. Ahmet Darlishta, who is charged with the same crime, but after three articles of Article 322-a, was sentenced to five and a half years in prison. The suspects, Fazli Sulja, Sejfula Edemovski, Shehu Muhamed and Resulj Saiti, who are suspected of two counts under Article 322 for participating in a foreign army, police, paramilitary or parapolic formations, were sentenced to five years in prison.

The NSPVE stress that “A preventive approach to radicalisation and violent extremism is the most economical way to deal with this problem, which must not be treated insufficiently or in general ignored, given that the use of force is always the last, not the first and unique answer option” (Government of the Republic of Macedonia 2018).

The specific mission of the National Strategy is to ensure and promote a secure and prosperous state through coordinated activities that prevent, protect, execute and respond to injury identification and detection of factors contributing to radicalism, extremism and violent acts in the form of terrorism and/or terrorist activities.

In the case of North Macedonia, the priority actions include strengthening North Macedonia's counter-terrorism structures and strategies, including with an improved threat assessment; stepping up efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, including with a multi-agency approach at the local level, as well as addressing the challenges posed by returning FTF and their families; and establishing a national threat assessment of money laundering risks and improving the link between financial intelligence and prosecution

Existence of critical evaluation systems

[Impact of CVE-PVE on the threat of radicalisation](#)

According to the National Strategy, there are limited capacities for P/CVE at the state level. The marginalisation of communities, intolerance about differences in culture, religion and languages and unfair or unjust practices of law enforcement agencies are the main risks for successful action. It is expected that institutional efforts to create comprehensive training and support in creating platforms and databases for sharing agency information, data and intelligence and increased trust and cooperation between government security services and leader communities will ensure consistency of efforts.

The National Strategy focuses on various issues at the local government level, pointing out several areas where state and local authorities and institutions need to work together to prevent the emergence of violent extremism and terrorism. These include improving trust and cooperation between government security services and religious leaders; clarifying comprehensive training and support for religious communities to oppose online radicalisation; improving training in communities, families, prison staff and religious leaders in order to identify the early signs of violence radicalisation; developing means and measures to counter the volume of misinformation they provide, point out the polarising narratives in the vulnerable categories of citizens; and creating processes and procedures to encourage programmes in support of communities of social cohesion, which prevents violent extremism and terrorism.

Unemployment and inappropriate responses from police authorities compound the frustration of communities that believe their needs are not taken seriously. Failure, or latent response to community calls for help by state institutions in the protection of citizens, strengthens the emergence of violent and radical activities. In North Macedonia, the tendency to encourage citizens to maintain ethnically and professionally closed societies, rather than efforts to encourage inclusive, inter- and intra-cultural integration and religious tolerance, are largely important reasons for NEMIRI. Furthermore, these differences in society contribute to the individual or collective will to accept extremism. Ultimately, division and exclusion will significantly contribute to the transnational overflow effects, which intensify the consequences at the local, state and regional level (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2018).

SPECIFIC INITIATIVES ADDRESSED TO WOMEN AND YOUTH

Women, Peace and Security and UN SC Res 1325 is the only framework that addressed the relation between women and security. It contains three strategic goals including strengthening the gender perspective in the formulation and implementation of the peace, security and defence policy. The Ministry of Defence took the leading role from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) but, so far, the new National Action Plan that will eventually touch upon the issue of women and P/CVE is not visible.

The **MotherSchools Model Initiative** is creating opportunities to boost trust among community members, which is a fundamental concept for overcoming the stigma and taboos associated with violent extremism and terrorism. In the beginning, many mothers were reluctant to join the project, initially due to the controversy over the content of the topic and the implications that may arise in the environment in which they live. Those who completed the programme gained a sense of pride in their achievement and built a strong sense of camaraderie, self-confidence, and openness to each other's communication. The MotherSchools is a "Women without Borders" programme, designed for mothers with the goal to provide mothers with the competence and confidence to guide their children through the challenges of adolescence, negative influences and growing global uncertainties. The MotherSchools initiative creates a safe space to learn, build trust and find support from others experiencing the same issues, without judgment or fear. Last year the programme was implemented in Saraj and Chair and this year MotherSchools programme was expanded in three new municipalities: Tetovo, Gostivar and Studenichani. The MotherSchools programme in these municipalities started in October 2019.

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The EU supported **Youth Work in Prevention of Violent Extremism**. Through this project, SEGA¹⁰ promoted this method to the wide stakeholders and prepared the ground for further developments related to structured dialogue. The project aimed for young people and decision-makers to become aware of processes and risks leading to extremism and radicalisation and be empowered to engage in anti-extremism efforts both individually and collectively at national level and within their local communities. The importance of the project is that it touches the most vulnerable group on radicalisation, the youth, as most of the reports confirm that, besides ethnic or religious differences, high unemployment and social exclusion affect the youth and facilitate the paths of radicalisation. In a way this fills the gap identified in policy dialogue between youth and policy makers in many areas including P/CVE.

¹⁰SEGA is a national platform of youth organisation dedicated to lobbying for needed legislative changes as well as committed to supporting youth activism, access to information and participation of young people in activities for solution of their problems (SEGA, 2020).

Conclusion

Given the cross-institutional data and multidisciplinary sources, we would like to point out two particular aspects as concluding remarks on the state of the art in the present day Republic of North Macedonia.

On the one hand, we would like to emphasise the historical particularity of North Macedonia and draw attention to its multi-confessional legacy. In other words, from a diachronic perspective, Macedonian society has a long tradition of multi-ethnic and multiconfessional tolerance which can be traced back to the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. From a contemporary perspective, these legacies translated into a set of constitutional, legal and socio-political instruments which institutionalise the multicultural reality in a way that is without a regional precedence. The various (i) localised and (ii) primarily individualised cases of radicalisation in North Macedonia, as presented in the report, best illustrate this point. Therefore, we suggest:

- Considering the long history of multiconfessional and multiethnic cooperation and everyday life in the Macedonian context,
- Considering the societal particularities in the Macedonian context,
- Considering the geopolitical position of the Republic of North Macedonia, its bilateral and regional relations, as well as its position within the wider arena of international political relations.

On the other hand, we would also like to point out several aspects that appear to be under-researched in the literature and not given the proper attention by the official state institutions and civil sector. Some of the remarks are restated as points in other research papers and policy analyses on North Macedonia. Herein, present day Macedonian society can benefit from a compound research on:

- The relation between the new media and social media and the processes of radicalisation. This aspect was hinted at in several studies on the violent extremism and radicalisation in North Macedonia but has not yet been analysed in a structured and systematic manner. A critical discourse analysis on the social media content and an analytical operation of gathering first-hand experiences with the social media editors can be a way to grasp these developments in Macedonian society.
- The process of media frames and influence on public opinion. One can clearly state, based on various research on other topics, that the media is setting the agenda on certain public discussions. In these regards, one can ask a mixed-method research question on the way the media influences public opinion on violent extremism and radicalisation in North Macedonia.
- Hate speech and the process of radicalisation. The public sowing, without a sense of responsibility for the spoken word, appears as the main generator of the social climate of intolerance and prejudice on national, ethnic and other grounds which appears as a general psychological framework for the expansion of all forms of acts of hatred from acts of physical violence to acts of verbal and psychological abuse. In the Macedonian practice of the authorities responsible for combating and preventing hate speech there is an evident reserved attitude towards the application of legal

prohibitions. Hence, the low number of registered cases of criminal prosecution or taking other legal measures.

- Even though various state institutions in North Macedonia came up with several national strategies on countering violent extremism and radicalisation, one can point out that knowledge of the implementation of these strategies is lacking. Herein, a functional analysis on a particular institution can serve as a tool for grasping the institutional memory, institutional efforts and accomplishments of certain institutional strategies on the topics of violent extremism and radicalisation.
- The relation between the state institutions and civil society, and the role of the latter in the process of raising awareness and researching the phenomena of violent extremism and radicalisation in the North Macedonian setting. In these regards, we would also like to point out the numerous studies conducted by the civil sector as a certain accomplishment. Yet, a structured, meta-level analysis of the relation between the official institutions and the civil sector partners, not only the NGOs, is a point to be developed in the future.
- The NATO accession and the latest benchmark in North Macedonia's EU integration is certainly a point that should be examined in the future regarding the state's issues with violent extremism and radicalisation.
- The most recent pandemics and the state measures employed for battling the crisis have already provoked some issues between North Macedonia's government and certain religious institutions. The impact on the radicalisation and violent extremism in the state is yet to be explored.

Finally, we would like to highlight that an interdisciplinary approach and mixed-methods study is the best way to grasp these socio-political phenomena in the national context. In addition, a cross-national and transnational analysis, as projected within the CONNEKT research objectives, will certainly contribute to a better understanding of the aforementioned gaps in the literature and the most recent developments that are not part of the scholarly discourse.

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What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being “the problem” into “the key” for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

CONNEKT is a research and action project which analyses seven potential radicalisation factors among youth aged between 12 and 30: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities and evaluates them on three levels: transnational/state, community and individual.

Its aim is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of extremism among youth in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to identify the interplay between them. Based on the empirical research findings, the project will end up recommending tools and measures for the prevention of violent extremism from a social and community perspective both for the regions of study and the European Union.

Under the coordination of the European Institute of the Mediterranean, (IEMed), the project gathers a multidisciplinary Consortium involving 14 partners from MENA, the EU and the Balkans.



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