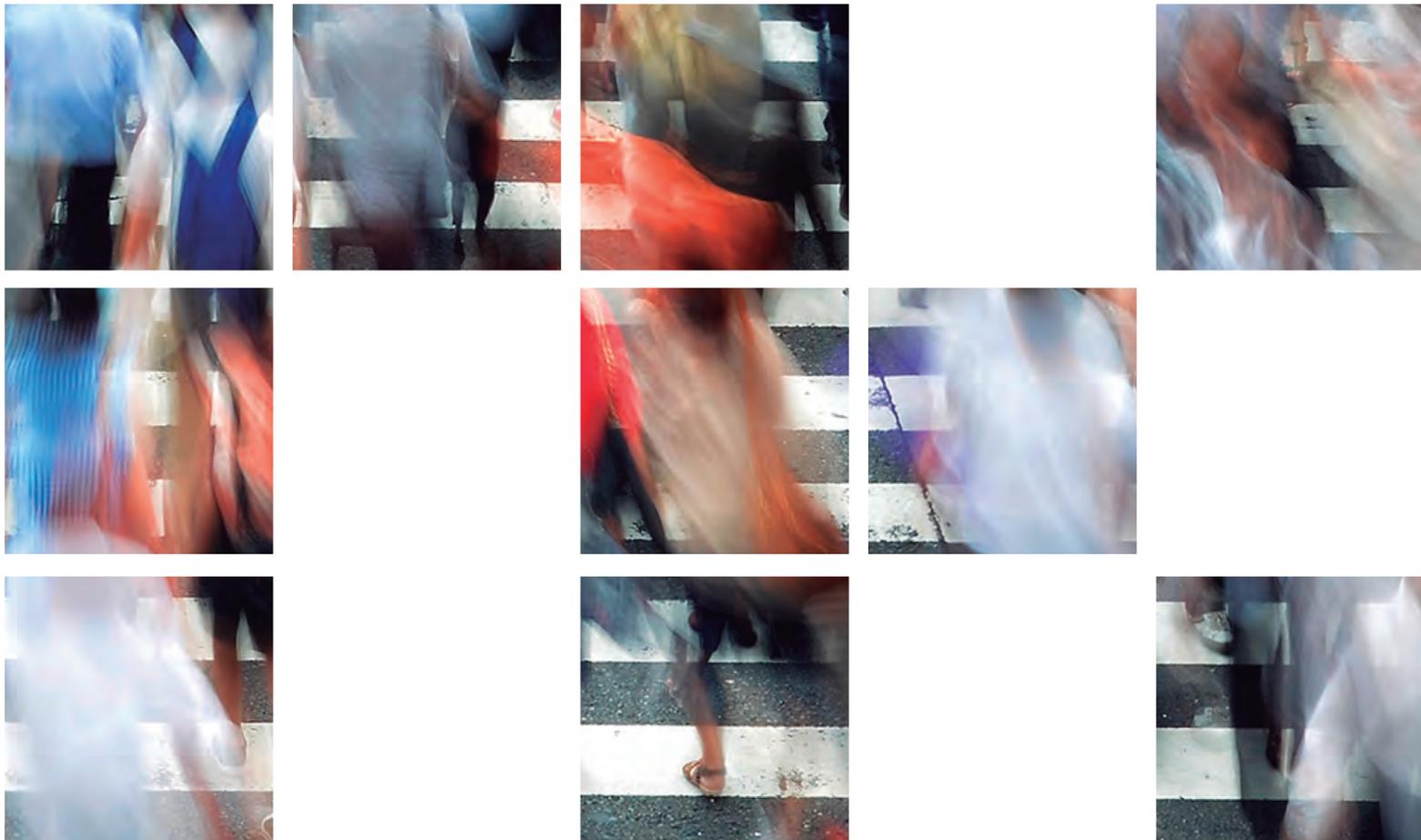




CONNEKT

REGIONALREPORT

Regional perspectives on radicalisation
and violent extremism in the Balkans



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PERSPECTIVES ON RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MENA, THE BALKANS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Regional Perspectives on Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the Balkans

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REGIONAL OUTLOOK

POLITICAL CONTEXT

All four countries under consideration used to belong to the communist bloc and are in fact rather young democracies. However, while Bulgaria was already an independent state, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), North Macedonia and Kosovo were constitutive parts of former Yugoslavia and became independent after its disintegration.¹ After the end of the Cold War and collapse of communism, all four countries entered a long and painful transition period towards democracy and free-market economy. In addition, they all adhered the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) one of their key foreign policy strategic priorities. Membership of these two organisations was seen by all four countries as the best way for the development of a functional democracy and coherent security system. Today, Bulgaria and North Macedonia are members of NATO and BiH started implementing the Membership Action Plan in 2018, while Kosovo is lagging behind in its efforts to join the Alliance.² On the other hand, Bulgaria became a member of the EU in 2007 and North Macedonia has been a candidate country since 2005, while both BiH and Kosovo signed Stabilisation And Association Agreements with the EU in 2008 and 2015, respectively.

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In addition, all four countries have made considerable progress in creating effective, impartial and authoritative institutions that guarantee the rule of law and respect for human rights and freedoms. To achieve these goals, in addition to the EU and NATO, membership of the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was also of the utmost importance for all these countries. The CoE is undoubtedly one of the key international organisations for upholding human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. On the other hand, within its comprehensive approach to security, the OSCE addresses a wide range of security-related concerns, which among others include human rights, national minorities and democratisation. Still, all four countries need further comprehensive reforms on their path towards fully consolidated democracies. This is especially true for the three Western Balkan countries that require crucial reforms related to the rule of law, fight against corruption and organised crime, economy and competitiveness as well as regional cooperation and reconciliation (European Commission, 2019). These internal issues, coupled with political instability, weak economy and relatively high levels of poverty, have turned these countries into fertile ground for radicalisation and violent extremism.

ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION

The size of the overall population of the four Western Balkan countries that are subject of this report differs greatly. Kosovo has the smallest population (1,739,825 residents) and Bulgaria the largest

¹ BiH declared its independence on 15 October 1991, North Macedonia on 8 September 1991, and Kosovo on 17 February 2008.

² Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration process has been hindered because five EU member states – Spain, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Cyprus – have not yet recognised its independence. The first four countries are also NATO members.

(7,364,570 residents), while BiH and North Macedonia are somewhere in between with 3,531,159 and 2,022,547, respectively.³ In all four countries, the population is quite diverse and dynamic. Since the collapse of communism, all four countries have witnessed an ongoing migration, especially of their young population. Population in all four countries is rather mixed both ethnically and religiously. The ethnic composition of the population in Bulgaria, BiH, Kosovo and North Macedonia is given in Table 1.⁴

TABLE 1. Population by Ethnic Affiliation

BULGARIA Total 7,364,570	BiH Total 3,531,159	KOSOVO Total 1,739,825	NORTH MACEDONIA Total 2,022,547
Bulgarian 6,245,155 (84.8%)	Bosniak 1,769,592 (50.11%)	Albanian 1,616,869 (92.9%)	Macedonian 1,297,981 (64.18%)
Turkish 567,072 (7.7%)	Serbian 1,086,733 (30.78%)	Bosniak 27,533 (1.6%)	Albanian 509,083 (25.17%)
Roma 360,864 (4.9%)	Croat 544,780 (15.43%)	Serb 25,532 (1.5%)	Turk 77,959 (3.85%)
Russian 15,595 (0.21%)	Others 96,539 (2.73%)	Turk 18,738 (1.1%)	Roma 53,879 (2.66%)
Armenian 9,978 (0.13%)	Not declared 27,055 (0.77%)	Ashkali 15,446 (0.9%)	Serb 35,939 (1.78%)
Roma 8,824 (0.5%)		Egyptian 11,524 (0.7%)	Bosniak 9,659 (0.48%)
		Gorani 10,265 (0.6%)	Vlach 20,993 (1.04%)
		Roma 8,824 (0.5%)	

Source: CONNEKT Country Reports. Own production.

Table 1 shows that, in terms of ethnic composition of the population, Kosovo and Bulgaria are the two most homogenous countries, with Albanians constituting 92.9% and Bulgarians 84.8% of the total population in Kosovo and Bulgaria, respectively. It is interesting that although the proportion of minorities in Kosovo is very small, it has the highest number: seven recognised ethnic groups as ethnic minorities. In Bulgaria, in addition to Bulgarians, Turks with 7.7% and Roma with 4.9% represent two others large ethnic minorities in the country. On the other hand, BiH is made up of three major constituent nations/ethnic groups, while other minorities are insignificant. As can be seen from the table, Bosniaks make up exactly half of the

³ Official data from the latest census in respective countries. It should be noted that the last census in Bulgaria and Kosovo took place in 2011, in BiH in 2013 and in North Macedonia as early as 2002.

⁴ Unless indicated otherwise, data used in all tables is taken from CONNEKT Country Reports of BiH Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić et al., 2020), Bulgaria (Dzhekova, 2020), Kosovo (Peci and Demjaha, 2020) and North Macedonia (Georgieva, Kambovski and Trajanovski, 2020).

population with 50.1%, while Serbs and Croats account for 30.8% and 15.4%, respectively. It should be clarified that the category “Others” that makes up around 2.7% of the total population in BiH refers to the members of national minorities and people who do not identify with any of the three constituent nations. In North Macedonia, Macedonians and Albanians represent the two major ethnic groups with 64.18% and 25.17%, respectively. It is worth noting that, except in BiH, ethnic Turks are present as an official minority in all other countries.

On the other hand, as already mentioned, the four countries under consideration are also quite heterogeneous in terms of religious affiliation of the population (Table 2). It should be noted that, although religious affiliation in these countries most of the time is intrinsically linked with ethno-national identities, there are also exemptions with many groups for whom religious, linguistic and ethnic markers do not correspond to such a classification. While the majority of Bulgarians, Macedonians and Serbs are Orthodox, there are also Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks), Macedonian-speaking Muslims (Torbesi), and Serbian-speaking Muslims. On the other hand, while a huge majority of Albanians in Kosovo are Muslims (95.6%), there are also Catholic and Protestant Albanians in the country. In addition, it must be noted that there are significant historical differences among Muslims living in various countries of the Western Balkans in terms of numerous languages and ethnicities (Peci and Demjaha, 2020).

TABLE 2. Population by Religious Affiliation

	BULGARIA Total 7,364,570	BiH Total 3,531,159	KOSOVO⁵ Total 1,739,825	NORTH MACEDONIA Total 2,022,547
Orthodox	4,374,135 (59.4%)	Muslim 1,790,454 (50.7%)	Muslim 1,663,412 (95.6%)	Orthodox 1,310,184 (64.78%)
Muslim	577,139 (7.84%)	Orthodox 1,085,760 (30.75%)	Catholic 38,438 (2.2%)	Muslim 674,015 (33.32%)
Protestant	64,476 (0.87%)	Catholic 536,333 (15.1%)	Orthodox 25,837 (1.7%)	Catholic 7,008 (0.35%)
Catholic	48,954 (0.66%)	Atheist 27,853 (0.82%)	Other 1,188 (0.07%)	Protestant 520 (0.026%)
Armenian- Gregorian	1,715 (0.023%)	Agnostic 10,816 (0.33%)	No religion 1,242 (0.071%)	Other 30,820 (1.52%)
Jewish	706 (0.01%)	Not declared 32,700 (0.94%)	Not declared 2,495 (0.14%)	
No answer	1,605,476 (21.8%)	Other 40,655 (1.16%)	Prefer not to answer 10,265 (0.59%)	
		No answer 6,588 (0.20%)		

Source: CONNEKT Country Reports. Own production.

⁵ It is worth noting that the 2011 Kosovo population census was largely boycotted by the Kosovo Serbs (especially in North Kosovo), who predominantly identify as Serbian Orthodox Christians, and therefore the Serb population and Orthodox religion were underrepresented. See Collaku, 2011.

According to Table 2, it is clear that the Orthodox and Muslim religions are dominant in the four countries under consideration. Another important factor is that in all four countries under consideration a significant proportion of the population is made up of Muslims. In Bulgaria, Orthodox religion constitutes 59.4%, while Muslims make up only 7.84%. However, one cannot ignore the fact that 21.8% of the citizens in Bulgaria did not answer the question about their religious affiliation. In Kosovo, on the other hand, with 95.6%, Muslims make up by far the most dominant religious group in the country. It is worth noting that, in addition to the majority of Albanians, all other ethnic minorities except Serbs also belong to Islam. In North Macedonia, the majority of the population are Orthodox (64.78%), while 33.32% belong to the Muslim religion. In BiH, similarly to ethnic composition, religious affiliation of the population is also more balanced with 50.7% Muslims, 30.75% Orthodox and 15.1% Catholic. It should be noted that except for the case of Croat Catholics in BiH, Catholic and other religions in these four countries are represented in symbolic percentages.

Significantly, the collapse of communism in the four countries under discussion left an ideological vacuum that provided space for the strengthening of nationalism and revival of religiosity, which then gave rise to strong ethno-religious identities. The roots of such complex ethnic/religious structures in all four countries actually go back to the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire. This system created an institutional structure for administratively integrating increasingly growing numbers of Balkan non-Muslims into the Ottoman state. It organised the Ottoman Empire according to religious adherence, rather than by territory, economic status or ethnic background. All subjects were distributed among three *millets* that represented the most important existing non-Muslim faiths: (1) the Orthodox Christians, (2) the Jews, and (3) the Armenian Christians (Daskalov and Vezenkov, 2015: 386). Obviously, the Muslims de facto constituted the fourth *millet*, making at the same time the Muslims of the Balkans members of the Ottoman-Turk “political nation” regardless of their mother tongue (Hupchick, 2002: 133). Such *millet* identification eliminated all considerations of ethnicity, and thus lacked any territorial connotations associated with the Western European concept of nation. *Millet* affiliation governed one’s life no matter where one lived within the empire, or how mixed the population was. Consequently, for all Ottoman subjects the homeland was anywhere within the borders of the empire, thus increasingly leading to mixed ethnic populations throughout the Balkans (Hupchick, 2002: 134).

Since in the *millet* system the national communities had no geographical boundaries, every cultural community considered all territories in which its congregation was a majority as its own. As a result, once the Ottoman Empire started disintegrating, the newly-emerged Balkan nations claimed each others’ territories as their own. In that way, such a system from the beginning carried in itself the possibility of bloody wars that followed after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. However, it is worth noting that while in the case of other Balkan nationalisms religion as a factor of unification for the population played a positive role in the development of nationalism, in the Albanian case it certainly had a divisive role.⁶ Since both the Ottoman Empire and its neighbours insisted on dividing

⁶ Albanians were basically divided into three religions: Islam, Orthodoxy, and Roman Catholicism. Muslims who made up about 70% of the population were further divided into Sunni Muslims (forming the majority) and Bektashi Muslims, a liberal Shiite sect which was a heterodox and syncretic order that harboured the first pioneers of nationalism among Albanian Muslims. See Demjaha and Peci, 2016: 11.

Albanians along religious lines, for the Albanians it was crucial to overcome the religious division by opting for a secular Albanian national identity based on “cultural and linguistic unity” (Misha, 2002: 41). After the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, history has basically repeated itself with the ethnic and religious background of adversaries reinforcing each other. In Croatia, Catholic Croats fought against Orthodox Serbs, while in BiH, Orthodox ethnic Serbs fought against Muslim ethnic Bosniaks and Catholic ethnic Croats, though at some points during the war everybody fought against everybody. In Kosovo, the police, military and paramilitary forces made by Orthodox ethnic Serbs fought against predominantly Muslim ethnic Albanians, and in Macedonia the conflict was basically between Orthodox ethnic Macedonians and Muslim ethnic Albanians.

DEFINITIONS OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

OFFICIAL DEFINITIONS STEMMING FROM NATIONAL STRATEGIES

Official definitions of radicalisation and violent extremism were outlined in the National Strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism that were adopted in all four countries under consideration.⁷ Since the drafting of these strategies in all countries was heavily assisted by international experts, especially American, in many aspects they are quite similar, and basically also employ similar definitions. It is interesting that the “Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism, 2015-2020” does not explicitly define “terrorism” or “violent extremism”. It refers in various ways to “terrorism and terrorism-related phenomena” or “violent extremism that can lead to terrorism,” and cites “new terrorist challenges” that include foreign fighters, but never defines any of these terms. In terms of definitions, the Strategy only builds on the definition by the OSCE, that is: “Violent extremism and radicalization that leads to terrorism.” Kosovo’s “Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism, 2015-2020” defines “Violent Extremism” as “extremism which involves the use of violence; including but not limited to terrorism” and “Radicalisation” as the “process of approving extremist religious beliefs and in some cases converting into a violent extremist.”

8

On the other hand, the Bulgarian “Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020)” defines “radicalisation” as “a process of adopting extreme opinions, views, beliefs and ideologies, to the extent of fierce rejection of all alternatives.” Also, according to the Strategy, “radicalisation” is “characterised by a decisive readiness for imposing one’s views and principles over the rest of society, through rejecting the constitutional foundations of democracy and non-respect for fundamental human rights. In some cases, it can lead to adopting the ideology of violence.” In addition, the Strategy defines “radicalisation which leads to violence” as “a phenomenon where individuals or groups of people adopt opinions, views and ideas, which might lead to acts of terrorism,” and “Violent extremism” as “a phenomenon where individuals or groups of people support or carry out ideologically motivated violence to achieve their ideological goals.” Similarly, in North Macedonia, according to the “National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism 2018-2022” “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.”

⁷ BiH and Kosovo were the first two countries in the Western Balkans to adopt the National Strategies. In July 2015, BiH adopted the “Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism, 2015-2020”, while in September 2015, Kosovo adopted the “Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism, 2015-2020”. On the other hand, Bulgaria adopted the “Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020)” in January 2016, while in North Macedonia the “National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism 2018-2022” and the “National Strategy for Countering Terrorism 2018-2022” were adopted only in March 2018.

DEFINITIONS IN ACADEMIC WORK

In addition to official definitions of radicalisation and violent extremism discussed above, the academic community from all four countries under consideration has also made serious efforts to distinguish between “radicalisation”, “extremism” and “violent extremism,” while at the same time developing definitions for these terms. However, these efforts came with a certain delay since, until recently, authors in the Western Balkans gave little attention to the terminology related to radicalisation and violent extremism. During recent years, attempts were made to conceptually distinguish between the terms “radicalisation” and “extremism” (often used interchangeably) as well as “violent extremism” and “terrorism” (also often used interchangeably) (Becirevic, 2016). Academic experts believe that, in addition to being a weakness, the unclarity of terminology represents a serious concern because official definitions are an important aid in developing a common understanding of how to structure and implement P/CVE activities.

In Bulgaria, the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) has in its numerous studies published since 2016 mainly adopted official definitions described in the country’s National Strategy. However, the CSD has also provided a review of the state of the art in academic discourses on definitional issues (Dzhekova et al., 2015), which is used as a reference point for other authors. The CSD often points to the difference between violent and non-violent radicalisation in its work. It also uses definitions by the EU and United Nations (UN) institutions such as the European Commission (EC) definition of radicalisation as “a process of socialisation leading to the use of violence” (European Commission’s Experts Group on Violent Radicalisation, 2008: 5), as well as the CoE’s definition of violent extremism: “promoting, supporting or committing acts which may lead to terrorism and which are aimed at defending an ideology advocating racial, national, ethnic or religious supremacy and opposing core democratic principles and values” (Council of Europe, 2015). It should be noted that other authors in Bulgaria either adopt the official state definitions, refer to foreign academic works or do not provide a definition at all.

In Kosovo, definitions about the concepts of radicalisation and violent extremism are still unclear and there is hardly a consensus within the country about their meaning and use. Nevertheless, a number of researchers have utilised various definitions about the concepts of radicalisation and violent extremism. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study has used definitions of these terms given by the Oxford Dictionary. Accordingly, extremism is defined as “the holding of extreme political or religious views [or] fanaticism,” while violent extremism is defined as direct usage of violence or as “encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of violent acts to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals” (Qirezi, 2017: 26). On the other hand, a report by Berghof’s Foundation defines only the concept of extremism as “any ideology that opposes a society’s core values and principles.” While acknowledging that extremists do not necessarily engage in violence, the report defines violent extremism as the one that occurs “when extremist worldviews are accompanied by the justification and use of extreme violence against those who do not share the same belief or ideology” (Morina et al., 2019: 4). Interestingly, Krasniqi defines radicalisation and extremism exclusively through the prism of Islam. He defines “Islamic radicalism” as all forms of actions that are “manifested mainly through the discourse of the conservative doctrines of Islam’s interpretation that exhibit a high degree of puritanism and religious intolerance” (Krasniqi, 2019: 10). In North Macedonia, several researchers adopt Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins’s definition on 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” (Hafez and Mullins, 2015: 260).⁸

It is worth noting that, when discussing definitions related to radicalisation and violent extremism, researchers try to avoid stigmatisation of individuals and groups who adhere to radical religious ideologies and hold radical religious or political beliefs within the legal boundaries of liberal democratic societies. According to Bećirević, Halilović and Azinović, authors and researchers have begun to employ these terms with more caution because they acknowledge that radicalisation does not necessarily lead to violence. They argue that it is necessary to distinguish between radicalisation linked to violent extremism and terrorism, and radicalisation aimed at initiating societal changes through non-violent means (Bećirević et al., 2017). As a result, phrases such as “radicalisation into violent extremism” or “radicalisation towards terrorism” are used more frequently by different authors. For instance, a 2018 study in Macedonian published by the OSCE provides 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” (OSCE, 2018). Such an approach towards radicalisation was later recreated in the aforementioned National Strategy⁹ of North Macedonia and other governmental documents. Bećirević, on the other hand, insists that in the Bosnian context, any analysis of “radicalisation into violent extremism” must acknowledge the process of reciprocal radicalisation, wherein mutual forms of extremism feed one another (Bećirević, 2018). Although Krasniqi also acknowledges that “Islamic radicalism” is not necessarily manifested through violence, he claims that “Islamic radicalism is a dynamic process of embracing and manifesting extreme perceptions of a religious ideology, which may also affect the legitimacy of terrorist acts” (Krasniqi, 2019: 10). Similarly, Krasniqi defines the notion of “Islamic extremism” as “actions against constitutionalism characterized by the active opposition of any other religious doctrine or ideology” (Krasniqi, 2019: 10).

It should be noted that the official definitions adopted in National Strategies are rather broad, and in principle cover all types of radicalisation and violent extremism. However, in reality the main focus of law enforcement and intelligence efforts has predominantly been on Islamic radicalisation. To a certain extent the same is also true for the academic literature since most of the authors cover only Islamic religious communities. Due to donor-driven research priorities, academic literature on violent extremism and radicalisation in BiH mostly mention the Salafi movement and studies are exclusively concerned with Islamic radicalisation (Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić et al., 2020). In Kosovo, only a few of the authors adopt more general definitions that, in addition to religious, also encompass political, ideological and social groups and individuals (Peci and Demjaha, 2020). In reality, extremism is also present among all religious groups in the four countries under consideration. The same applies to far-right radicalisation and ethnically and politically motivated acts of violence. Unfortunately, such forms of radicalisation and violent extremism are often overlooked and remain largely under-reported, under-researched and often under-prosecuted (Dzhekova, 2020). For the time being, representatives of state institutions in all four countries continue to view violent extremist threats mainly through the Islamist religious prism.

⁸ 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 Kalajdzioski, “Report on Macedonia”.

⁹ For more details see “National Counterterrorism Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia (2018-2022)”, Government of the Republic of Macedonia. National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (2018), 11.

PRESENCE OF RADICALISED AND VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS IN THE BALKANS

FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND RETURNEES

The proportion of Muslim population in the countries being discussed in this report is of special importance since nearly all who departed to join various insurgent groups in Syria and Iraq were Muslims. It should be noted that determining the exact number of persons from these countries that have joined Daesh/ISIS is rather difficult. In many cases entire families have travelled to Syria and Iraq. While in most cases such family travel was either initiated or imposed by a senior member of the family, it is difficult to distinguish whether only men were engaged in combat activities. Another factor that complicates the foreign fighters picture is the fact that a considerable number of individuals who travelled to conflict zones either have dual citizenship or long-term residence outside of the four countries under consideration. Accordingly, different sources and authors operate with different figures, and the ones under discussion represent the best possible estimates.

Apart from Bulgaria, which had only one citizen who has allegedly joined Daesh, the number of citizens that have travelled to Syria and Iraq from the other three countries was rather worrisome. The distribution of numbers of men, women and children from Bulgaria, BiH, Kosovo and North Macedonia who have travelled to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq is given in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Numbers of Men, Women and Children in Syria and Iraq

Countries	Men in Syria/Iraq	Women in Syria/Iraq	Children in Syria/Iraq	Total
Bulgaria	1	0	0	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	188	61	81	330
Kosovo	255	53	95	403
North Macedonia	140	14	No data	154
Total	585	128	176	889

As already mentioned, despite claims by certain foreign sources that up to 10 Bulgarian citizens may have joined Daesh (ICCT, 2016), according to the official data, during the period (2013-2016) only one Bulgarian citizen of Syrian descent fought with Daesh (Дневник, 2017). In general, the Ministry of the Interior and the State Agency for National Security (SANS) consider that Bulgaria acts primarily as a transit zone for foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq.¹⁰ On the other hand, as shown in Table 3, a total number of 188 men, 61 women and 81 children travelled to Syria and Iraq, from BiH and from the Bosnian diaspora between 2012 and 2015, with the largest number of departures being registered during 2013 (Hamidicevic and Plevljak, 2018). In Kosovo, according to the latest data,

¹⁰ According to the State Agency for National Security, around 332 FTFs passed through Bulgaria between 2013 and 2015 en route to Syria and Iraq. See Stollova, 2016, "The Roma and the Radicals: Bulgaria's Alleged ISIS Support Base", Balkan Insight.

since 2012, an estimated 403 individuals travelled from Kosovo to join terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq, of whom 255 were men, 53 women and 95 children (Perteshi, 2018: 18). It is interesting to note that the size of the contingent of Kosovo and BiH in conflict zones has increased due to children born in Syria and Iraq to Kosovan and Bosnian parents. According to official data, as of early 2019 there were 78 children born to Kosovan nationals and 77 born to Bosnian nationals (Shtuni, 2019: 18-19). Finally, Table 1 shows that 140 men and 14 women travelled from North Macedonia to Syria and Iraq during the period from 2012 to 2017, while there is no data about the eventual number of children (Azinović, 2018). It is also worth mentioning that, according to the available data, it is estimated that 75 foreign fighters from Kosovo have been reported killed in conflict zones (Perteshi, 2018: 18). In April 2018, BiH authorities made public in the media death certificates for 76 fighters with BiH citizenship (including five women and four children) who were killed in Syria (Hamidicevic and Plevljak, 2018). The reported number of casualties in North Macedonia stands at 27 men (Šutarov, 2018).

Once Daesh started losing most of its controlled territory in Syria and Iraq, the number of returnees increased rapidly, while the number of foreign fighters joining the conflict zones declined considerably. By mid-2016 intensified efforts of authorities in BiH and Kosovo contributed to a complete halt of new departures to conflict zones. Meanwhile, the only citizen from Bulgaria who joined Daesh returned to Bulgaria in 2017 (ДНЕВНИК, 2017). In BiH 47 men and 8 women came back by the beginning of 2016, while by the end of 2017 a total of about 50 adults returned to BiH from Syria and Iraq (Azinović, 2018). In 2019, BiH authorities managed to repatriate only 7 more foreign fighters. On the other hand, Kosovo authorities not only succeeded in preventing further departures of its citizens to conflict zones but have been rather successful in returning Kosovo citizens from Syria and Iraq. Out of the total estimated number of 135 returnees, 110 were repatriated in April 2019, of whom 74 are children, 32 women, and 4 alleged male foreign fighters (Shtuni, 2019: 19). In North Macedonia, the number of foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq also considerably declined from 2017, and completely stopped in 2018.¹¹ Meanwhile, the number of returnees to North Macedonia from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq was estimated at around 80 (Georgieva, Kambovski and Trajanovski, 2020). However, a considerable number of citizens from these countries still remain in Syria and Iraq. It is believed that as of December 2018, 98 adult Bosnian citizens (49 men and 49 women) still remain in Syria and Iraq (Atlantic Initiative, 2018). However, Shtuni claims that in 2019 BiH nationals made up the largest group from the Western Balkans that remained in Syria and Iraq, since there were still some 102 Bosnian adults in conflict zones (Shtuni, 2019: 19). On the other hand, around 190 individuals from Kosovo are supposed to have remained in conflict zones (Perteshi, 2018: 18). However, of those remaining, there is an estimated number of only 66 men who are considered potential combatants, since it is believed that some 70% of them or 139 (47 women and 92 children) were non-combatants (not directly engaged in fighting) (Kursani, 2018: 18). According to various security sources, the number of citizens from North Macedonia still remaining in conflict zones is somewhere between 25 and 35 (Azinovic, 2017: 10; Georgieva, Kambovski and Trajanovski, 2020).

¹¹ The reasons for these developments, besides the demise of the Daesh controlled territory, are reported to be the new legislation on terrorism in North Macedonia, as well as the novel and practical obstacles for reaching the war zones in Syria and Iraq (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, 2018: 4-5). 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).

It is worth noting that at a certain point Kosovo and BiH were considered to have the highest number of foreign fighters per capita out of any European country (Peci and Demjaha, 2020; Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić et al, 2020). However, it seems that such numbers tend to be blown out of proportion and are the result of calculating the number of fighters per one million inhabitants of a certain country. As Azinovic points out, “such calculations are subject to the (un)reliability of counts of these individuals and, moreover, must be interpreted within the appropriate framework” (Azinovic, 2017: 9). Namely, if the ratio of foreign fighters to the total Muslim population is taken into account, the number of foreign fighters for Kosovo and BiH is actually slightly below the average of the EU (Hamidicevic and Plevljak, 2018). By way of example, let us compare the rates of citizens’ engagement in Belgium with those in BiH, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

Initially, let’s compare the total number of foreign fighters with the overall population in these respective countries (Table 4).

TABLE 4. Comparison of the Number of Foreign Fighters in Overall Population

Country	Total Population	Number of Foreign Fighters ¹²	FF per 1,000,000 people	Prevalence of FFin general population
Belgium ¹³	11,370,000	498	44	1 in 22,727
BiH	3,531,159	249	70	1 in 14,289
Kosovo	1,739,825	308	177	1 in 5,649
North Macedonia	2,022,547	154	76	1 in 13,157

Source: CONNEKT Country Reports. Own production.

In terms of overall population, Table 4 clearly shows that all three countries of the Western Balkans have a higher rate of citizen engagement than Belgium in the fighting in Syria and Iraq. Among the countries of the Western Balkans, Kosovo with 177 foreign fighters per 1 million citizens has the highest rate, followed by North Macedonia (76 per 1 million) and BiH (70 per 1 million). Belgium, on the other hand, has registered only 44 foreign fighters per 1 million citizens (Azinović, 2018: 5). However, assuming that the accounted number of foreign fighters in the available data refers almost exclusively to Muslims, it is interesting to make the comparison of the rates of Muslim citizens’ engagement in Belgium with the three countries of the Western Balkans (Table 5).

Table 5 clearly shows that when statistics about the foreign fighters in Belgium, BiH, Kosovo and North Macedonia are placed within the context of the Muslim population in each respective country, the comparison yields different results. Now the rate of citizen engagement in Belgium in the fighting in Syria and Iraq is higher than all three countries of the Western Balkans. Namely, in this case there are 83 foreign fighters for every 100,000 Muslims in Belgium (Azinović, 2018: 5), meaning one foreign fighter

¹² The overall number of foreign fighters includes citizens of fighting age, both men and women, in Syria and Iraq.

¹³ Data for Belgium is taken from Azinović (2018: 5).

in every 1,204 Muslims in Belgium. Table 5 also shows that, in this scenario, it is North Macedonia with 23 foreign fighters per 100,000 citizens (1 in 4,348 Muslims) that has the highest rate among the countries of the Western Balkans. North Macedonia is followed by Kosovo with 19 foreign fighters per 100,000 citizens (1 in 5,263 Muslims) and BiH with only 14 foreign fighters per 100,000 citizens (1 in 7,143 Muslims). The analysis conducted shows that statements that Kosovo and BiH had the highest number of foreign fighters per capita in Europe might be blown out of proportions and should be taken with caution.

TABLE 5. Comparison of the Number of Foreign Fighters among the Muslim Population

Country	Total Muslim Population	Number of Foreign Fighters ¹⁴	FF per 100,000 Muslim inhabitants	Prevalence of FFin Muslim population
Belgium	600,000 ¹⁵	498	83	1 in 1,204
BiH	1,790,454	249	14	1 in 7,143
Kosovo	1,663,412	308	19	1 in 5,263
North Macedonia	674,015	154	23	1 in 4,348

Source: CONNEKT Country Reports. Own production.

OTHER VIOLENT MOVEMENTS: THE CASE OF UKRAINE

In terms of cases of citizens of these four countries having joined other violent movements abroad, the only worrisome one is the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Ukraine. Namely, it has been reported that a small number of BiH nationals has been fighting as part of foreign armed separatist groups in Ukraine. While the official number of these fighters stands at seven, it is believed that the real number is much higher. Predominantly, these fighters from BiH travel to Ukraine through Serbia and are assisted by the Movement of Serbian Chetniks Ravna Gora. In Ukraine, they join pro-Russian paramilitary formations, together with fighters from Serbia as part of the "Serbian Hussar Regiment". Despite the phenomenon, according to BiH police agencies, in October 2017 only one BiH national was on trial for fighting in Ukraine (Hamidicevic and Plevljak, 2018). It is interesting to note that according to the Atlantic Initiative Survey of 2,110 citizens and 12 focus groups in BiH, there is a much higher support among Serbs for fighters going to Ukraine than from Bosniaks for fighters going to Iraq or Syria (Atlantic Initiative, 2018). A similar phenomenon of foreign fighters has been also reported in Kosovo, with Serb individuals living in the north of Kosovo having travelled to Ukraine. According to certain media reports, around 300 Serbian foreign fighters funded by the Russian organisation "the Kosovo Front" have been fighting in the Ukrainian separatist territories (Stelmakh and Kholodov, 2017). While not all these fighters are from Kosovo, it is difficult to determine their exact numbers since usually all of them are referred to as Serb nationals (Velebit, 2017).

¹⁴ The overall number of foreign fighters includes citizens of fighting age, both men and women, in Syria and Iraq.

¹⁵ According to Azinovic, the total number of Muslim population in Belgium is around 700,000. See Azinović (2018: 5).

In Bulgaria it is not possible to provide the exact number of individuals who have joined violent movements abroad, since such information is gathered by security authorities and is subject to classification. However, according to the Mirotvorets Center established by the pro-Western Ukrainian government, five Bulgarian citizens have either fought in Donbas or aided pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine (Club Z, 2016). North Macedonia is the only country under consideration that has not reported any foreign fighter to be in the war zone in Ukraine, although the country officially refused to apply sanctions and restrictive measures on Russia for annexing Crimea in 2014 (Beslin and Ignjatijevic, 2017). It is worth mentioning that, although countries in the Western Balkans consider foreign fighting as a criminal act regardless of the destination, returnees from the Middle East face a robust security-based response in their countries of origin, whereas those returning from Ukraine usually remain exempt from prosecution and severe sanctions (Beslin and Ignjatijevic, 2017).

ISLAMIC RADICALISATION VERSUS OTHER FORMS OF RADICALISATION

As already mentioned, the disintegration of the Daesh-controlled territory has basically ended the departure of foreign fighters from the four countries to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. However, as Azinović has pointed out, the end of Daesh as the world has known it “does not mean the end of the radicalisation and recruitment into extremism and violence in the region” (Azinovic, 2018: 4). In fact, representatives of state institutions in all four countries have continued to view violent extremist threats mainly through the prism of radical Islam. Other forms of radicalisation and extremism, despite being more prevalent and resulting in more violence in comparison to the highly publicised instances of so-called Islamist radicalisation, have not received as much public attention and have not been subject to any sustained efforts at assessment or counteraction. In Kosovo, the government has underlined the additional risk of violent extremism in North Kosovo among ethnic Serbian Kosovars. It has cautioned that these Serbian extremist groups might engage in “various acts of violence against [Kosovan citizens of Albanian ethnicity], institutions as well as local and international presence in [the north] of the country” (Goshi and Van Leuven, 2017: 22). Still, neither have any concrete preventive actions been taken by the government, nor have any specifically focused studies been conducted. On the other hand, a study that assessed eventual possible violent extremist threats in Kosovo has suggested that violent extremist threats in Kosovo were mainly politically motivated. The study points out that around 80% of executed (actions taken) violent extremist threats were political in nature, while of the unexecuted (actions not taken) threats, close to 70% were religious in nature (Kursani, 2017: 6). The situation is similar with the far-right and ultra-nationalist groups in Bulgaria that have been associated with numerous completed violent acts (including by political party members) (Nova, 2015), as opposed to violent manifestations of Islamist radicalisation. Members of such far-right groups and movements that operate within the country are mainly ethnic Bulgarians, and their actions are enabled by an environment of widespread prejudice towards minorities like the Roma (Галъп Интернешънъл, 2015) and worsening attitudes towards other minorities like homosexuals (ДНЕВНИК, 2019). In North Macedonia one can also hardly speak of any serious tendency towards voicing radical Islamic views in a political framework, since such views are predominantly confined to the private sphere and individual religious practice (North Macedonia Country Report, 2020: 123). Consequently, it can be said that in North Macedonia no real religious rhetoric has been established in public discourse, although this

discourse does have greater religious content than before (Savevski and Sadiku, 2012). However, within the country there are several fringe organisations, which sometimes 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 former Macedonian Prime Minister is one of the most prominent examples (Mkd.mk, 2019).

In BiH, some media and civil society organisations (CSOs) are often reported as radical, or their followers as radicalised, Serb and Croat groups being driven by ethnic nationalism and Orthodox and Catholic extremism. These are right-wing groups that often identify themselves as followers of the Serbian Chetniks and the Croatian Ustasha who were active during the Second World War. The Serb organisations and groups, working on an “extremist Orthodox agenda”, are often supported by Russia, whilst the Croatian formations are often backed by the “radical elements of the Catholic Church and some political elites” (Becirević, 2018) It is not uncommon for these groups to display neo-Nazi characteristics, engage in violent acts, and call for separation of territories inhabited by their respective ethno-religious groups from the state of BiH (Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić et al., 2020).

It might be concluded that, although other forms of radicalisation and violent extremism also exist in all four countries, representatives of state institutions have continued to view violent extremist threats mainly through the prism of radical Islam. These other forms of radicalisation and extremism related to far-right extremism, especially hate crime, despite being much more numerous, have received much less attention both by law enforcement and the media. The same is true of the emergence of foreign fighters in Ukraine, which despite being spotted from media reporting in BiH, Kosovo and Bulgaria, did not receive the attention of state institutions and researchers. Moreover, as Perry points out, “other forms of extremism, such as domestic right-wing extremism, are noted as a secondary concern or even not acknowledged at all” (Perry, 2016: 4).

PUBLIC POLICIES ON PREVENTION AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (P/CVE)

PUBLIC POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

The four Balkan countries included in this report show some general commonalities, in terms of their policies and programmes on P/CVE, but they also differ on some particular aspects. The overall approach of the four countries is shaped by the security-oriented paradigm that puts Islamic religious fundamentalism at the centre of attention and perceives terrorism as its most aggravated manifestation. The other forms and factors that nurture radicalisation and violent extremism assume less attention, if any, in policies and programmes on P/CVE. This includes extremist political ideologies, ethnic nationalism or Christian religious fanaticism.

In a practical realm, the four Balkan countries have adopted National Strategies for Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (hereafter: National Strategies) and implemented Action Plans.

The leading role in coordinating multi-agency efforts for implementation of National Strategies is played by the security sector institutions, particularly ministries of interior. The degree of involvement of non-state actors in drafting the National Strategies is higher, as compared to the process of their implementation.

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Some of these countries have adopted special legislative acts to buttress policies and programmes to counter radicalisation and violent extremism (e.g., Kosovo has adopted special law), and other countries have either amended their Criminal Codes (BiH and Bulgaria) or have not taken any special legislative step (North Macedonia).

PRODUCING P/CVE KNOWLEDGE

There are two general categories of analysis and documents, pertaining to the P/CVE, which are produced in the four countries of the Balkans included in this report. First, official documents such as national strategies, action plans, various public data, and analysis. The second category includes a vast and diverse array of research and other publications produced by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organisations, media, academic community and other non-state actors.

In line with the dominant perception mentioned above, the majority of official and non-official documents, and other publications, focus on the nexus between radicalisation and violent extremism with Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. In this context, although the phenomenon of Islamic radicalism started to attract the attention of the security institutions as well as think tanks and academic pundits very early,¹⁶ the

¹⁶ Bulgaria, for example, imposed a more restrictive regime on the operations of externally-funded Muslim organisations and foundations, since the mid-1990s. See Троева (2012: 7). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the origins and sources of radicalisation and violent extremism, along ethnic and religious lines, is a reflection of the war and post-war situation of the first half of 1990s. See on this, Azinovic (2017).

publications related to this issue were scarce before the mid-2010s. Thus, in Kosovo, for example, one of the early studies was published in 2005, by KIPRED, with the title: "Political Islam among the Albanians: Are the Taliban coming to the Balkans?" (KIPRED, 2005). In BiH, as Bećirević emphasises, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and particularly the rise of Daesh, have increased the research and publications on radicalisation, extremism, violent extremism, and terrorism (Bećirević, 2016: 5). However, as the country reports show, the majority of the research and publications by the non-state actors have been conducted since the mid-2010s and this is related to the rise of Daesh and the problem of foreign fighters from the Balkans who joined terrorist organisations in Iraq and Syria.

Most of the studies and reports produced by the non-state actors investigate the socio-political, economic and historic context and factors that nurture radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism – in addition to providing facts and data. They advocated a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach to radicalisation and violent extremism. An approach that, as Stojanovski and Kalajdzioska assert, embraces a "soft approach", as opposed to a "top-down" approach (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovska, 2018: 7). Or, as Azanovic argues, an approach that avoids the logic of "one-size-fits-all" (Azanovic, 2017: 7).

However, most studies and reports that have been produced in the four Balkan countries have leaned towards case-study and descriptive methodologies, more than towards empirical and/or comparative methodological approaches. In relation to this, Kursani noted that "up until 2016 research on violent extremism in the Western Balkans was not thoroughly grounded on evidence-based research" (Kursani, 2019: 7). The same conclusion has been underlined by Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić, Turčalo in their country report on BiH. They underline that there is a lack of empirical studies in radicalisation and violent extremism in BiH and most research uses secondary sources from security services and agencies or rely on a limited number of expert interviews (Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić et al., 2020).

The overall importance of analytical studies on the issue of radicalisation and violent extremism lies in the fact that they raise public awareness and boost professional knowledge and expertise on this issue. However, only the documents adopted by the public institutions serve as a framework within which the state/institutional policies towards P/CVE are implemented.

In this regard, the most important official document adopted by all countries included in this study are their respective National Strategies, which were adopted between 2015 and 2018. Before highlighting the major components of these National Strategies, it is important to bring to attention two slight differences between the four countries of the Balkans that are subject of this study.

First, these countries have not used standard titles to name their National Strategies and this is a reflection of their conceptual approach to the junction between violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism. Thus, in BiH, it is called the "Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Prevention and Combating Terrorism for 2015–2020"; in Bulgaria, the "Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020)"; in Kosovo, the "Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020"; and in North Macedonia, the "National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism 2018-2022". Furthermore, North Macedonia has also adopted a separate "National Strategy for Countering Terrorism 2018-2022". Kosovo has adopted complementary strategic documents,

including the “National Strategy for Reintegration of Repatriated Persons in Kosovo 2014-2016”, the “National Strategy and Action Plan for Community Safety 2011-2016”, the “National Strategy of the Republic of Kosovo for the Prevention and Combating of Informal Economy, Money Laundering, Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes 2014-2018”.

The second difference has to do with the fact that, apart from North Macedonia where the two National Strategies were adopted by the parliament in 2018, in the other three countries, namely Bulgaria, BiH and Kosovo, their respective National Strategies have been adopted by the governments. National Strategies have been supplemented by the Action Plans in all these countries.

MAPPING THE ACTORS

The four countries included in this report have adopted multi-agency approach towards P/CVE. Their National Strategies and Action Plans envisage involvement of a broad range of institutions and actors. This includes state institutions and mechanisms (central and local), religious communities, NGOs, media, and schools. In general, National Strategies in all four countries of the Balkans anticipate involvement of three categories of actors: first, national/public institutions at central and local level (with a leading role of the security institutions); non-state actors (NGOs, media, other CSOs); and religious organisations. These institutions and actors have been involved, in various degrees, in the phase of drafting of National Strategies, and they are supposed to play a key role in their implementation (mostly through the Action Plans).

From the country reports, it transpires that the only visible difference in this context is the involvement of international actors. Thus, in Kosovo, BiH and North Macedonia, international organisations and donors play an important role in supporting and influencing national policies and programmes on P/CVE (particularly through financial donations and expertise). This is not the case in Bulgaria, as the respective country report does not indicate any meaningful role of the international organisations or actors in supporting P/CVE policies and programmes.

TARGETED POPULATION

In a broader sense, the targets of the strategies and efforts towards radicalisation and violent extremism are persons and groups that are exposed to the risk of radicalisation and those that have already radicalised. In concrete terms, in each of the four countries this includes primarily youngsters and also persons who are socioeconomically and psychologically vulnerable, former foreign fighters, religious leaders (particularly radical imams), and far-right and ethno-nationalist ideological groups. The above groups are primary targets, as they are more likely to become radicalised and get involved in violent extremism and terrorism. In addition, the target group includes parents and teachers, journalists, police and prison officers and other law enforcement officials, local communities and specific regions/locations that are more exposed to the risk of radicalisation. This targeted group is in a position to play an important role in preventing and combating radicalisation and violent extremism.

Beyond general commonalities in terms of the targets, country reports highlight some differences in this regard in the National Strategies of the Balkan countries included in this study. These differences have to do with the fact that some countries give more importance to specific targets than the others do. Thus, Bulgaria's National Strategy aims to address both Islamic and far-right radicalisation (this is not the case in the other three countries, where far-right groups are either excluded or receive negligible attention). North Macedonia includes explicitly the Public Prosecutor and Ombudsman in its National Strategy, whereas BiH puts particular emphasis on the religious communities. The National Strategy of Kosovo gives special place to online radicalisation and correctional services (prisons).

ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS FOR THE P/CVE INITIATIVES

There are two dimensions of the institutional efforts to enforce P/CVE initiatives; first, creating an appropriate legal basis and, second, setting the corresponding institutional mechanisms.

Regarding the legal framework, all countries of the Balkans included in this study have provisions in their criminal laws on offences related to terrorism, extremist acts and hate crimes. The legal basis is formed primarily by the Criminal Codes and Criminal Procedural Codes, but also by other relevant laws, such as laws on prevention of money laundering and financing of terrorism, e.g., in North Macedonia (Assembly of Republic of Macedonia, 2014). Some countries have amended their Criminal Codes (BiH in 2014, and Bulgaria in 2015) to make them more compliant with the need to prosecute the new waves of radicalism and the phenomenon of foreign fighters going from or through the Balkans in the conflict zones in the Middle East. Kosovo went a step further to adopt a special law, namely the "Law on Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts outside State Territory". It is important to emphasise that this legal framework, in all Balkan countries, is construed within the normative confines of their general constitutional orders, which embody the fundamental principles of secularism and individual human rights (including freedom of speech, freedom of belief, conscience and religion). Hence, the fight against radicalisation and violent extremism, in the legal sense, hinges on a delicate balance between secular constitutional order, individual liberties and public safety.

As to the institutional apparatus for the enforcement of the P/CVE initiatives, some of the Balkan countries included in this study have set up specific enforcement mechanisms. In some countries, this role is played primarily by conventional institutions while in some other there are no specific enforcement mechanisms for P/CVE initiatives.

Thus, BiH has not established any specific enforcement mechanisms for P/CVE initiatives that would make any part of P/CVE obligatory for participants. As the country report on BiH emphasises, most initiatives rely on a combination of community pressure and personal contacts. North Macedonia has established the National Committee for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism, which has the leading role in implementing the Action Plans. This Committee involves in its work a wide spectrum of other actors and institutions, including the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Local Self-Government, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Agency for Youth and Sports and the Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Religious Groups,

civil society, religious leaders, local communities, and the media. In Kosovo, the Kosovo Security Council plays a key role in monitoring the implementation of the National Strategy and the respective Action Plan. The Council comprises a five-person working group (technical) and a larger government working group that includes relevant ministries, security and intelligence institutions, as well as representatives of NGOs, religious communities and other stakeholders. In Bulgaria, the Security Council at the Council of Ministers is responsible for strategic decision-making related to P/CVE. An inter-institutional working group operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Interior is in charge of developing the strategy and action plans and drafting implementation reports (which are then approved by the Council of Ministers).

It is important to add that the local approach plays an important part in the implementation of P/CVE initiatives. Accordingly, some countries have established specific, locally-based mechanisms in regions and municipalities with higher exposure to radicalisation and violent extremism (e.g., projects in Cair, Gostivar and Kichevo in the Republic of North Macedonia, the pilot “Referral Mechanism” in Gjilane, Kosovo, or International Organisation for Migration (IOM) projects with local stakeholders in BiH).

As a final point on the issue of enforcement mechanisms, in line with the general security-oriented paradigm through which the problems of radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism are interwoven, in all countries of the Balkans included in this study, the Ministries of Interior/Security play a key governmental role in dealing with P/CVE.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Financial resources (budget) are one of the major challenges for the implementation of the National Strategies and execution of Action Plans in all four Balkan countries studied. Furthermore, as it is specified in the respective country reports, the picture is different in each of these countries. In Bulgaria and North Macedonia no specific state budget has been allocated to the implementation of the National Strategies and execution of Action Plans. From the country reports, it appears that BiH has allocated limited resources for P/CVE (Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić et al., 2020). In the Republic of Kosovo, the Action Plan for the implementation of the National Strategy aims to cover four strategic objectives with EUR 2,801,600 for the 2017-2020 timeframe (Peci and Demjaha, 2020). Furthermore, in BiH, Kosovo and North Macedonia, a significant portion of the budget for the implementation of the National Strategies, as well as the projects of civil society on P/CVE, come from international donors.

MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THE STRATEGIES IMPLEMENTED

The overall objective of the policies and programmes of countries, as reflected in their National Strategies, is to create an official framework for a coordinated, multi-layered and multi-agency approach towards the phenomenon of violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism. The wide range of measures and actions included in the National Strategies and Action Plans have two general goals: first, prevention, and second, addressing/tackling radicalisation and violent extremism. In concrete terms, these include measures aimed at early identification of vulnerable individuals/groups, prevention

of their radicalisation, de-radicalisation and re-integration. In the practical realm, the goals are reached through activities, such as raising awareness in the local communities, schools, religious institutions, training of imams, teachers, police officers, journalists, dissemination of information and public campaigns, creation of ad-hoc bodies at regional and local levels, and so on. These measures go hand in hand with conventional actions taken by the law enforcement and justice institutions, which aim at prosecution of violent extremism and terrorist activities.

In their National Strategies all four countries emphasise prevention as one of their paramount strategic goals and this is a very rational approach. They differ, however, only on the degree and manner in which they gear towards reaching this goal. BiH, for example, initially focused more on detection and countering and, in recent years, shifted its attention more towards prevention (Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić et al., 2020). Bulgaria in practice focuses more on detection and countering, although the National Strategy spells out objectives of detection and countering, as well as prevention and reversing radicalisation (Dzhekova). As noted in the country report, the National Strategy of Kosovo encompasses four strategic objectives, whereas early identification and establishing prevention mechanisms are spelled out as complementary, yet separate goals (Pezi and Demjaha, 2020). In the case of North Macedonia, the National Strategy refers to the goal of “prevention” in somewhat aspirational tone by underlining 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” (Georgieva, Kambovski, Trajanovski, 2020).

EXISTENCE OF CRITICAL EVALUATION SYSTEMS

The Balkan countries included in this study have not established any independent mechanism with the specific mandate to evaluate P/CVE initiatives. Consequently, different reports about P/CVE, prepared by various bodies, are the only evaluation mechanisms. These reports are presented by the relevant state institutions or/and by the various CSOs, international donor organisations or media. At the institutional level, periodic reports are prepared mostly by the Ministries of Interior and the intelligence agency (in Bulgaria) or other relevant state institutions (e.g., in Kosovo such reports are presented by the Secretariat of Kosovo Security Council). However, as the country reports underline, all these countries lack independent critical evaluation systems for P/CVE. This appears to be a critical loophole in the policies and programmes on P/CVE of the four Balkans countries included.

IMPACT OF P/CVE PROGRAMMES ON THE THREAT OF RADICALISATION

Two factors hinder any genuine assessment of the impact of P/CVE on the threat of radicalisation at individual, community and macro level. The first factor has to do with the lack of a comprehensive evaluation system at the national level, which would provide consistent and comprehensive data and information about the practical effect of the national policies and strategies vis-à-vis the threat of radicalisation. The second inhibiting factor has to do with the fact that any trend pertaining to

radicalisation and violent extremism is a product of numerous causes and dynamics, which operate at national and supra-national milieu. Against this backdrop, one of the parameters provided from the country reports is the trend of foreign fighters from the Balkan countries who join Daesh or other terrorist groups in the Middle East. According to the country reports, the number of foreign fighters from the Balkans who have joined terrorist groups in the Middle East has rapidly declined since 2016 (Kosovo and BiH have reported no new cases of individuals joining foreign terrorist organisations in Syria or Iraq since 2016). This can be related, at least partially, to the disintegration of the Daesh-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq. However, from the country reports it can be inferred that national governments and the non-governmental sector (including religious communities) have pursued aggressive policies to counter radicalisation and violent extremism – with a major focus on Islamic religious fundamentalism. This has had a positive effect, particularly in raising general awareness about the perils of radicalisation and violent extremism. In this context, it should be underlined that the trend of decrease in the number of citizens who joined Daesh from the four Balkan countries coincided with the adoption of the National Strategies and Action Plans, as well as with the more vigorous actions taken by the security and justice systems in these countries.

In relation to this issue, it should be emphasised that the phenomenon of the foreign fighters who have joined the Russian-backed forces in the Ukrainian separatist territories is largely outside the purview of the general national policies and programmes towards radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism. As the country reports indicate, this includes mostly ethnic Serbs from BiH (Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić et al., 2020) and Kosovo (Peci and Demjaha, 2020) but possibly also few Bulgarian nationals (Dzhekova, 2020).

The existence of mechanisms and models for the measurement of the practical impact of P/CVE strategies on radicalisation at individual, community and macro level is an indispensable factor for a successful public policy on this issue. This component is lacking in the four countries of the Balkans analysed.

EU POLICIES TOWARDS P/CVE IN THE BALKANS

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001 and attacks in the UK and Spain in 2004-2005 made terrorism and ideological radicalism as a key security concern for the EU. The EU policy on radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism has been articulated within the area of freedom, security and justice (AFSJ), as well as Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). On this issue, Kudlenko underlines that “it was within the AFSJ that the EU formulated its Counter-Terrorism Strategy of 2005, which remains the key document in the field until today. The CFSP, on the other hand, has been instrumental in allowing the EU to establish partnerships and cooperation agreements with third countries and regional organizations” (Kudkleno, 2019: 4).

The EU policy towards P/CVE in the Balkans is formulated within the general approach and capacity of the Union to combat violent extremism and terrorism. In this regard – as the EU official documents constantly emphasise – the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism is primarily the responsibility of the member states. Hence, the EU’s role is to support the efforts of member states, primarily by providing expertise, and strengthening cooperation and coordination (European Commission, 2020).

In this context, it is important to highlight that the Counter-Terrorism Strategy of 2005 laid down four directions through which the EU bolsters the efforts of the member states in combating terrorism: first, strengthening national capabilities; second, facilitating European cooperation; third, developing collective capability; and four, promoting international partnership (Council of the European Union, 2005).

EU APPROACH TOWARDS THE BALKANS

The EU’s approach towards the Balkans, in relation to P/CVE, is influenced by the general socio-political context of this region. Four interrelated factors need to be particularly emphasised: political and economic transition, weak state structures, high level of crime and corruption, and ongoing security system reforms.

In line with its general approach on P/CVE, the EU’s role in the Balkans is primarily to support the efforts of the countries of this region in their efforts to respond to violent extremism and to counter terrorism. The EU’s focus is on combating terrorism, which is perceived primarily as a security-related matter. This serves the twin objective of preserving the stability of the Balkans and boosting the security of the EU. In referring to this intersection, some authors have observed that although the Balkans has experienced very few terrorist attacks, terrorists and weapons with links to the Balkans were involved in a range of attacks in EU member states, the US and even the Middle East (Azinović, 2018: 7; Wensink et al. 2017: 69; Shtuni, 2016).

When it comes to the relation of the EU with the four countries included in this report, it is crucial to underline the fact that Bulgaria is a member state of the EU, which is not the case with the other three countries (BiH, Kosovo, and North Macedonia). This means, by default, that the EU cannot have the

same policies and relations with all countries of the Balkans included in this report. This is so because Bulgaria, as an EU member state, must fully align its security policies with the Union, as well as with other political, economic, judicial and administrative standards under the Copenhagen criteria (European Council, 1993).

Conversely, the key to understanding the EU relations with BiH, Kosovo and North Macedonia is the EU's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans through the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) and the framework of relations set by the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA). A series of EU-WB Summits have been held in order to better orchestrate this integration process through the endorsement of bilateral agendas.

As the European Union Institute for Strategic Studies Institute (2017) points out, the "potential EU accession is the driving force behind the democratic and economic transformation of Western Balkan societies." The three non-EU countries under study, in turn, have different statuses: North Macedonia as a candidate country, and BiH and Kosovo as potential candidates.

North Macedonia has been a candidate since 2005 and, despite having signed the historic Prespa Agreement with Greece and resolved a long-standing dispute over its name (Petříček et al., 2019), the launch of negotiations is paralysed. Corruption is still a deep problem in many spheres of society, and respect for fundamental rights needs to be improved since hate speech, police impunity and the detrimental situation in prisons are not properly addressed. Relations with the neighbourhood have changed for the better and this should follow the spirit of the agreement signed with Greece and the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations with Bulgaria. In terms of the economy, the coronavirus crisis is reversing the positive trends of 2019 and it is having a strong economic and social impact on the performance of the market (North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020).

BiH is a potential candidate since the political and economic criteria, the public administration reform, the area of the judiciary, fundamental migration rights, and the fight against corruption and organised crime are held back by a significant lack of progress. Significant reforms are pending to guarantee freedom of assembly and freedom of expression and of the media, among others. On the economic front, progress is limited, and COVID-19 has further deteriorated the functioning of the economy (Kapidžić, Dudić, Kadić et al., 2020). Thus, it is still at an early stage of fulfilling the obligations of EU membership.

Kosovo is a potential candidate, which, unlike the other WB countries, has an additional obstacle: the fact that it has not yet been recognised as an independent state by five EU member states (see footnote 2). As of 2020, it is imperative for the country to reach an agreement with Serbia on the normalisation of their bilateral relations so that both can advance in their respective accession processes. Corruption is widespread and limited progress has been made, human rights legislation is not sufficiently prioritised, and the economic front is still a challenge (Kosovo 2020 Report, 2020).

The EU's approach towards the Western Balkan countries is "an investment in the EU's security economic growth and influence" and it is based on very diverse initiatives that have paid attention to

the weaknesses and strengths of cross-regional relations. In general terms, the situation in the Western Balkans is dominated by a serious concern about corruption which is not properly tackled yet, bad performance in terms of institutions, public administration and judiciary, slow GDP growth, and still some unresolved legacies from the past (Dabrowski and Myachenkova, 2018: 5-19).

The EU's institutionalised cooperation with the Western Balkans, related to the domain of terrorism, goes back to the year 2006. In that year, the Council of the European Union adopted the Action Oriented Paper on Improving Cooperation, on Organized Crime, Corruption, Illegal Immigration and Counter-Terrorism, between the EU, Western Balkans and relevant ENP Countries (Council of the European Union, 2006).

In 2008, the Council of the European Union adopted the Conclusions on Cooperation with Western Balkan Countries on the Fight against Organised Crime and Terrorism (Council of the European Union, 2008). This document was adopted with the aim of aligning the anti-terrorism policies of the Western Balkans countries with the EU's Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Subsequently, a series of visits to the Balkans were carried out by counter-terrorism experts from Europol and EU member states between 2008 and 2010. The major conclusion drawn by these visits was that most states of the region approached terrorism as part of organised crime and were only in initial stages of developing legal frameworks and administrative capacities for countering radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism (Kudlenko, 2019: 6). It is worth underlining in this regard that, in 2011, the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator who was engaged in reviewing the progress of the EU Action Plan on combating terrorism emphasised that the Western Balkans was a priority for the EU and, therefore, the EU should support countries of this region in their efforts on counter-terrorism (Council of European Union, 2011: 34).

The most important documents adopted in this regard is the Initiative on Integrative and Complementary Approach to Counter-Terrorism and Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans, which was adopted by the Council of the European Union in 2015 (known by its acronym: WBCTi).¹⁷ This document was followed by the successive Integrative Plan(s) of Action (2015-2017; 2018-2020), which are not legally binding documents.

The WBCTi proclaims its major goal of "eliminating duplications and overlapping in countering terrorism and violent extremism activities in the Western Balkans region through a new cost-effective concept, which builds upon the needs and priorities identified together with the Western Balkans countries and strategic partners active in the region, and uses a combined bottom-up and top-down approach" (Council of the European Union, 2015a: 3). The WBCTi and the Integrative Plans of Action (WBCTi iPA) make an intrinsic connection between violent extremism and terrorism. Thus, the WBCTi iPA 2015-2017, refers to the "activities, which address jointly identified needs in the area of countering terrorism as well as countering violent extremism, including the earliest stages of prevention [...]" (Council of the European Union, 2015b: 3).

¹⁷ The WBCTi originates from the Brdo Process regional ministerial framework chaired by Slovenia, where the ministers of interior/security of the Western Balkans have strongly expressed the demand for a more coordinated action in this policy field.

At the 2018 EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia, several flagship initiatives were presented within the Western Balkans Strategy and, among them, one initiative of reinforcing the engagement in security and migration. Under this enunciate, counter-terrorism and the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism stood as important priorities. Cooperation at the operational level, on migration and border management, support for capacity-building in the area of cyber-security, and the creation of an EU Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) inter-agency Task Force were the main tools conceived to enhance stability.

At the EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs, held in October 2018, the representatives of the six Western Balkan countries and the EU Commission (Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos) signed a Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans. The EU and the Western Balkan countries undertook to work together towards reaching five major objectives by December 2020. These five objectives are listed as follows:

- 1: A Robust Framework for Countering Terrorism and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism: Institutional Set-up and Legal Alignment, Implementation and Enforcement Capacity;
- 2: Effective Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism;
- 3: Effective Information Exchange and Operational Cooperation;
- 4: Building Capacity to Combat Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing;
- 5: Strengthening the Protection of Citizens and Infrastructure (EU Commission, 2018).

Subsequently, the fight against terrorism has assumed an important place in the regular progress reports that the EU Commission issues every year to measure the advancement of the Balkan countries in their EU membership process (this includes BiH, Kosovo and North Macedonia). Most of these reports have reviewed the progress of these countries on terrorism, in conjunction with the security and rule of law and, to a lesser extent, with ideological radicalisation and extremism.

Any general conclusion on the effects of the EU's policy on P/CVE in the Western Balkans has to take into account two crucial facts. First, the EU does not have the principal role in confronting P/CVE and terrorism in the Western Balkans. This role belongs to the countries of this region, whereby the EU plays an important role in boosting their efforts. Second, the EU is not the only international actor that plays an important role in the security dynamics of the Western Balkans. NATO and its key member states (particularly the US), and to a lesser extent the OSCE, also play important roles in this regard. Therefore, the EU's endeavours in combating P/CVE in the Balkans need to be coordinated not only with the countries of this region but also with the other international stakeholders.

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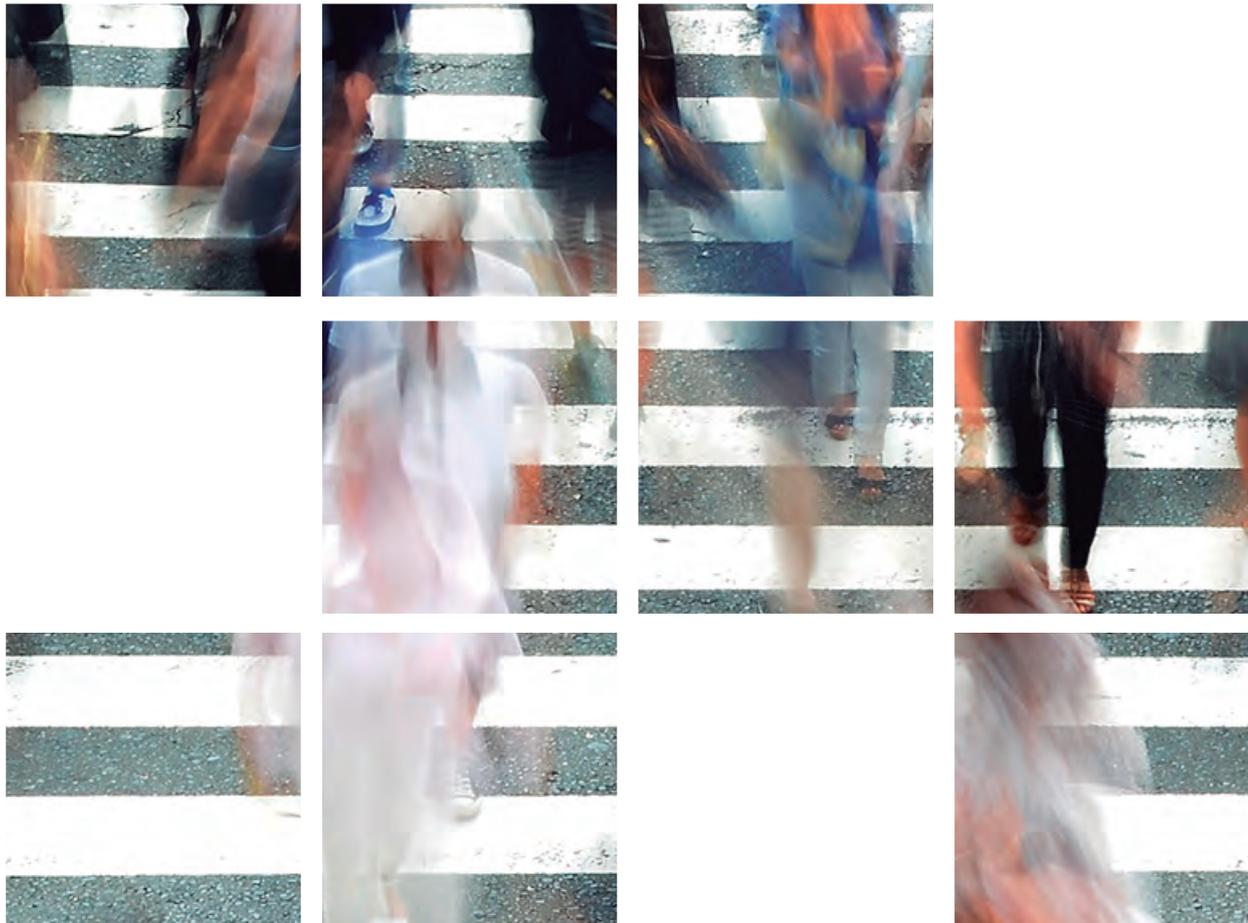


What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being “the problem” into “the key” for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

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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