



# CONNEKT

## COUNTRY PAPERS ON MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS

Drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism  
in the light of state dynamics in MENA and the Balkans

Damir Kapidžić (Ed.)



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## Consortium Members



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Drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in the light of state dynamics in MENA and the Balkans.

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## INTRODUCTION

The seven country reports in this publication provide an overview of how institutions approach radicalisation and violent extremism in two different regions. As part of CONNEKT Work Package 4 (WP4), they examine the macro-level analysis that includes structural and institutional approaches and helps establish a cartography of contexts within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Balkans. Moreover, the WP4 looks into an evolution of dynamics regarding the seven previously determined drivers (territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political ideas, cultural factors, religion, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics) and attempts to provide better understanding of institutional norms, values, practices, strategic policy choices, and institutional responses. This is the first empirical building block, which will inform subsequent research, and links institutions to meso- (community) and micro- (individual) levels. The research presented here provides country-focused foundations for understanding the interaction between macro-, meso- and micro-level analysis.

In order to facilitate stronger integration between the individual case studies, and to allow for cross-country and cross-regional comparison, a common framework was established for the empirical research and country reports. This consists of a joint theoretical framework focus on seven identified potential drivers of violent extremism, a common questionnaire for interviews and focus groups, and coordination in the preparation of research and writing, as well as feedback on drafts of the country papers.

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The theoretical framework is based on New Institutionalism, as the research subjects are individuals who work in institutional contexts and represent these institutions. The focus is on the rules, norms, practices and relationships that shape institutions, while also regarding them as actors in their own right. Additionally, New Institutionalism provides a basis for the analysis of international interdependence that can be considered as a pivotal driver of domestic institutional change in many societies under study. Therefore, this theory represents a convenient framework for analysing cooperation patterns, interactions, communication aspects, roles, and mutual perceptions of different institutional stakeholders.

The research was planned to be conducted in eight countries of the MENA region and the Balkans: Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia in late 2020 and early 2021. These two regions represent important and relevant locations, where it is possible not only to contextualise diverse drivers of violent extremism but also to learn about the processes that lead to the emergence and development of this phenomenon. Consequently, the research allows the drivers of violent extremism to be approached empirically, while trying to determine the factors that go beyond the traditional representation of religion as the pivotal driver. Due to the security situation in Egypt, research there was delayed until further reassessment. In the other seven countries, individual country teams identified relevant institutional actors and grouped them according to a common structure. This allowed us to not only focus on state security and religious institutions, but also on civic, media and international organisations working in the respective countries. Ethics requirements were met before the start of research that included obtaining national ethics approvals,



consultations on institutional level research, especially with state security actors, pseudonymisation of findings, and interviewee consent forms.

All studies mainly relied on the use of semi-structured interviews with relevant institutional stakeholders, in addition to focus groups in some cases. This means that the reports utilise a qualitative methodology for the analysis of seven drivers at the macro level. A common questionnaire was developed by the WP leaders and then translated and adapted to local languages and contexts. The questionnaires across all cases included the same elements and similarly framed questions. Slight adaptations to individual country contexts were made to clarify concepts and frame drivers to be understandable. A general structure for writing the reports was provided to all partners. The first section looks at institutions and cooperation between them, including communication, perception and examples of good practice, while the second part pays more attention to the seven previously mentioned drivers and country specific issues. The WP4 leader provided feedback on drafts all country papers.

The main aim of this joint macro-level research is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers and examine their mutual interplay within the macro-level analysis. The modes of interaction between institutions in individual countries provide a view of prevailing norms and practices, as well as power relations (including knowledge) on issues of radicalisation and violent extremism. This allows us to identify key channels of institutional interaction that can guide policy recommendations. In addition, the research attempts to create space for cross-regional, cross-country and individual approaches that should, in turn, result in a wider coverage of the phenomena of violent extremism within the joint publication.

# JORDAN

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of CONNEKT is to understand why some people radicalise and others do not. In the context of CONNEKT, it is acknowledged that embracing a radical ideology does not necessarily imply any kind of violence. Resulting from that understanding, the report examines the macro-level drivers of VE in Jordan and aims to identify historical trends and evolution of dynamics regarding the seven pre-identified drivers of violent extremism (VE) at a state level. The report complements the broad mapping of the field as it exists in Jordan presented in the CONNEKT's Country Report on National Approaches to VE in Jordan (Mahdeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2020).

The theoretical framework that was used for this research project is new institutionalism. New institutionalism identifies the rules, norms, practices and relationships that influence patterns of behaviour in politics and policy-making (Cairney, 2012). Unlike a more traditional view of institutions where the central role is attributed to the state, in new institutionalism this role depends on society (Peters, 2011). It can be used at the macro level for determining relevant political and social dynamics. Therefore, it is a particularly useful framework for this research project, which aims to produce an "x-ray" of relational frameworks, their historical roots and, consequently, the foreseeable scenarios.

7 As for the methodology, the findings of this report were informed through consultations with 25 key stakeholders. The selected respondents broadly represent institutions of state (state level and regional institutions, governments, legislatures; local institutions such as municipal governments; and security institutions), and societal and international institutions (non-governmental organisations [NGOs] and civil society representatives; religious institutions/leaders; academics and researchers; and international institutions/actors such as bilateral donors, United Nations [UN] agencies, etc.). In the next section of this report, these respondents are further categorised to facilitate presentation of research findings. Their insights and opinions were solicited through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and individual Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). FGDs and KIIs were conducted in May/June 2021, and, except for two in-person interviews, all primary data collection was conducted via Zoom, in line with CONNEKT's ethical guidance. Respondents were presented with different sets of introductory and institutional interaction questions, in addition to questions assessing the macro-level drivers of radicalisation. The collected qualitative data was transcribed and analysed via the MAXQDA software, with data protection measures being applied throughout the process.

## INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

### UNDERSTANDING VE IN JORDAN TODAY

In 2005, a series of near-synchronised bomb explosions went off at three hotels in the Jordanian capital Amman. Around 60 people were pronounced dead and 115 were injured (BBC News, 2005). Later known as the “Amman Bombings”, the event was a major turning point for Jordan’s fight against VE. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) claimed responsibility, and all attackers were identified as Iraqi nationals with clear links to the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. The attack and its perpetrators (with their link to Al-Zarqawi) did not operate in a vacuum. Contextually, AQI had gained significant momentum in the wake of the 2003 US Invasion in Iraq. Exploring its timeline reveals several relevant state and supra-state dynamics that help understand VE in Jordan today, for traces of such dynamics were clearly touched upon by many actors who were interviewed as part of this research. The persistence of the same violent extremist issues, dynamics and concerns over two decades later potentially underlines two notions: first, questioning the effectiveness of the Jordan state’s VE response and strategy (even though the latter is undeclared), and, second, identifying potential areas for enhanced effectiveness.

Originally founded by Al-Zarqawi in 1999, AQI started bomb attacks a few months after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2004. The group is considered the predecessor of the more recent Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Initially known as *Jama’at al-Tawhid wa’al-Jihad* (JTJ), AQI was a major participant in the Iraqi insurgency against the US Invasion of Iraq, before swearing fealty to Al-Qaeda as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (Stanford University, 2021). As such, Jordan’s journey with the fight against VE is neither recent nor linear. AQI represents but one benchmark of many that came before, including the experience with the Arab Mujahdeen in Afghanistan fighting the Soviet Union in a “holy war” (Federation of American Scientists, 1994), and later experiences with groups such as ISIS. Yet, the “Amman Bombings”, carried out by AQI, is considered by this research as a defining moment not only for the long-term macro-level state response it has triggered since then but also for many of its dynamics that are still at play and are key to understanding Jordan’s VE landscape today, nearly two decades later. Three such dynamics must be noted, with the common denominator in all three seemingly being the increased hostility towards the state and its institutions.

First, the group’s founder and ISIS’s godfather, the Jordanian national Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, provides an interesting case study for understanding the drivers of VE in Jordan. Ironically, his profile is similar to that of others who followed in his path, which questions the success and effectiveness of Jordan’s response to preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Al-Zarqawi’s profile reveals a former criminal background, him being incarcerated in one of Jordan’s biggest correctional facilities with initial charges of sexual assaults and the possession of drugs (Stanford University, 2021). This profile is found in the “newer generation” of radicals in Jordan; data suggests that most of the cases of individual radicals who were studied and examined did not hail from religious backgrounds (Mercy Corps, 2015; Abu Rumman and Shteivi, 2018; US Embassy in Jordan, 2018). Therefore, the ideology might not be as strong a driver of extremism, or, at best, it came

later in the equation governing the radicalisation, after the contextual grievances drove the initial process. A key governmental actor respondent confirmed this, explaining how “ideology is just an umbrella through which the grievances are mainstreamed.”<sup>1</sup>

Second, the Amman Bombings event serves as a reference point for comparison on how the patterns of VE have shifted in Jordan over the years. Most notably, a shift was seen in the primary target of VE groups. These bombings were simply an explicit statement about civilians being a key target for VE groups as, at the time, this was in line with AQI’s doctrine that Al-Zarqawi cemented. In contrast, the perpetrators of ISIS’s attacks in Jordan, including the different attacks conducted in Irbid, Karak, Baqa’a, Fuhais and Salt (BBC News, 2016a; BBC News 2016b; Jordan Times, 2016; Sweis, 2016; Foreign and Commonwealth Office, n.d.) have made it clear that their primary target was the state and its security personnel. In the Baqa’a incident (BBC News, 2016b), the attack was carried out by a lone gunman with an automatic weapon killing five people, and in the Karak incident (Jordan Times, 2016) the attackers actively refrained from shooting civilians within their range and instead killed 11 members of different security forces (and still three civilians). The respondents involved in this research have expressed considerable alarm against a reverse pattern in potential future waves of VE in Jordan, whereby civilians and mass casualties could become part of the game (Sweis, 2016).

An additional shift in the patterns was noted in relation to the horizontal spread of VE activities. In the past, those involved in or affiliated with violent extremist organisations (VEOs) were mostly individuals who did not enjoy the support of their families. However, the recent wave of VE activities in Jordan reveals a shift from an individualistic to a family pattern of radicalisation whereby radicalisation of closely-knit family members, cousins and in-laws is noted, which, according to research participants, have made the fight against extremism in Jordan all the more complex, for such close family networks are more difficult to penetrate and trace by the law and security establishments (Abu Rumman and Shteivi, 2018).<sup>2 3</sup>

Third, both the Amman Bombings and the work of AQI reveal another key dynamic to understanding VE in Jordan: the transnational influence. This influence was captured in the impact of regional instability on Jordan’s internal security. The 2003 US Invasion of Iraq, causing instability and lawlessness in parts of Iraq and creating a breeding ground for groups such as AQI to recruit and exercise combat, was mirrored a decade later by the Syrian conflict which brought ISIS elements in proximity of the Jordanian borders (Khalid bin Al-Walid’s army, for instance) (BBC News, 2016c),<sup>4</sup> and allowed for some ISIS acolytes to carry out attacks within the Kingdom (BBC News, 2016b). Additionally, the transnational influence meant that Jordan had to take security and military measures outside its own borders to pre-empt potential threats to its internal security. These measures came with a heavy domestic implication, as was seen by the capture and tragic death of Jordanian pilot Muath Al Kasasbeh in one of the

<sup>1</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 27 May 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 27 May 2021.



airstrikes Jordan was conducting as part of the international coalition against ISIS (Smith-Spark and Martinez, 2015; The Royal Hashemite Court, 2014).

## THE MAIN INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED IN VE IN JORDAN

As mapped out in the Country Report on National Approaches to Extremism in Jordan which focused on country's national structural and contextual approaches and strategies towards radicalisation and VE, main institutional stakeholders in Jordan could be categorised as governmental actors including security actors; non-governmental local actors including local civil society and community-based organisations; and international non-governmental actors including international donors and UN agencies (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2020). Representatives from each category were engaged in FGDs and KIs as part of this project.

Analysis of consultations and discussions revealed existence of historical shifts in the positioning of key institutional actors towards radicalisation and VE but equally, it revealed the fact that within the state's institutions, the view on how to prevent and counter VE differs in line with priorities of different state entities. Similarly, other institutional actors - local institutions, international donors, security actors, and religious leaders - also have their own, at times opposing views and opinions, resulting in a complex and competing picture overall.

### Governmental actors

The consultations with a range of governmental actors revealed two key elements in the development of institutions involved in work on prevention of VE.

The first element is related to the adoption and then consequent evolution of the PVE strategies, the details of which were provided in the *Country Report on National Approaches to VE in Jordan* published last year (Ibid.). The first strategy was launched by Jordan's National Policy Council in 2014/2015, under the official title of The National Plan to Counter Terrorism (TNPCE). Upon its dissemination in 2016, the strategy was met with criticism based on it being shallow, without clarity on or sufficient depth of the proposed measures considered to be effective in prevention of VE (Al-Sharafat, 2018). A reference to one of the measures listed in the TNPCE was cited during this research, when a respondent recalled how it was recommended that the **Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) and Islamic Affairs** "creates its website". As noted by the respondent, such a recommendation should have been considered as an internal initiative in the context of a more effective public sector rather than a measure aimed at combating radical thought.<sup>5</sup> The second PVE strategy was developed in the period 2017-2018 by the P/CVE Unit, which itself was established in November 2015 (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2020). That strategy, however, was not disclosed to the public and is yet to be officially presented and adopted by the government. Moreover, to date, there is no confirmation as to whether it will be revealed publicly and, as some respondents said during this research, it is not known "whether this will happen at all".<sup>6</sup> This second PVE strategy is therefore treated as strictly confidential, with only a handful of actors having had an opportunity

<sup>5</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 2 June 2021.

to consult it – mainly international non-governmental actors, as reported by the respondents.<sup>8</sup> The governmental actors included in this research explained that the said strategy was quietly substituted with a National Action Plan (NAP) produced in 2019 but still undergoing changes in light of COVID-19 as well as the evolving nature of VE in Jordan. These officials argued that the NAP is kept “low profile” due to its sensitive nature and to avoid it being readily available to radical individuals and groups the plan tries to counter.<sup>9</sup> Within these discussions, other local actors expressed their frustration at being “left out” of the discussions about the NAP.<sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup>The **P/CVE Unit at the Prime Minister’s Office** is the official government entity that is responsible for coordinating the different P/CVE initiatives and activities in Jordan. The Unit also directs international stakeholders as well as the donors towards the government’s priorities as far as P/CVE is concerned to ensure the relevance of such projects. The stakeholders noted the lack of communication and coordination on behalf of the Unit, leaving a gap regarding the Unit’s engagement of local actors. In discussion, some countered this criticism by citing the Unit’s “lack of manpower and resourcefulness” as a hindrance to more effective communication with a broad audience of relevant PVE stakeholders in Jordan.<sup>12</sup> Further, during its inception and then in the early years of its operations, the Unit had gone through a number of changes of its leadership but also a frequent transfer of mandate between different ministries, which the previous CONNEKT report on Jordan already elaborated on (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2020).

The second element relates to the government, or rather the security aspects, and is an acknowledgment of the ineffectiveness of a purely security approach, which was adopted by the government to counter radicalisation and VE. Many respondents hailed this acknowledgment as a positive development,<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> voicing that an effective PVE strategy should go beyond the focus on security, and actively consider other relevant factors and dimensions that enable radicalisation and VE, such as ideology and grievances.<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> Several governmental actors elaborated on this development by mentioning the example of the “Dialogue with Takfiri Program” that was introduced in correctional and rehabilitation centres in the Kingdom.<sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> No public information exists on the programme, but insights of several respondents were shared with the research team to further substantiate the point being made. According to them, the programme was

<sup>8</sup> Online interview with female representative of a state institution, Amman, 7 June 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Online interview with female representative of a state institution, Amman, 7 June 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 6 June 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 14 June 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 6 June 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 14 June 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

introduced in 2008/2009 with the aim of opening channels of dialogue with Islamist prisoners serving sentences on charges of extremism. The respondents cited a high success rate of the programme – over 80% – and attributed this success to several factors, namely: the programme participation was completely voluntary; the help of external experts and academics was enlisted to lead these dialogue sessions with prisoners; and the programme was built on a multidisciplinary approach integrating sociology, religious dialogue, and addressing grievances.<sup>25 26 27 28</sup> No insights were shared on whether the programme, which ended in 2014, is still ongoing in a similar format or if it has been replaced by different type(s) of programme(s). Additionally, relevant respondents noted that the success of this programme was partially attributed to Jordan having looked at and examined different models and experiences from the region and beyond. For example, interviewees reflected on what represents a successful dialogue and rehabilitation programme, agreeing that such a programme needs to shy away from heavily relying on pure economic and financial incentives, such as the case with Saudi Arabia's *Munasaha* programme (Cigar, 2019), and the heavy-handed Egyptian model of prolonged sentences and harsh security grip and practices over prisoners (El-Said and Harrigan, 2013). Rather, Jordan's approach was inspired by Singaporean- or Malaysian-like models that adhere to religious dialogue with radicals or to utilising ex-radicals and penitents in deradicalisation efforts.

### Local non-governmental actors

The second group of institutional stakeholders was composed of local non-governmental actors, including civil society and **community-based organisations (CBOs)**. Discussions with their representatives revealed three developments described below.

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First, the shifts in the patterns of radicalisation have pushed local actors to search for and adopt different models of youth engagement. The key development within this context was best captured in how local non-governmental actors seem to be moving away from a vulnerability-based approach, addressing negative push factors towards embracing a resilience-based approach that capitalises on the already existing positive skills and knowledge of young people (UNICEF, 2020). A number of respondents highlighted two specific cases in point: the British Council's Strengthening Resilience (SR) programme delivered in two phases (British Council, 2020), and Mercy Corps' use of the "science of resilience" by integrating neuroscience to understand and address the impact that long-term stress has on the emotional brain (Bourke, 2020). Yet, the research interviews clearly showed that the shift towards different models of youth engagement came about as a reaction to the evolving radicalisation scene in Jordan, rather than as a proactive measure aimed at designing and delivering more effective PVE programming. Hence, some concerns were voiced on both the sustainability of such development,<sup>29 30 31 32</sup> as well as the scope of it reaching a wider base of local actors with fewer resources and capacities.<sup>33 34</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 6 June 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 2 June 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Online interview with male representative of a non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 2 June 2021.

Second, local non-governmental actors seemed less inclined to specifically work at or target the so-called “hotspots” of radicalisation in Jordan.<sup>35 36</sup> This was due to a growing realisation that the extensive targeting of such communities had contributed to a high stigmatisation felt by the local population, and was, therefore, counterproductive to effective P/CVE efforts.<sup>37 38 39</sup> Instead, local actors started designing interventions that target the general body of young people, with activities that are not exclusive to those most vulnerable or those “at risk”, but are inclusive of those considered not to be “usual suspects” in terms of vulnerability.<sup>40 41</sup> The shift, in other words, concerned the approach of how the target groups of these programmes are being identified and selected by local actors.

Third, a shift in the terminology being used to refer to the PVE efforts and programming was also noted: local actors seemed to shy away from “labelling” their programmes and interventions as P/CVE-related and were instead adopting notions such as “social cohesion” or “good/active citizenship” (Idris, 2019). To understand why, different lenses must be applied. One relates to a “growing concern of the state” about Jordan’s international image (USAID Jordan, 2016), and argues that whilst VE is a real concern for the state, fears have risen around the disproportionality of its portrayal. In simple terms, from the state’s perspective, the issue is not seen as widespread and excessive as being reflected in the number of PVE programming interventions that exist(ed). On the non-governmental end, another lens helps interpret this shift in relation to donor priorities. Local actors have carried extensive PVE programming in response to donor priorities and interests as well as to the availability of PVE funds, which are characterised as “comfortable”.<sup>42 43 44</sup> As donor priorities shift, so does the local focus on PVE. Therefore, regardless of what lens is applied, this is an alarming development. It reflects either a manoeuvre against growing concerns of the state, or a donor-driven shift that trickled down to the local design of programmes, as opposed to reflecting a genuine move to adopting a more holistic approach to addressing VE or acknowledging that the drivers of VE are also structural drivers of broader societal and security concerns in the country.

### International non-governmental actors

Their institutional developments are similar to those of local non-governmental actors, both in terms of the shift in terminology and the geographical focus of PVE programming. For instance, an international non-governmental actor<sup>45</sup> noted how they are going “unbranded” about PVE per se, despite having funded several PVE initiatives and programmes. Their focus has shifted from supporting an explicit PVE “branding” of their programmes to instead supporting programming that counters the

<sup>35</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 26 May 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

negative behaviours labelled as “leading towards a destructive VE pathway”, in the realm of both counter-narratives and domestic violence. Said actor attributed this to their acknowledgment of a “shifting VE landscape” in Jordan.

Furthermore, whilst these actors reported no significant change in the focus of their PVE interventions,<sup>46</sup> they referred to an increased predisposition of reaching out to new groups of beneficiaries against the backdrop of a new vision,<sup>47 48</sup> which holds that “alternative narratives work” and, hence, people must be granted greater opportunities to see their positive impact. The focus would be on how specific individuals and role models can be supported to make an individual impact within their communities, so this “audio-centric approach engages with specific individuals who wield influence, access, and connectivity to local communities.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 2 June 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



## MACRO-LEVEL CONTEXT IN JORDAN

Since the Amman Bombings, the state's response to the evolving VE scene has been double-folded: a mixture of combating the radical ideology and pursuing greater securitisation. As such, the framing and the causality of VE from a macro-level state perspective seems to be heavily anchored upon the ideological drivers—deconstructing and countering radical [Islamic] narrative, with arguably little heed to other contextual, non-ideological factors and grievances.

### IDEOLOGICAL BATTLE

The state's ideological-security response is evident in several initiatives, one of the most remarkable being the **Amman Message**. As detailed in CONNEKT's Country Report on National Approaches to VE in Jordan, the Amman Message, launched in 2004, sought to present a simple but precise statement for senior Islamic scholars worldwide, declaring "what Islam is and what it is not, and what actions represent it and what actions do not." A few years later (2008/2009), the **Public Security Department (PSD)** launched the **Dialogue with Takfiri Program**, alluded to earlier in this report. And whilst this low-profile dialogue programme was hailed during this research as evidence of Jordan's early acknowledgment of the danger of VE and the need to work on rehabilitation and reintegration of those who have been on the VE path, this programme still represents a reflection of the state's persistent focus on the combination of ideological and security responses to addressing emerging VE concerns.

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In parallel, religious and ideological efforts continued at the institutional level through the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, referred to earlier in this report. Predominantly, these efforts took the form of working with religious actors, namely imams and female preachers, by offering them different capacity-building workshops and trainings aiming to enhance their religious knowledge and their capacity/competency at addressing religious questions and concerns (Tohamy et al., 2017). Other measures include having a unified Friday sermon for all the mosques in Jordan, whereby the Ministry of Awqaf writes one religious speech for over 7,000 mosques around the Kingdom, distributes it through the specific WhatsApp groups,<sup>50</sup> obliging the preachers to read it, with the aim of raising the level and quality of the sermon, introducing topics of interest to citizens, and promoting a culture of moderation (Nesan News, 2017).

In the same context, the **Office of HRH Prince Ghazi bin Mohammad** at the Royal Hashemite Court has been extensively involved in the PVE response in Jordan. The Office is looked at as the expert entity that possesses greater flexibility than state-level institutions in regard to dealing with VE issues. Whilst little to no public knowledge exists on this Office's PVE work and the modalities it follows, several research respondents emphasised the fact that, in its work, the Office follows a heavy religious/ideological approach to dealing with VE, citing Moroccan imams and religious scholars who were brought to Jordan to support the religious dialogue.<sup>51 52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>51</sup> In-person interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 6 June 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

Nevertheless, the state's substantial ideological framing and response to VE was, during this research, criticised on the basis of it being "narrow".<sup>53 54 55</sup> According to relevant respondents, the role of mosques and imams is still short of addressing the radicalisation and VE in a meaningful in-depth way. Preachers are still seen as unable to engage with real-life concerns of citizens, never discussing current and modern topics such as globalisation, digital literacy, active citizenship, and so on.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, research participants voiced a concern about the current approach failing to address institutional gaps related to the sufficient "supply" of imams, citing that over 2,000 mosques in Jordan operate without an officially appointed imam, and hence are left to be run by imams who had not been fully "recognised" (Tohamy et al., 2017)<sup>57</sup>, raising concerns as to their qualification, knowledge and ability to deliver sermons and run the daily affairs of mosques.

### Securitisation

On the security front, the state's security response has been two-fold: legal and operational. Legally, significant amendments have been incorporated in the relevant legal frameworks, such as the State Security Court Law, Counter-Terrorism (CT) Law, Cybersecurity (CS) Law, and the Prints and Publications (PPs) Law (United States Department of State, 2017; Araz, 2020). By virtue of such amendments, a vague and broad definition of what constitutes a terrorist act or show of sympathy has enlarged "the circle of suspicion" to include those who would do something as simple as a "Facebook Like". Further, these amendments enabled the trials under said laws to be referred to the **State Security Court**, which is a military court that should not be prosecuting civilians. Alarming, the impact of such amendments and stricter security policies had been counterproductive, contributing to an increased sense of hostility towards the state (Bondokji and Mhadeen, 2019a).<sup>58</sup> Operationally, the increased number of CVE actions over the past five to six years testifies to the state's security response level. This is not exclusive of operations levelled against VE groups or their affiliates in Jordan, which are valid and needed from a security perspective, but also the routinely executed raids and/or arrests that are made against potential radicals. These are performed with excessive use of force, selective application of security measures and, with reported constraints on freedoms of expression, have thus been found to likely "reinforce the sense of marginalisation and alienation" among citizens (Bondokji and Mhadeen, 2019b). Both responses bring valid questions around the effectiveness of the state's security approach. One respondent unpacked the apparent lack of "security coordination" between the police and military units, highlighting various regiments and units that work on CVE under different Special Operations titles across the security sector, ranging from **Jordan Armed Forces (JAF)** and specialised unit to the *Public Security Department (PSD) unit* to the specialised and highly trained **General Intelligence Department (GID) unit**, etc.<sup>59</sup> The multiplicity of security actors have often caused confusion regarding the division of roles and responsibilities and, in some cases, this came with "a high price paid by security actors who had lost notable and highly professional and trained officers" during operations (Schenker,

<sup>53</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 24 May 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 26 May 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 27 May 2021.

2016; Jordan Times, 2016; Roya News, 2018)<sup>60</sup>. As VE threats evolve, such CVE/CT lapses have underscored the need to avoid “taking Jordan’s security for granted” (Schenker, 2016; Black, 2016).

No assessment of the effectiveness of Jordan’s security approach to VE is complete without examining rehabilitation and reintegration, and the levels of radicalisation, at correctional facilities. These efforts are an integral part of Jordan’s security approach for they are run and managed exclusively by security actors. And whilst this is a sensitive examination due to the lack of literature and knowledge on this particular issue, the point was still raised by respondents who reiterated the fact that most of those who were found implicit in carrying out attacks affiliated with VE groups were at some point either on the radar of security forces or have in fact served some time in Jordanian correctional facilities.<sup>61 62 63</sup>

However, this research project has also revealed a greater acknowledgment from all actors of the need to go beyond the mere ideological/security approach in dealing with VE in Jordan.<sup>64 65 66 67 68 69 70</sup> This is a welcome development as it guides P/CVE efforts in the right direction, and regardless of whether this is coming from a place of concern that security actors cannot and should not shoulder the weight of dealing with VE on their own, or from a place of comfort with the need to develop a more informed view on effective P/CVE efforts by mainstreaming them across different institutions, the development must be capitalised on by both governmental and non-governmental actors.

In the attempt to go beyond the mere ideological/security dimension of VE, this research has revealed a successful recent case study: the establishment of a **Strategic Communications Unit (SCU)**, which played a low-profile but very important consultative role in guiding Jordan’s response to recent emerging VE threats. No public data exists on the work of the SCU but the interviews with two of its members provided some insights into the inner dynamics of the Unit’s work and functions.<sup>71 72</sup> Established in 2014, the SCU remained active until 2018. It was composed of a small group of experts who hailed from both the private and public sectors and had worked under the direct guidance and supervision of the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF). The Unit offered significant guidance on the design and delivery of effective alternative narratives aimed at countering that of ISIS, which was at its height in that period, and was also responsible for crisis management and scenario planning. The Unit’s success was attributed to a mix of distinct factors: those related to the structure and organisational capacity of the Unit itself (having a flat structure; the constant capacity-building of SCU members; being allowed significant flexibility in the work that was carried

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 24 May 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 27 May 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 24 May 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 6 June 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 24 May 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 24 May 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 6 June 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 14 June 2021.

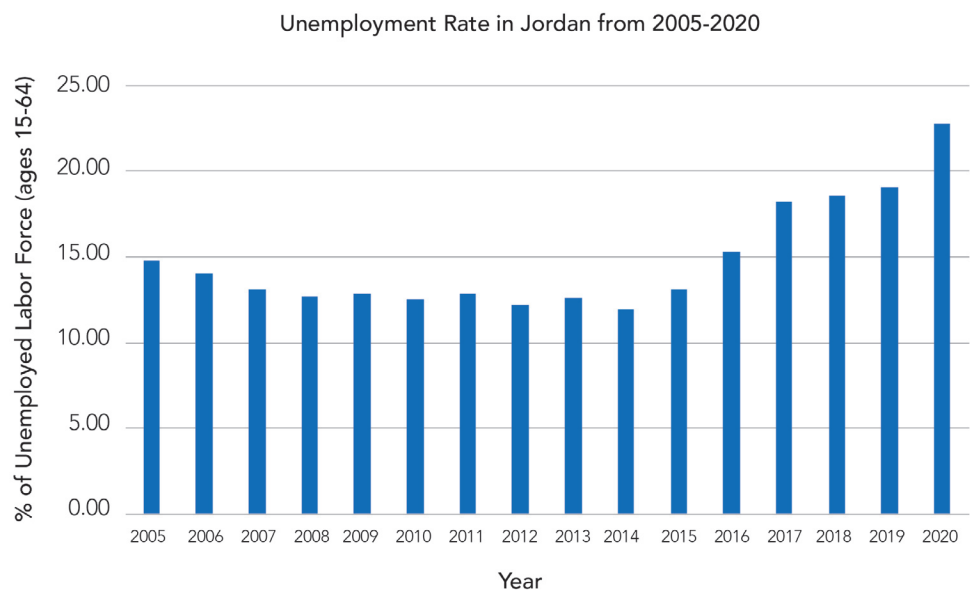
out; benefitting from the political and security buy-in of relevant senior officials) or the factors related to the focus on specific areas or content (focusing on alternative, as opposed to counter, narratives; provisioning no more than 10% for the content related to religion or ideology; amplifying the social capital around the high levels of trust in JAF and Jordan’s security apparatus).<sup>73 74</sup> Their success has shown that such an approach could be the formula for any future P/CVE efforts in Jordan.

The de facto reality on the ground

Having explored the evolution of Jordan’s official response to VE, understanding the complete scene requires assessing the de facto reality on the ground by asking the question: “what has been happening in parallel to the state’s ideological/security response?”

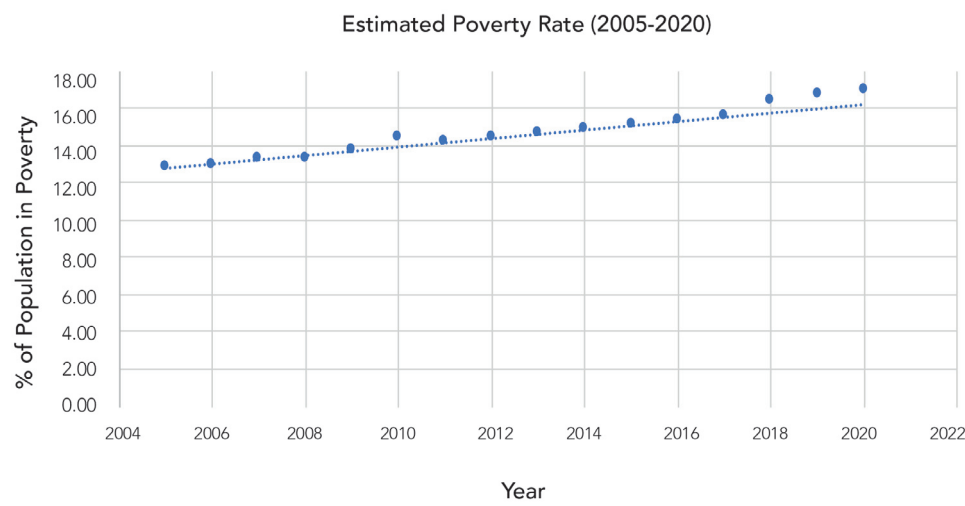
The contextual grievances influencing radicalisation pathways have deepened. Ample literature now exists on their nature, from socioeconomic drivers to political, personal, psychological and family drivers (Bondokji and Wilkinson, 2017; Sayegh and Bondokji, 2017; Bondokji and Mhadeen, 2019a). A brief review of socioeconomic and political metrics, supported by the figures below, confirms this trajectory. Between 2005 and 2020, unemployment rates have gone up from less than 15% in 2005 to nearly 23% in 2020 (International Labour Organization, 2021; Jordanian Department of Statistics, 2021). A more recent World Bank assessment for unemployment rates in 2021 projected a staggering, unprecedented, 50% unemployment rate (World Bank, 2020). Likewise, poverty rates have gone up, too, from nearly 13% in 2005 to around 16% in 2020 (Jordanian Department of Statistics and World Bank, 2009). In contrast, electoral turnout rates have dwindled from 54% in the 2007 electoral cycle to an all-time low of 29.9% during the most recent 2020 cycle, which reflects the growing political apathy and disengagement from formal political processes, especially amongst youths (Milton-Edwards, 2018; Ma’ayeh and Sweis, 2021; Inter-Parliamentary Union, n.d.).

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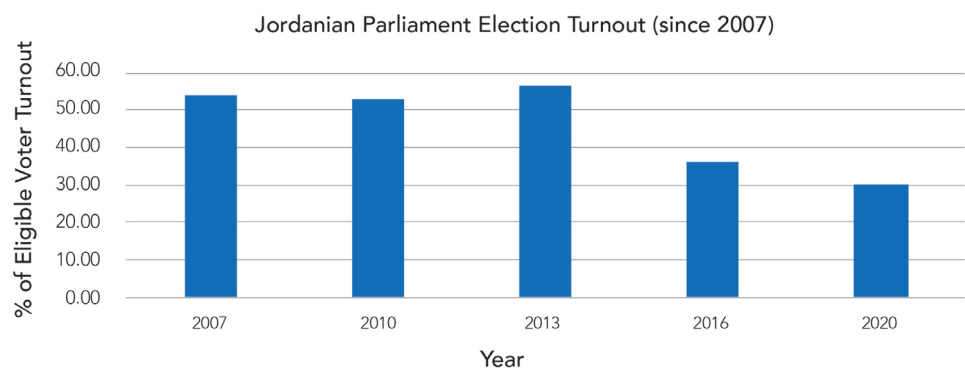


Source: International Labour Organization (2021)

<sup>73</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 6 June 2021.  
<sup>74</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 14 June 2021.



Source: Jordanian Department of Statistics and World Bank (2009)



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (n.d.)

The existing literature and the findings of this research project point in the same direction regarding the meso-level drivers of VE in Jordan. When asked about drivers of VE at a more local level, local non-governmental actors unequivocally cited a range of contextual grievances: from issues relating to family dynamics/disintegration, domestic violence, youths’ idle time, marginalisation, and lack of social justice to low levels of political participation, and poor access to jobs and educational opportunities (Harper, 2017).<sup>75 76 77 78</sup> Interestingly, ideology and religion, which have been at the core of the official state response and conceptualisation of VE in Jordan, are seldom mentioned.

Especially important for this research was the discussion about how respondents perceived the state’s ideological/security approach, on the one hand, and the state’s interest in and commitment to addressing the

<sup>75</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.  
<sup>76</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>77</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.  
<sup>78</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.



contextual grievances, on the other. At the meso level, the state's attempt to frame and deal with VE in the ideological/religious realm was received negatively. Most respondents viewed it as either further implicating Islam, intentionally or unintentionally, or as a narrow understanding of the local dynamics of VE. The same was noted about the pure security approach: it was seen as a measure that contributes to further shrinking of the space in which meso-level actors operate and deliver PVE programming.<sup>79 80 81 82</sup> On the other hand, the well-documented low levels of trust in the government and its institutions constitute a statement on how meso-level actors view the government's interest and commitment regarding their contextual grievances (Jordan Strategy Forum, 2018; University of Jordan News, 2021). Another statement is captured in the socioeconomic factual metrics on the country's progress in relation to these grievances, as shown by earlier graphics. The impression given is simply that the government is not paying enough heed to these grievances, nor has it taken serious effective measures to address them.<sup>83 84 85 86</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated such grievances and challenged the trust levels in the state (Kebede et al., 2021; UNDP, 2020).

The discrepancy of the state priorities in terms of ideology and security as opposed to the contextual realities in terms of grievances is troubling. It encourages questioning of the relevance of the state's response to actual VE needs and vulnerabilities and explains gaps that must be addressed to ensure effective P/CVE interventions/programming moving forward.

<sup>79</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>82</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>83</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

## DRIVERS

Acknowledging that the literature on the drivers of VE is excessive, this section does not represent another attempt to identify drivers per se. Rather, it highlights the ways in which the changing dynamics of the seven CONNEKT-identified drivers have led to a parallel shift in the institutional response to VE in Jordan. In some instances, this impact is captured in specific institutional measures undertaken to enhance the effectiveness of the corresponding institution in dealing with VE; in others, the impact is captured in the shifting institutional trends at the macro and meso levels. Lastly, the impact has varied, as will be explained, from one driver to the other.

### RELIGION

Having established earlier that ideology/religion is integral to Jordan's response to VE, it was fitting to confirm through this research that religion as a driver has significantly impacted institutional responses to VE in Jordan. The impact is captured in both specific institutional measures and the shifting institutional trends.

In terms of specific institutional measures, religion has prompted significant changes to the role of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. Most notably, the Ministry established the King Abdullah II Institute to Train, Qualify and Prepare Preachers in 2009, with the goals of building the capacity of religious leaders, setting clear rules and guidelines for preaching, providing practical training for religious actors, as well as enabling scholars and trainees to enhance their knowledge and communication skills (Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, 2009). Additionally, the Ministry launched a nationwide programme to build the capacity of imams and female preachers, given the prominent potential role and influence they have in preventing radicalisation within their local communities (The Royal Institute for Inter-faith Studies, 2012).

This effort was not exclusive to government institutions, as the non-governmental actors also worked on capacity-building of imams and female preachers (Addustour, 2016). Their work was in close cooperation with the Ministry, which signals how this driver has impacted institutional responses and enabled greater cooperation between different governmental and non-governmental actors. Other measures were explored to address the shortage in the "supply" of imams across Jordan referenced earlier: the idea of a "unified mosque" was discussed but never saw the light.<sup>87</sup>

Religion has also contributed to the shift in the evolving pattern of the official VE narrative in Jordan: the prominence of religion as a driver further paved the official narrative around the role of religion and ideology in the fight against VE. It has strengthened the need to institutionally address the pull factors of the radicalisation equation, for VEOs were pushing more rigorously on the use of ideology as an umbrella through which the contextual grievances were mainstreamed.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, this driver has

<sup>87</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 14 June 2021.

<sup>88</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

raised institutional awareness among both governmental and non-governmental actors on the role of mosques and imams/female preachers, sparking a nationwide discussion on how this role should be re-imagined.<sup>89 90 91</sup>

## ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

Jordan is a developing country with a small economy struggling with increasingly high unemployment rates and public debt that affects most of the population. Several studies highlight the role of economic deprivation as a push factor towards joining VEOs (Speckhard, 2017; Bondokji and Wilkinson, 2017), and the respondents have highlighted this as the most prominent driver affecting the radicalisation process of Jordanians. However, it seems that the impact this driver had was more on the shift in institutional patterns, as opposed to specific institutional measures.

Regarding its impact on institutional responses, this driver “carved” a space for itself in the PVE strategies and national action plans discussed earlier, meaning that said strategies had a clear call for economic empowerment, which in turn have encouraged non-governmental actors to rethink the design of their PVE interventions to ensure that participants are equipped with sustainable employability skill sets.<sup>92</sup>

Further, it prompted institutions to explore new modalities for youth empowerment given the high rates of youth unemployment. This is captured in the shift from vulnerability-based approaches to those which rely on the resilience of young people, as well as in the shifting geographical focus: the majority of early PVE interventions and institutional responses have taken place in areas that were considered “underprivileged” or “hotspots” for radicalisation.<sup>93 94 95</sup> Here, it is important to note that the changing perception of non-governmental actors on the localities of their programmes is indicative of the effect this driver has had on institutional responses. The presence of this driver encouraged channelling more resources and funds to underprivileged communities, which have long been outside the governmental radar of development (USAID, 2015). Whilst looking at the standalone impact of this driver might be seen as a welcome positive impact, factoring it in with other drivers reveals a different picture.

## TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

This research has shown that territorial inequalities within Jordan are a real concern.<sup>96</sup> Thus, when coupled with the economic deprivation, this driver’s effect is seen in at least two ways.

First, the territorial inequalities meant that certain areas were more targeted with P/CVE programming than others; this also meant that these territories were the ones either suffering the most inequalities

<sup>89</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 24 May 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>91</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

<sup>94</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

<sup>95</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>96</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

and/or categorised as hotspots for radicalisation. And whilst this targeting bodes well for addressing the question of unequal development and the economic deprivation that follows, it does not necessarily play out as favourably for this driver. Respondents have noted their concern over how the excessive targeting of those territories, which were already lagging economically, was viewed by said communities to be further stigmatising.<sup>97 98 99</sup> As a result, non-governmental actors at the meso level are shifting their institutional responses to address this increased concern, for its persistence will inevitably be counterproductive to P/CVE efforts.<sup>100</sup>

Second, the by-product of this excessive targeting of territorial inequalities has been the mushrooming of local actors directly linked to the abundance of funds that were channelled to P/CVE efforts in these locations. In turn, this has encouraged the creation of numerous local CBOs that “neither had the previous PVE expertise nor the level of sensitivity” needed to deal with such an issue.<sup>101</sup> In the characterisation of one of the most trusted CBOs working on PVE, this “horizontal expansion” of local PVE actors in certain communities, where real and deep contextual grievances are at play, has been “negative” to PVE efforts in Jordan.<sup>102</sup> In turn, there was also no proper governmental guidance or supervision over the work of PVE actors mostly because of the absence of a clear, public national action plan/strategy in the first place.<sup>103 104</sup>

On the institutional level, this became apparent in the shape of re-designed programmes and the terminology shift used to refer to PVE interventions. Applicable to both local and international non-governmental actors, the common impact of this driver seems to be the implementation of “unbranded” PVE programming, especially in hotspot areas. This is problematic not only in how it leads to poor and inaccurate monitoring and evaluation of PVE programmes but also in its contribution to further distorting people’s understanding and confrontation of the issue. Lastly, this might divert attention from the real drivers of VE, given said actors’ reluctance to explicitly deal with the issue or have genuine local conversations about it.

## DIGITALISATION

On digitalisation, it is worth noting that no impact has been uncovered in this research, although the overwhelming impact of this driver on Jordan’s institutional response to VE is captured in the other shifting forms of radicalisation in the country. Radicalisation in the Jordanian context has taken new and different shapes beyond the mere act of joining VEOs.<sup>105</sup> These include the horrific mutilation crimes in different localities committed by and involving adolescents, gangs and family members (Naar, 2020; Hussein, 2016a) In all these instances, social media and internet narratives have played a key role in not

<sup>97</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>98</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

<sup>99</sup> Online interview with male and female representatives of a state institution and a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Online interview with female representative of a state institution, Amman, 7 June 2021.

<sup>105</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

only exposing such new forms of radicalisation but also in providing a platform through which videos and photos of such radicalisation patterns are circulated. Here, the digital context did provide an overwhelming channel for manifesting this specific form of VE, triggering an institutional response in the form of an extensive security campaign as a result (Council of Europe, n.d).

One more relevant effect relates to the institutional response regarding Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in Jordan. It is worth noting that in the early years of ISIS's rise, most of the recruitment did not happen online but in person (Mercy Corps, 2015). The growing VE concerns shed light on the major lack in digital literacy in Jordan, which triggered an institutional response that sought to promote digital/MIL literacy and educate the society about the spread of mis/disinformation and "fake news". Studies show that factors such as gender, location and economic status are key variables in the presence of the digital divide (Abu Halka and Shafizan, 2020). The impact of this driver on the institutional response has been positive towards closing this divide but it triggered the issue of false news/misinformation spreading, with little governmental experience in dealing with it. Another consequence was the spread of shocking videos and media links of ISIS atrocities.<sup>106</sup>

## POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

The impact of political grievances on the institutional responses to VE in Jordan is mostly seen through the specific institutional measures, and not through the shifting institutional patterns. The compounding political grievances pushed meso-level non-governmental actors to launch and fund several youth programmes concerned with building youth's political capacities, encouraging them to engage in official political processes (Ndi.org, 2016; Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung Foundation, n.d). However, none of the said programmes was specifically labelled as a PVE intervention; they were labelled as enhancing young people's political participation and building their capacities. It is not clear whether this was intentional but it is the accurate characterisation of the impact of this driver on specific institutional measures. At the government level, the institutional response has involved increased participation of young people in the formulation of relevant strategies such as the 2019-2023 Youth Strategy, but, again, with no explicit link between this response and P/CVE efforts.<sup>107</sup>

## CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL, AND LEISURE OPPORTUNITIES

As for this specific driver, no significant or notable impact has been found with the institutional response to VE in Jordan. This is likely attributed to the high resistance that is typically faced by any non-governmental actor who is perceived to be complicit in changing (or attempting to change) the "cultural fabric" of Jordanian society. The issue is simply too sensitive to solicit an institutional response. As for governmental actors, they are seen as too traditional to make such shifts. For instance, despite the notable and frequent criticism of the "suspicious" work of civil society organisations (CSOs) with "foreign funding and agendas" by the parliament (HKJ Today, 2017) consecutive governments did not react beyond being defensive about it.

<sup>106</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>107</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.



One exception in this context is the institutional response regarding the potential role of female members (mothers, sisters, wives) in deradicalisation efforts. This specific area of VE seems to have gained prominence over the past few years (UN Women and the Jordanian National Commission for Women, 2016; Abu Rumman, 2021) and could be linked to shifting institutional patterns related to the perception of women more broadly. Still, no strong ties to institutional VE responses exist per se.

### TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

As discussed earlier, the impact of this driver on institutional responses to VE has been significant. At the government level, its significance could be seen all throughout the measures and fluid patterns towards the increased securitisation, which have long characterised the state's response to VE. The transnational dynamics have promoted a heavier investment in strengthening the capacity of Jordan's military and security establishments (Jordan Times, 2018), as well as an active engagement with the global coalition against ISIS. This driver impacted the way the institutional security response to VE took shape, whereby military and security operations had to be extended beyond Jordan's own borders to fill the security gaps resulting from the next-door instability in Iraq and Syria.<sup>108 109 110</sup>

With the non-governmental actors, the impact of transnational dynamics is partially captured in the work with refugees, Syrians specifically, in the aftermath of the Syrian crisis. Its specific impact was the inclusion of Syrians in nearly all programmes that were designed and delivered, mainly in the north of Jordan but also in other regions. An additional impact relates to the use of terminology and the design of programmes whereby institutions tried to respond to a growing concern about both social tension between Jordanians and Syrians and issues relating to social cohesion – hence the shift in terminology from PVE to social cohesion.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>109</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>110</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

<sup>111</sup> Online interview with male representatives of a state institution and a local-non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

## CONCLUSION

The discussed difference between the state's response to VE and the de facto realities at the meso/local levels has led this research project to identify three important gaps, as follows:

First, the gap at the conceptual level of VE in Jordan. Largely, the state seems to conceptualise the threat and its dynamics through an ideological lens. VE is mainly viewed as an issue of misusing and misinterpreting Islam, to be tackled through cementing the real image of Islam, and enhancing the religious and societal discourse on notions of tolerance, acceptance and dialogue. Whilst noble at heart, this lens falls short of accounting for the arguably more pressing driver of VE: contextual grievances.

These contextual grievances form the dominant understanding of VE by non-state actors, be it non-governmental local, regional or meso-level actors, or international ones. For instance, none of the international non-governmental actors interviewed through this research had attributed the appeal of radicalisation, hence the rationale behind programming, to the ideological or religious dimension of VE. Rather, they referred to other issues, such as lack of economic empowerment and/or political participation that mattered.<sup>112 113</sup>

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Likewise, local meso-level actors have all cited non-ideological factors like economic wellbeing, individual self-fulfilment needs, social injustice and lack of opportunities far more than ideology.<sup>114 115 116</sup> Therefore, a re-conceptualisation of VE in Jordan is needed. Different governmental and non-governmental stakeholders should have a thorough conversation about/examination of the phenomenon, to establish common ground starting from which the VE should be first understood and then consequently tackled.

This reconceptualisation is linked to the second gap: the stark absence of an effective coordination mechanism that ties the different state and non-state P/CVE efforts within a common vision. Institutionally, this gap was expressed by non-governmental actors, who cited how very often "there is no communication with and between institutions working on VE"<sup>117</sup> and that there is a significant "need to have a direct VE line of communication between institutions and the government"<sup>118</sup> as the efforts in dealing with VE should not only be coordinated but transparent and complementary. A meso-level actor echoed this point, expressing concern that there is "no one to go to"<sup>119</sup> if the stakeholders wish

<sup>112</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

<sup>113</sup> Online interview with female representative of a state institution, Amman, 2 June 2021.

<sup>114</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>115</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

<sup>116</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>117</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

to present new information, findings, or simply discuss effective ways that could be used for designing better-suited PVE programmes.

Non-governmental stakeholders seem to suggest that the state's strong focus on one dimension of the equation only (ideology/security) meant that it paid little heed to other dimensions, arguing that this resulted in the weak coordination observed in the PVE landscape, in addition to the lack of a clear and officially adopted roadmap for both governmental and non-governmental actors involved in the fight against VE.<sup>120 121 122 123</sup> It is important to note the lack of coordination that negatively impacts the state's own efforts and initiatives at C VE. One respondent expressed the frequent change in the mandate and management of the P/CVE Unit as a hindrance to its own ability to initiate and strengthen coordination between different actors, which is the Unit's official mandate, a position shared by other respondents.<sup>124</sup>

Lastly, an existing third gap relates to the misplaced focus on religion in the state's response. Respondents argued that fighting religious extremism with religious narrative, or on religious grounds, further implicates(ed) religion. For "moderation is a genuine characteristic of religion, and hence must not be thought of or used as a reaction to extremism."<sup>125</sup> In the strong words of one of the respondents, "do not fight, do not implicate religion in your fight against extremism; you will instantly lose."<sup>126</sup> Remarkably, respondents had differing opinions on the validity of using religion in the fight against VE; some thought that the issue was with violent interpretation of religion, while others felt the issue was with the religious texts themselves as they allow wide room for [mis]interpretation.<sup>127 128</sup> And whilst no conclusive agreement was made, the bottom line was that religion must be used carefully and within the broader context of acknowledging that it is potentially only one dimension of VE, not the dominant one. In the light of this, the work of the SCU further substantiates this point, as its success was attributed to not having had a strong reliance on religion. Alternative national and societal narratives were more effective in turning the dominant outcry in Jordan on how "this is not our war", in reference to Jordan's participation in the global coalition against ISIS, to a consensus on the need to partake and play a role in the coalition as a pre-emptive measure to fighting VE.

In conclusion, it is imperative to note the direct links between the three aforementioned gaps and the shift in the institutional patterns, detailed earlier in the report.

A more informed understanding of VE in Jordan requires acknowledging that the country's fight against radicalisation and VE is neither recent nor linear. The state's official conceptualisation and response to

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

<sup>122</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>123</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>124</sup> Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>125</sup> Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 24 May 2021.

<sup>126</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

<sup>127</sup> Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

<sup>128</sup> Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

the phenomena has been largely through an ideological/religious lens. The findings of this report challenge the sustainability of such official framing and causality of VE and call for re-imagining existing P/CVE approaches. The de facto reality on the ground reveals a deepening presence of the contextual grievances influencing radicalisation pathways in the country, which notably worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of gaps, the weak inter-institutional collaboration is the most prominent notion that negatively affects existing P/CVE efforts. Second comes the heavy reliance on religion in countering radical VE ideologies for it seems to be implicating religion further, more so given the fact that there is little role or connection for religion in the radicalisation of individuals in Jordan. Combined, these gaps have contributed to shifting institutional VE patterns.

Lastly, parallels were drawn between the impact of VE drivers and the institutional responses to the phenomenon in the country. The identified parallels underscore the need to look beyond specific spaces or territories, to correctly identify relational frameworks between drivers, interventions and shifting institutional VE patterns.

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## INTERVIEWS

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Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 24 May 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

Online interview with female representative of a state institution, Amman, 2 June 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 6 June 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of a state institution, Amman, 6 June 2021.

Online interview with female representative of a state institution, Amman, 7 June 2021.

### **Local non-governmental institutions**

Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

Online interview with male and female representatives of a state institution and a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 22 May 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 24 May 2021.

Online interview with female representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 26 May 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 27 May 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a local non-governmental institution, Amman, 14 June 2021.

### **International non-governmental institutions**

Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 20 May 2021.

Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 23 May 2021.

Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 31 May 2021.

Online interview with female representative of an international non-governmental institution, Amman, 2 June 2021.

# TUNISIA

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## INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism in Tunisia is not considered a new phenomenon as the country experienced a series of violent extremist incidents at various periods before the revolution. With the outbreak of the revolution against the Ben Ali regime, and in the atmosphere of democratic transition, the country witnessed a very changing and eventful climate, including a series of successive violent operations targeting security forces, soldiers and civilians. Although military and security institutions succeeded in dealing with most of these operations, this approach was not a viable solution that breaks with the phenomenon by treating it at its roots. It was necessary to join the efforts of the various state institutions and civil society institutions to address the root causes of the phenomenon rather than only addressing the manifestations of the threat.

This paper seeks to understand the relationship between policies, state institutions involved in countering radicalisation and violent extremism, including their strategic role and their daily routine practices, and the drivers of the phenomena of radicalisation and violent extremism. This understanding is based on an analysis of the results of field research consisting of a group of semi-structured individual interviews with a diverse sample of representatives of state institutions, academics and civil society activists, in addition to a stakeholders' workshop that brought these representatives together. The research outputs were analysed via a qualitative data matrix.

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The paper outlines the role of state institutions in addressing the economic, political and social dynamics that feed the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism. The paper concludes that the failures of the developmental model in terms of regional and class disparities, and the political grievances caused by the state's exclusion of individuals, groups and regions, represent the main drivers of violent extremism in Tunisia. The analysis of the research outputs also led to an explanation of the limitations to the institutions' role in combating the driving factors of the phenomenon due to the slow pace of change in the approaches followed and the practices of institutions in the context of democratic transition.

The results presented are based on research work done in Tunisia within the framework of a wider research project (CONNEKT: "Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies") aiming to build an integrated map of the drivers of violent extremism (VE) in these regions, in order to achieve effective prevention. The CONNEKT project explores seven factors that are considered potential drivers of VE (not as exclusive drivers but rather as a starting point for research) by analysing them at three levels: the state level, the community level and the individual level, and then looking at the interaction between the three levels. This paper addresses the first analytical level, which is the analysis of state policies and the work of its institutions in connection with the phenomenon within the Tunisian context.

The neo-institutionalism approach is used in order to analyse the impact of institutions and policies on the phenomenon of VE. This approach considers institutions as the locus of influence and change, and therefore explores the effect of the institutional system on the dynamics of change. It also defines the

institution as a set of rules and practices that are arranged and embedded in structures of meaning and resources. On the one hand, these structures are relatively stable in contrast to the high turnover of individual actors, and, on the other, they are relatively flexible with individuals’ expectations and changing external circumstances (March and Olsen, 2008).

In this paper, an attempt is made to answer the following two questions:

- What is the role of Tunisian state institutions in preventing and combating the phenomena of radicalisation and VE and their relationship with the factors driving the phenomena?
- What are the most significant macro-drivers<sup>1</sup> of VE in the Tunisian context?

These questions are answered based on an analysis of the results of the qualitative fieldwork conducted by the research team at the Jasmine Foundation for Research and Communication (JFRC) over a period of three months (from December 2020 to March 2021). The research was launched through two exploration focus groups and 20 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with a sample of institutional representatives, academics and civil society actors.

SEGMENTATION OF PARTICIPANTS IN STAKEHOLDERS’ WORKSHOP

Category of stakeholders	Number of participants
Civil society	6
Academic	2
State institutions	7

This sample represents an important group of parties involved in addressing the phenomenon. Following these interviews, the CONNEKT research team at the Jasmine Foundation engaged a diverse group of stakeholders in a workshop aimed at discussing the results of the one-on-one interviews in order to test the findings and explore their validity further. The workshop also made it possible to collect information from the sample about the role of the seven factors in driving the phenomenon of radicalisation and VE and the degree of influence of each factor on the phenomenon.

After completing the fieldwork, we moved to the stage of analysing the results by placing them in an analytical matrix that contributed to generating correlations and inferences that help understand the drivers of the phenomenon at the macro-level. This analysis enabled us to clarify the role of institutions in mapping the potential drivers of VE by showing the institutional process between the impact of policies and the effect of external conditions on institutional capacity.

<sup>1</sup> The macro level refers here to the level of policies, covering the role of the state and official institutions whose interventions cover the whole of Tunisian territory, understanding that the CONNEKT consortium considers that “macro-level analysis of drivers refers to those push/pull factors that can be identified within the domain of historical trends and at state and supra-state level, sometimes considered structural factors.”



MATRIX OF INTERVIEWS

	Driver Question	D1 Q1	D2 Q2	D3 Q3	D4 Q4	D5 Q5	D6 Q6	D7 Q7	
Representative of State Institutions	Interview 1 Interview 2 Interview 3 Interview 4 Interview 5								Analysis of role of impact of each driver in VE phenomenon
Academics	Interview 6 Interview 7 Interview 8 Interview 9 Interview 10								
Representative Civil society	Interview 11 Interview 12 Interview 13 Interview 14 Interview 15								
		Analysis of drivers' role/impact by category of stakeholders/institutions							

## INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

This section presents the main state institutions involved in addressing the phenomenon of VE, whose role was highlighted by the stakeholders we contacted during our fieldwork and the institutions covered in our previous report within the framework of the CONNEKT project on approaches to VE in Tunisia (Chrichi, Ghribi and Kherigi, 2020). These are considered the most influential institutions in setting public policies and implementing state programmes related to the phenomenon of VE.

### PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE: THE NATIONAL COUNTER-TERRORISM COMMITTEE

As part of a national evaluation that took place in Tunisia in 2015, and specifically the evaluation and amendment of the anti-money laundering and terrorist financing framework, the National Counter-Terrorism Committee was created as an institutional structure specialised in countering violent extremism (CVE) within the Prime Minister's Office under Organic Law No. 26 issued in August 2015. The committee was effectively established with the issuance of a governmental decision in March 2016 as its activities were launched in the first meeting chaired by the Prime Minister.

The committee has 22 members who are representatives of ministries and experts. The committee has five main functions: strategic functions (issuing guidelines, analysing data, and contributing to research and studies for more effective legislation and policy measures), organisational functions, awareness-raising tasks, and coordination and advisory functions (Commission Nationale de Lutte Contre le Terrorisme, 2020). The National Strategy to Counter Extremism and Terrorism was issued within the National Committee in November 2016, and a group of public structures and civil society actors supervised its preparation. This strategy is based on four pillars: prevention, protection, tracking and response.

As part of its organisational mission, the National Counter-Terrorism Committee has established a set of financial sanctions related to preventing terrorist financing and financing for weapons of mass destruction (Ibid.).<sup>2</sup> In this context, the National Counter-Terrorism Committee issued for the first time, on 9 November 2018, 23 decisions to freeze funds and economic resources held by people associated with terrorism. This decision was the focus of the National Committee's cooperation with the European Union (EU).

One of the most important projects implemented by the Committee in the field of preventing VE is the project "Tarabott: Cohesion to Prevent Violence", which was launched in 2018 and will be concluded in 2021. This project is executed within the framework of the Committee's partnership with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). One of the most prominent points on which this project is based is the promotion of scientific research in the field of prevention as it is built on launching a fund to support local research on preventing radicalisation. The project also seeks to support local associations by financing their initiatives in the field of strengthening the resilience of local communities.

<sup>2</sup> Through this system, the Committee has contributed to the transfer of Tunisia from the list of "high risk" countries to the list of "controlled" countries.

Among the most prominent recommendations in the field of prevention, which was contained in the first report issued in November 2020 by the National Counter-Terrorism Committee, is to enhance youth participation in national affairs by supporting youth participation in decision-making processes at the local and national levels.

### **MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR: THE SECURITY POLE TO COMBAT TERRORISM AND ORGANISED CRIME**

The Ministry of the Interior supervises the Security Pole to Combat Terrorism and Organised Crime, which was created on 13 October 2014 (which only became operational at the beginning of 2015) on the basis of Decree Number 246 issued on 15 August 2007 Regarding the Revision and Completion of Organising Internal Security Force Structures at the Ministry of Interior and Local Development. The Pole is the only integrated centre in the fight against terrorism in the Arab countries that works on coordination between security, the military, the judiciary, and the administration. It also works on analysing data, formulating forecasts, raising recommendations, and preparing a strategy to prevent against the threat of VE. The Pole has accomplished several projects, including establishing a geographical database, producing national statistics and compiling studies issued by international and national centres, supporting the state in achieving its policies, and activating the principle of positive discrimination in regions where there is a greater risk of extremism. Interventions were also carried out in the entertainment and cultural fields in these regions.

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It should be noted that the Pole's executive agency demanded the issuance of a ministerial circular that controls the coordination mechanisms between the security pole and the rest of the security structures regarding information exchange. Its request indicated the existence of obstacles to the exchange of information within the ministry. This also pushed those in charge of the Judicial Pole on Combatting Terrorism and Crime to demand for the Pole to have administrative and financial independence in order to be able to complete its projects and carry out the necessary recruitment.

### **MINISTRY OF YOUTH AND SPORTS: THE NATIONAL YOUTH OBSERVATORY (ONJ)**

The "Observatoire National de la Jeunesse" (ONJ) is an institution with administrative and financial independence operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. It has three departments: Youth Observatory, Research and Studies Department, and Media and Documentation Department, in addition to a scientific council with an international cooperation office. The Observatory states that its main task is "listening to young people, monitoring their concerns and aspirations and following them, conducting research and future-oriented studies on the youth sector, and organizing consultations that will be used in preparing development plans." (ONJ, n.d)

One of the most important programmes carried out by the Observatory is the National Youth Survey 2018-2019, which aims to identify the opinions of young people about the phenomenon of violence and their perceptions of its causes while identifying their recommendations to confront it and VE.<sup>3</sup> This is considered the first national survey on youth to include a diagnosis of the phenomena of violence and

<sup>3</sup> It reached 10,000 young people (ages 15-29), distributed over the country's geography, in terms of gender, educational and professional levels (ONJ - UNFPA, 2021).

VE, which was carried out on a large representative sample of youth in Tunisia. Based on an analysis of the data contained in the survey, an analytical study entitled “Youth in the Face of Violence” was issued in partnership between the Observatory and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Tunisia. Within the framework of its partnership with the international organisation Search for Common Ground, in October 2015 the Observatory held a national youth forum with the aim of gathering and engaging young people from all regions of the country in order to formulate and think about proposals and recommendations to prevent the phenomenon of VE by reducing exclusion and strengthening social cohesion (Tuniscopes, 2018).

### MINISTRY OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

The Ministry of Religious Affairs oversees mosques and imams and religious preachers in Tunisia. One of the most prominent roles played by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to prevent and combat the phenomenon of VE in Tunisia is its role in spreading a moderate religious discourse as an alternative to the violent extremist discourse. In this context, the Ministry has launched a campaign against violent extremist narratives targeting youth on social media. The campaign consisted of launching an electronic portal to spread the correct moderate Islamic values by adopting the moderate Al-Zaytounah Mosque approach. The campaign also included the intensification of lessons in mosques and meetings with young people in different spaces (Al-Jazeera, 2016).

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has regularly organised a series of seminars, forums and school days on the issue of preventing violent extremism (PVE) focusing on the centrality of youth in the prevention process. Among these forums we can mention the national seminar “Youth Against Terrorism” (2019), which presented various approaches (intellectual, legal, psychological, social, security, legal, and media). In addition, it has held forums such as the national symposium “The Role of Women in Preventing Violent Extremism” (2018) and the seminar on “Mechanisms to Confront Takfirist Thought and the Need to Upgrade the Religious Affairs Sector”, organised by the Ministry in cooperation with the Higher Institute of Sharia.

Within the framework of the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ strategy on combating extremism, the ministry organised a study day entitled “Religious Tolerance: In Support of Coexistence and Rejecting Extremism” (2017), which affirmed the role of religion in contemporary life and in ensuring spiritual stability.

## MACRO-LEVEL CONTEXT IN TUNISIA

### THE ROLE OF STATE INSTITUTIONS IN ADDRESSING THE DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

One of the most prominent victories of the post-independence state in Tunisia after 1956 and during the first decade of its founding was spreading education, thus enabling social mobility, which led to the expansion of the middle class in society, minimising social inequalities and reducing poverty. However, the shortcomings and limitations of this system in providing job security (a lack of harmony between the specialisations produced by public education and the skills demanded by the labour market) were soon revealed, in addition to the system's inability to formulate an inclusive economic vision and development policies and projects that encompass all regions of the country and develop their resources and areas of potential.

The post-independence state in Tunisia was based on a model of highly centralised governance, which for more than half a century has regulated the state's relationship with all sectors, producing an unbalanced developmental model that gives favour to the centre (the capital and coastal areas) at the expense of the peripheries (the interior regions). It also invests in economic sectors that do not value the capabilities of all regions of the country. The post-independence state also adopted an urban policy that focused on building major cities, neglecting the development of rural areas, which continued to suffer from marginalisation and the absence of development and public services (Work Bank Group, 2014).

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This model was established through the imbalance in the ruling regime's relationship with territory. This centralised model led to clear economic and social disparities between the regions of the country, as public investments, services and economic activities were concentrated in the big coastal cities, which deepened poverty in the interior regions of Tunisia and marginalised them not just on the economic level but also on the political and cultural ones, thus excluding them from decision-making and participation. Economically, this centralised system was characterised by shifting economic policies and models, although these have been characterised by liberalisation and privatisation since the end of the eighties in attempts to make the Tunisian economy open to foreign investment.

Despite the image of openness that the regime was keen to build externally, it adopted laws and procedures that limited competition and restricted private initiative and investment. The Tunisian economy remained monopolised – in terms of production and investment – by state-owned companies exploited by the regime and a small circle of private actors.

This system relied on a developmental model that contributed to limiting wealth creation. This monopolistic model of initiative, production and wealth grew during the Ben Ali regime, when the level of clientelism and patronage deepened. The regime was able to extend its hegemony over state institutions through the monopolistic model, making their work limited to achieving the interests of the ruling circle and its allies through a system of corruption and privileges (Sadiqui, 2011: 7; Lewis, 2011).

With time, the sense of injustice increased among Tunisians, especially educated youth (those with university degrees), who the labour market was unable to absorb and provide with a decent job that ensures dignity. The feeling of injustice has also increased among the general population due to the

severe lack of freedom, transparency and the state's responsibility in achieving social justice. The growing sense of injustice led to the outbreak of a popular revolution in 2010-2011 against a regime that had exhausted its power to fulfil the basic demands of its citizens.

What follows is an analysis, based on the results of field research, of the relationship of the regime's functioning and its impact on state institutions, with the drivers of the phenomenon of radicalisation and VE in Tunisia.

### THE IMPACT OF THE POST-INDEPENDENCE STATE MODEL ON SOCIAL DISPARITIES BETWEEN REGIONS

The institutional mindset in Tunisia continued to operate after the revolution based on the idea of the "prestige" or authority of the state, which derives legitimacy from the post-independence state and governs in a vertical, hierarchical way. In this approach, the state sets a hegemonic model for society, imposing on all citizens to adhere to it (Salhi, 2017). However, as much as that model created high expectations in the minds of Tunisians regarding the role of the state in creating development, providing jobs and improving the quality of their lives, state institutions remained unable to address those needs and meet those expectations with the efficiency and speed needed.

In their answers to our research questions regarding economic and social grievances, academics considered that the absence of the state's role in recognising, treating and dealing with these grievances created a vacuum that formed the basis for the VE discourse. Interviewees from state and civil society institutions<sup>4</sup> mentioned that it is possible to identify several distinctive regions that are more vulnerable to VE discourses. They mentioned for example that this was the case for some regions in central and southern Tunisia, which they had observed during their activities in these regions. They state that they observed a greater degree of readiness to accept the arguments used in extremist discourse. We point out here that almost two-thirds of the surface of these regions belong to "tribes" (عروش) or contains shrines, an area estimated at more than three and a half million hectares out of five million hectares of usable land (Al-Hadi Al-Hajji, 2020). The issue of tribal lands has contributed to deepening regional disparities between territories (Boutaleb, 2002). This was complicated by the fact that these territories were not efficiently managed and the state will not allow communities to manage them themselves.

The post-independence state also established an economic system based on a complex system of authorisations that enabled it to control all economic activity, giving state institutions absolute power and exclusive prerogatives over who can or cannot engage in economic activity through a wide plethora of security, administrative and political limitations. Tedious and long procedures formed a screening process that allowed the exclusion of those who were not loyal to those in power, or were not established economic actors with privileged access to the state, or who had engaged in criticism of state policies or opposition to the regime.<sup>5</sup> This has led to severe restrictions on economic initiatives and produced a continuously

<sup>4</sup> In-person interview with a male representative of a legislative committee in parliament. Tunis, 03/02/2021; In-person interview with a female representative of the Ministry of Culture JFRC office. Tunis, 05/02/2021; and stakeholders' workshop discussion, a male head of a local association, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

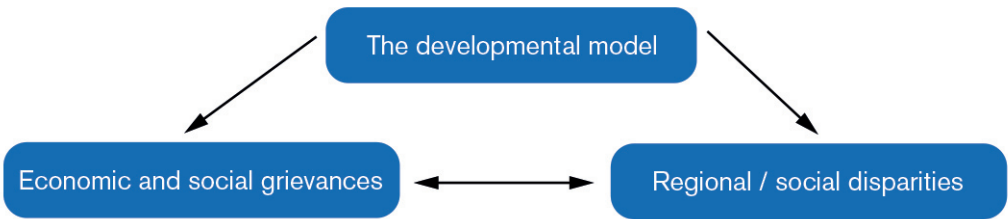
<sup>5</sup> In-person interview with a male professor in political sociology, Tunis, 01/03/2021.

growing field of informal economic activities, sectors and actors (World Bank Group, 2014). These wide informal sectors and actors have spread all over Tunisia particularly during the last 30 years, but they are especially located in the popular neighbourhoods of the capital, the suburbs and the interior regions.

All of this has resulted in a precarious situation for a large number of those who are engaged in informal economic activity, especially those from marginalised neighbourhoods around the capital, and those adjacent to major coastal cities, in addition to populations that migrated to the capital from the centre-west and south.<sup>6</sup> The marginalised areas suffer from poor infrastructure – inherited from the colonial era – and this structure directly affects access to education, culture and entertainment, which further exacerbates the impact of regional disparities. The interviews with the representatives of official institutions during our research confirmed these main features of the development model and all more or less agreed on the impacts of the aforementioned policies on excluding large swathes of society. It is worth noting that the state policies, administrative procedures and institutional rules described above operate in Tunisia not just as ways for organising economic activities, but also as a form of control over society (March and Olsen, 2008). This resulted in building a social and political exclusion system, whereby an ever-growing number and variety of social groups were pushed into marginality (out of the official arenas formally recognised by the state) and in successive waves, thus transforming this marginal flow into the mainstream, not just in the economy but also in the whole of society in culture, and in politics. In the last 30 years this has built a system of production and reproduction of marginalisation, where not just individuals but also entire territories, social groups and regions have become victims of exclusion and deprivation. This was exacerbated by the use of state authority to curtail dissent and participation in proposing alternative policies, transforming the country into a dictatorship underneath the Eldorado façade that the regime tried to project.

At the basis of this marginalisation and deprivation system we find a set of factors and dynamics that could be schematically represented by a triangle, whose elements are: regional disparities, economic and political grievances, and the vertical and hierarchical implementation of the developmental model in all fields, which contributed to the construction of a rentier state, society and culture.

**FIGURE 1.** Marginalisation and deprivation system in Tunisia



Own production

<sup>6</sup> Online interview with the head (male) of a local cultural association, 19/01/2021; and stakeholders' workshop discussion, male representative of a local association working on security, Tunis, 02/03/2021.



## THE EFFECTS ON POLICY APPROACHES ON INSTITUTIONS

These failures of the state in upholding its promises to promote development and social justice gradually led to the erosion of its political legitimacy not just within society but also, in a subtle and gradual way, within state institutions themselves. Some of the interviewees spoke about the erosion of the foundational principles on which the administration had been constructed, as the state was no longer able to play a role in assuring the economic and social integration of all segments of society. The slogans, objectives and principles of the post-independence state were emptied of meaning, leaving a gap in institutional culture gradually filled by alternative logics stemming from non-official collective interpretations of members of the administration informed by new informal rules based on self-interest and clientelism as well as non-compliance with orders except in their formal sense.

Some of the representatives of the institutions that we interviewed attributed the ineffectiveness of state institutions in managing public affairs in the last decade before the revolution to problems within the administration, which are problems that occurred in the relationship between political decision-makers and the administration, resulting in flaws in executing policies and transforming them into a tangible reality.<sup>7</sup> One of the respondents attributes the beginning of the disruption of the relationship to the decade before the revolution, as this period, especially the last five years, witnessed the collapse of confidence of the administration in the legal system and the founding rules.<sup>8</sup> As one respondent put it: "The administration no longer went along with authoritarian political decisions."

This collapse of confidence led to the formation of new administrative behaviours (Ouannes, 2010) represented in rejection and reluctance to implement orders from the highest levels of the state to the administration and translate them into routine practices.

The recurrence of this behaviour produced a pattern that continued in the 10 years after the revolution, which was exacerbated, as explained by other interviewees, by the absence of a new clear institutional culture, norms and rules matching the new democratic legitimacy of the state (after the revolution), as no change was observed on the level of daily institutional and administrative practices, as well as in terms of the performance of public services.

## INSTITUTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

After the revolution, the administration faced a flurry of demands for change in its traditional practices, which made those inside the administration become aware of these demands. This could be seen in the responses of the administration's and state institutions' representatives when asked about the problems in their institution's handling of the phenomenon of VE, which provoked very animated discussions about the importance of change inside the administration.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In-person interview with a female representative of the Ministry of Culture, JFRC office, Tunis, 05/02/2021; In-person interview with a male representative from the Ministry of Youth Sport and Inclusion, JFRC office, Tunis, 28/01/2021; In-person interview with expert on security and representative of Interior Ministry, Tunis, 15/12/2020.

<sup>8</sup> In-person interview with a male representative from the Ministry of Youth Sport and Inclusion, JFRC office, Tunis, 28/01/2021.

<sup>9</sup> Noted in all interviews with representatives of state institutions and particularly in stakeholders' workshop, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

### *The contradiction between policies and daily practices in Countering Violent Extremism*

Most of the representatives of state institutions<sup>10</sup> in the interviewed sample consider that the state apparatus is undergoing transformation, but in the form of a difficult labour process or a very slow transformation, to the point that external observers think that little is changing. These transformations affect the practices and behaviours of the technical staff of the administration and the policies followed. Below we will explain these transformations based on the analysis of the data gathered.

It is noticeable that new policy approaches are often based on recommendations from international organisations, but without adapting the policy to the nature of the institution's practices and rules. Similarly, the required policy change is not supported by an authentic change in institutional working rules in a manner that fits the objectives expected from the recommendations or the implementation of policies. As one of the respondents put it: "To implement project A, for example, affiliated to a donor... an order is issued to the administration for implementation. You find that senior administrative officials have no understanding of the approach and the phenomenon, and sometimes even the minister has no understanding so he passes the matter – that is, disposes of it – to the administrative bureaucracy – of course the "old one", which is the same administration that was part of the former regime – so a conflict of behaviours occurs between the technical side (of the administration) and the new approach." However, the interviewee still thinks that slow change is taking place despite this affirmation: "I believe there is a relative change happening as accumulative action generates fundamental change."

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Moreover, it appears that the policies and approaches adopted in institutions are based on a weak understanding of the phenomenon and the absence of clear rules of practice, in addition to a clear lack of responsibility by decision-makers, leaving assessment of the phenomenon to bureaucratic officials. One of the interviewees thus claims that: "The technical side is purely security-focused. A protocol on how to behave in the case of protests is the same in the whole world. A political order comes to control the protests. The protocol is used according to the practices dictated... The result is repression."<sup>11</sup> This results in the same mechanisms of communication continuing to be used with the public, with youth and social groups who articulate social and economic demands as institutions continue to translate various and different approaches into the same traditional practice.

On the other hand, efforts to design a comprehensive and participatory preventive approach (for example involving culture) between the National Counter-Terrorism Committee and other ministries (like the Ministry of Culture) do not yield clear structures to translate objectives into realistic and sustainable initiatives. The interviewees stated that this could be explained by the fact that the bureaucracy is accustomed to ambiguity, within an institution or between institutions, in converting political decisions into regulatory orders and work outputs. This is how, for example, one of the interviewees describes this tendency: "They organised a session in order to combine efforts to find a comprehensive preventive approach but, as usually happens, we do not find the structures that will work on that."

<sup>10</sup> In-person interview with a male representative from the Ministry of Youth Sport and Inclusion, JFRC office, Tunis, 28/01/2021; In-person interview with expert on security and representative of Interior Ministry, Tunis, 15/12/2021; In-person interview with a female representative of the Ministry of Women, Family and Children, JFRC office, Tunis, 08/01/2021 ; In-person interview with a female representative of the Ministry of Culture, JFRC office, Tunis, 05/02/2021.

<sup>11</sup> In-person interview with expert on security and representative of Interior Ministry, Tunis, 15/12/2021.

In addition, the interviewees indicated that the necessary data to be able to implement policies is not always readily available to members of the administration, and not just to the general public who have a right to access information. A bureaucratic internal system continues to monopolise information and limits sharing it even internally,<sup>12</sup> which is indicated by the absence of mechanisms of access to data as well as of the necessary mechanisms that translate political will in the form of structures tasked with follow-up of the policy implementation and of the relevant rules and routine practices within the state apparatus (March and Olsen, 2008). This situation results in a lack of effectiveness, in addition to the lack of inter-agency communication (that is, between the various institutions), and contributes to producing structural vacuums that curtail policy implementation, with inadequate procedural arrangements weakening executive bodies and limiting intervention to a purely formalistic approach that is not conducive to producing preventive impacts that address the factors driving the phenomenon of VE.

As for implementing programmes, the mandatory rules of the administration take a vertical hierarchical form, whereby programmes are set from the top to the bottom. As one of the interviewees puts it: "I coordinate with the regional branches of the Ministry of Culture ... [political orders are issued down from the centre] ... and then we inform the localities in the region [a policy of indirect communication]."<sup>13</sup> Thus, it becomes clear to us that the administration adopts the participatory approach only as a slogan and theme, but the rules and practices are still subject to the traditional mentality, as administrative arrangements have not been adapted according to new approaches.

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In light of the aforementioned unsuitability of post-revolution policies in preventing and combating VE with the bureaucratic mode of execution (based on implementing orders), we note the decline in the role of routine administrative practices in achieving an impact and addressing the phenomenon. This weakens the capacity of institutions even more than in the past. The old approach, even if limited (due to its hierarchical and centralised nature), was previously achieving its goals effectively due to harmony between political decisions and the rules of practice within the administration, meaning that previous policy approaches developed rules of practice that were consistent with its approach. But it is no longer equally effective as it is faced with a contradiction between the still effective "old" institutional culture and the new comprehensive and participatory policy approaches. Thus, policies and political decision-making after the revolution have been operating within a system of old working rules developed in a very different context and based on an old approach to combating the phenomenon of VE focused on the sole use of "hard power".

This is evident in the technical implementation tools used, which appear to contribute to creating an atmosphere that feeds VE, and transforms these implementation tools into an obstacle or hindrance to responding to the security needs of citizens and society and even sometimes turning them into tools for serving the interests of "clients". This means that the belief in the need for change expressed by bureaucratic officials does not find, in response, any substitute for the old institutional practices and

<sup>12</sup> Here, we can refer to stakeholders' workshop discussion, a female representative of a state institution according to a situation he went through: "For example, I stayed late after work for a meeting with the head of the minister's cabinet... I didn't meet him and I couldn't even reach him." Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>13</sup> In-person interview with a female representative of culture ministry, JFRC office, Tunis, 05/02/2021.

regulations or, at a minimum, the appropriate guidelines for translating political will into new institutional norms and practices.

#### *The contradictory roles of institutions in Countering Violent Extremism*

Many representatives of the institutions interviewed considered, based on their experiences, that the policy adopted by state institutions of supporting the role of civil society in CVE is not consistent with the desired goals of prevention and control. For example, grants are awarded on the basis of the population of the target region, which is a criterion that takes into account quantity rather than quality, meaning that it does not give priority to the most vulnerable groups and those in need of support. The respondents also considered that the quality of the programmes and activities presented according to this criterion, in addition to their number, do not meet the needs of these regions, which contradicts what was stipulated in the 2014 Constitution regarding the necessity of achieving positive discrimination for regions that suffer from low development indicators. Consequently, the criteria adopted are inconsistent with the intended goal of CVE.

On the other hand, some of the interviewees indicated that the relationship between international donors and civil society is often governed by ideological considerations rather than objective ones, which leads to the exclusion of many civil society organisations (CSOs) from receiving such funds in the field of culture, whose distribution is supervised and overseen by various ministries. Some interviewees also considered that donors' policy of requiring partial self-funding or withholding funding until after proof of expenditure intimidated and excluded many associations. It is useful to point out here that the inequalities and inconsistencies in funding criteria and other policies relating to VE are not limited to the intervening institutions that this research covers, but are rather problems that most ministries that are working to confront the phenomenon suffer from.

Through the aforementioned, we note that institutions, instead of solving problems related to the phenomenon, deepen them, as they contribute to reproducing and creating disparities between regions and social groups when it comes to access to culture and entertainment through the unfair distribution of funds and projects that aim to address VE.

On the other hand, other interviewees pointed out the issue of school dropouts whose number reached more than a million students without ever receiving any integration or coaching.<sup>14</sup> The streets have turned into an incubator of crime, delinquency and addiction for them due to lack of alternatives and the weaknesses of public programmes efficiently addressing this issue and capable of supporting children and adolescents' case by case. In the same context, another interviewee<sup>15</sup> confirmed that the majority of young people who are detained in prisons and correctional facilities come from marginalised urban spaces where social and family ties are experiencing collapse resulting in early dropout from school. The respondent added that nearly two-thirds of the inmates in correctional facilities, who are children and adolescents, do not last long outside before returning to prison with new and more

<sup>14</sup> In-person interview with a male doctor working with young drugs addicts and civil society activist on the issue of drugs addiction amongst youth and youth delinquency, Tunis, 20/01/ 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Stakeholders' workshop, male representative of a public agency managing the prisons and rehabilitation system, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

dangerous convictions. The education system as well as prison institutions thus appear to constitute “incubators of violence” as they fail to strengthen youth resilience to violence and provide solutions of social integration and positive socialisation for youth in urban communities that are stricken with poverty, crime and marginalisation.

State institutions appear in the interviewees’ testimonies as being unable to support young people or invest in their future, particularly in regions where the state is absent in terms of basic services, culture, entertainment, and jobs. This gap between state and society has widened until its members lose their sense of belonging, which is replaced by strong feelings of resentment and expressed in their rejection of symbols of authority and of official mainstream culture and processes.

#### *Lack of coordination: Separate Strategies and Action Plans*

Most of the interviewees stated that mechanisms and forms of cooperation and coordination between institutions and individuals concerned with VE do not exist. However, a small number of the interviewees tried to relativise this, recalling some unsuccessful attempts or initiatives such as the “Alternative Narratives Platform”.

It should be noted here that this platform, which was supposed to collect civil society initiatives working on producing alternative narratives to VE (Espace Manager, 2019) was not open to all the actors who are implementing projects or actions in this field as it was revealed that several actors, including the representatives of religious institutions, were not aware of the platform.

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In addition, one of the experts interviewed considered that the National Committee for Countering Terrorism, which was supposed to play the role of coordinating efforts between the various actors and institutions working on VE, did not possess the tools required to fulfil this role. This committee in fact suffers from insufficient material resources and lacks authority over the various institutions. “Ministries are like an archipelago in which every island is isolated from the other,” according to a researcher from an official public research institution explaining that public institutions do not share information with each other or cooperate with researchers.<sup>16</sup>

Some of the interviewees considered that forms of cooperation, even where they exist, are so weak that they do not have any impact, citing the duplication of similar programmes in many ministries, which is a waste of money, effort and time.<sup>17</sup> It was also evident to us, through the interviewees’ comments,<sup>18</sup> that ministries have very strong sectorial divisions and identities, which contributes to the emergence of values that weaken synergy in implementing common visions and policies.

<sup>16</sup> The researcher cites the refusal of ministries to give access to information to him. Stakeholders Workshop, male researcher in the strategic research center officially affiliated to the Presidency of the Republic, Tunis, 02 03/ 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Stakeholders workshop discussion, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND THE TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

A number of institutional representatives<sup>19</sup> focused on political instability throughout the last decade in Tunisia, since the country has seen 10 governments in 10 years. This, they argued, has resulted in obstacles to implementing political decisions and government initiatives aimed at combating VE. In addition, the action plans for these initiatives and their communication tools have not been updated in line with changes to VE.

The absence of institutional mechanisms ensuring continuity and communication, particularly important when there are changes to government – caused dysfunction and paralysis of state institutions. One of the interviewees explains that: “projects that are in progress are suspended [when there is a change in political leadership] so that the new official has enough time to take stock of the issues, tasks and data from the start.”<sup>20</sup> The frequent changes in institutional leadership have resulted in executive delays, as implementation and monitoring strategies are repeatedly changed according to the changing visions of new officials. This situation may sometimes even reach the point of suspending the flow of resources in order to avoid allegations of misconduct or corruption, causing effective paralysis of the flow of processes, which is exacerbated by a lack of readiness and flexibility in finding solutions.

Moreover, many of the interviewees stressed the role of another obstacle to institutional efficiency. Several of them highlighted that very often state officials adopt a policy of seeking to strike a balance between the actors within the administration in order to reduce conflict and obstructionism in the institutional environment. The effects of this power struggle among actors within the administration disrupt the implementation of orders for the sake of political considerations and interests. Thus, rather than being shaped by the objective of achieving specific goals, policies are shaped and constrained by these attempts to create a balance between influential actors such as trade unions, directors, party leaders and their respective constituencies. In addition, an opportunistic culture has spread within state institutions, as bureaucrats see projects as a way to gain personal interests and attain privileges that have become more widely accessible since 2011.

In the new context, shaped by the political transformations of the democratisation process, state institutions have adopted a mixture of innovative and traditional approaches. The new approach incorporates practices and concepts based on the 2014 Constitution, including “positive discrimination” in favour of deprived regions, and “free initiative” to adapt the economy to the development needs of the country. However, the translation of these approaches into laws and orders, as well as their implementation, is proving to be slow and insufficient.

As for old classical approaches, these are still in operation through the persistence of a traditional institutional culture, which continues to implement old administrative procedures. Thus, managing changes to public administration is governed by this tension between the progressive new principles enshrined in the 2014 Constitution (such as participatory approaches and preventive approaches based

<sup>19</sup> Stakeholders’ workshop discussion, a male representative of the National Youth Observatory (ONJ); a male representative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs; and a female representative of the Ministry of Culture, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>20</sup> In-person interview with a male representative of the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Inclusion, JFRC office, Tunis, 28/01/2021.

on the concept of human security in CVE, and the traditional approach based on rigid rules and tools that adopt a very hierarchical and vertical approach to implementing policies, creating lack of communication between state institutions, and with other actors.

### THE HARD SECURITY APPROACH AS THE CENTRE OF CVE STRATEGIES

The respondents in both the focus groups and the individual interviews<sup>21</sup> considered that the state has directed most of its capacities and resources towards a hard security approach. Seven out of 10 interviewees considered that the state relies on a purely hard security approach to CVE. One of them justified this as being an approach that speeds up the elimination of this phenomenon, and is the least expensive approach compared to a more comprehensive one involving many stakeholders. In their responses to questions concerning institutional working patterns, they estimated that throughout the post-revolution period, institutions have been content with a pre-emptive military approach in confronting the phenomenon on the ground, thus neglecting the development of a multi-level preventive policy.

The academics interviewed attribute this to a limited understanding of the phenomenon, despite the state's cooperation with researchers, although they emphasised that this involvement does not result in the translation of research into policies. A civil society representative also considered that had it not been for international partners' support and funding of CVE and PVE projects, Tunisia would have suffered from a much higher number of VE attacks, since the state does not provide support to civil society to carry out this type of work. However, representatives of security institutions surprisingly considered civil society to be best placed to carry out preventive measures against the phenomenon due to the weak level of trust between state institutions (especially security institutions) and society, especially among youth.

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Some civil society interviewees attribute the dominance of the hard security approach over the comprehensive approach to the institutional culture in Tunisia, which is built on a repertoire of practices that rely on hard security solutions in various fields to impose authority and manage social, economic and political demands. This has caused the state to lose the ability to communicate with the various actors in other ways, resulting in an inability to develop its programmes and make them effective on the ground. The researchers interviewed argue that the hard security approach contributes to legitimising violent extremist discourse. The use of legitimate violence – that is, by the state – whether correctly or incorrectly, creates justifications for the practice of violence by young people in response to violence by the security forces against them. We find these arguments and justifications clearly expressed in street art, music and the songs of soccer fans, which frequently express grievances against treatment by the security forces. Thus, this hard security approach contributes to building the susceptibility of a wider group to accept and embrace violent extremist discourse and its key elements and logics.

Most of the interviewees stated that the hard security approach that has dominated CVE policies before and after the revolution is mainly based on addressing the violence used and those who use it, while neglecting the conditions in which extremist ideology and discourse flourish. Thus, the state only addresses the phenomenon through judicial processes and sanctions. Some laws even stipulate prison

<sup>21</sup> The consensus among respondents was that most efforts are focused on a hard security strategy.



sentences for those who express admiration for violent extremist speech on social media. Minors who expressed such support on social media have indeed been subject to imprisonment.

Some representatives of state institutions and academics believe that it is logical to confront and prevent violent acts by using violence but that extremism, as a broader phenomenon, cannot be confronted with violence because "extremism is a distorted set of ideas, and it is the result of living conditions that encourage the emergence and spread of such ideas... These ideas are based on reward. This is the reality of living conditions. After interacting with this reality, these ideas adapt according to the grievances or sense of inferiority of each individual, so that he adopts extremist ideology, and in the end, it gives him an ideology that requires the practice of violence."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In-person interview with a female professor at Zaytounah University and senior researcher working on the analyses of violent extremism discourse, Tunis, Higher Institute of Islamic Civilization, 23/02/2021.

## DRIVERS

### MANAGING RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS: BETWEEN RESTRICTIONS AND LAXITY

Some interviewees, especially those who defined the phenomenon of VE from a historical point of view, consider that the phenomenon has to be linked to global crises. One interviewee stated: "With the crisis in the 1960s, there were some armed leftist movements that represented VE" and mentioned the division of the left into political movements and cross-border armed movements.<sup>23</sup> According to this understanding, the world witnesses the emergence of radicalisation with every crisis. In the same context, the Arab revolutions came as an extension of a crisis that Arab societies had been living in their relationship with their regimes, which are experiencing regional transformations and major transnational dynamics. This leads to viewing terrorist movements as a manifestation of the current crisis in the region and in its relationship with the international system. With the latest crisis in modern societies, radicalism is this time dressed up in Islamic garb, or "the Islamisation of radicalism." (Roy, 2017).

Despite this so-called "Islamisation", what is remarkable is that, as many interviewees observed, those who are recruited by violent extremist groups do not possess significant religious knowledge and are not practising (i.e., committed to obligatory acts of worship such as fasting and prayer). This is confirmed by studies showing that non-practising youth represent the bulk of the target groups of extremist recruiters (Hassaini, 2018).<sup>24</sup> One of the interviewees from the Ministry of Religious Affairs<sup>25</sup> also cited a study according to which six years of religious education is effective in creating resilience against the discourse used by terrorists when seeking to recruit members (Scientific American, 2017). Another academic interviewed<sup>26</sup> indicated that rather than being related to an interpretation of religion, VE reflects the lived reality (or social and economic conditions) of members of extremist groups (Kepel, 2015), as well as a particular interpretation of their positioning within the national and international political contexts. He explains that discourse analysis shows that at the basis of the religious views adopted by VE groups justifying violence we find perceptions of grievances, injustices and inequalities blamed on the subordination and subservience of the ruling regime in the country to the "West" (or "the infidel West" as extremist groups call it) and explains this subordination as being due to "Muslims not practising their religion", thus creating a political narrative (Fottorino, 2015).

In support of the argument that vulnerability to recruitment by terrorist and violent extremist groups is higher among those with limited religious knowledge, a representative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs who was interviewed stated that, throughout its history, Tunisia has generated a moderate understanding of religion, which was produced by Al-Zaytounah Mosque. These teachings were opposed to the doctrines of Takfirism, which is considered to be the ideological basis of religious extremism. Other interviewees affiliated to the Religious Affairs Ministry also confirmed that Takfirism emerged in Tunisia during a period

<sup>23</sup> In-person interview with a male representative of a legislative committee in parliament and specialist in psychology, Tunis, 15/02/2021.

<sup>24</sup> The author mentions that 82% of those targeted by terrorist recruiters are not religious individuals.

<sup>25</sup> Stakeholders' workshop discussion, a male representative from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>26</sup> In-person interview with a male senior researcher in a government research agency, and formerly at the Strategic Research Center officially affiliated with the Presidency of the Republic, Tunis, 20/12/2020.

when mainstream religious teaching and discourse were severely restricted due to secularisation policies adopted by the state. They argue that this discourse was also emptied of its practical dimensions that relate to lived reality, causing a spiritual void, the absence of clear religious references and the collapse of young people's trust in the religious establishment, which was co-opted by the regime. One of the interviewees also considered that social media and new communication technologies had enabled the spread of extremist discourse at a speed that exceeded the speed of the response to it. He considered that the religious establishment had not received sufficient support to enable it to compete with this extremist discourse, which enjoys sophisticated and large-scale production and dissemination methods.

### THE STAKES DRIVING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

When analysing the map of regional disparities and linking it to the regions most concerned with the phenomenon of VE that the interviews raised, we can notice a clear correspondence between them. The participants to a stakeholders' roundtable agreed that there is a strong correlation between regional disparities and the geographical distribution of social injustice and inequalities, on the one hand, and VE in Tunisia, on the other. The areas most affected by VE are the same areas where basic public services (as well as cultural facilities) are particularly poor. The state is only present in these areas through symbols of legitimate violence: police stations and a hard security presence.

In addition to this, it is noticeable that these areas also have high rates of school dropouts (Boukhars, 2017; ADO+, 219). We observe similar regional inequalities when it comes to educational opportunities and attainment, access to leisure facilities and cultural activities, and the resulting sense of injustice and deprivation, which affect mainly the interior regions as well as marginalised neighbourhoods in the capital. Although most of the stakeholders participating in the research agreed that these regional disparities and social injustices draw a map of social exclusion that is at the root cause of radicalisation and VE, some of them<sup>27</sup> thought that social exclusion and social grievances are not necessary conditions for radicalisation and VE. They think that this can be proven by the fact that several persons who were drawn to VE and were caught into its webs in Tunisia are actually from affluent families and neighbourhoods as well as being high academic achievers or from highly skilled professions. As one of the participants explains based on a conclusion drawn from the "Alternative Narratives" platform project (Amouri, 2019), the attraction to extremist rhetoric extends beyond economically or socially marginalised classes or regions: "The image of the Islamic State was impressive and attractive by responding to the psychological pressure and frustration young people go through... These groups' discourse on social media provided a sense of emotional fulfilment for youth by promoting a sense of belonging."<sup>28</sup>

Based on the aforementioned, we conclude that the driving factors for engagement in extremist groups took two forms:

The first form are community-level drivers linked to geographical disparities, evidenced by the overlap between high prevalence of VE and the map of social, economic and developmental inequalities. One study confirms that "three quarters of people who have been radicalised are from interior regions,"

<sup>27</sup> Stakeholders' workshop discussion, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>28</sup> In person interview with a female representative of women Ministry of Women, Family and Children, JFRC office, Tunis, 08/01/2021.

(Hassaini, 2018) which shows that collective or community-level issues are the most important drivers of the phenomenon in the Tunisian case without neglecting individual-level drivers. According to one of the academics interviewed, “the threat of VE still exists – even though the frequency of the phenomenon has decreased, this does not mean the decline of the phenomenon overall. It always finds arguments according to different issues and grievances related to the conditions of the regions”<sup>29</sup> and that is why prevention is key to CVE.

As for individual-level drivers, they are affected by factors such as digitalisation (modern technology and the means of communication it provides), which makes it easier for extremist groups to reach all social categories, either by targeting specific accounts or through social media strategies to attract certain types of individuals. Digitalisation is not a collective driver but rather increases the appeal of VE to some individuals, according to many of the interviewees.

## MAP OF DRIVERS

We noticed that most of the surveyed sampled agree that the seven factors that the CONNEKT project is testing are factors that drive extremism and VE, but their assessment of the relative importance of these drivers varied. When looking at the geographical distribution of the interviewees, whether based on the place where they work, carry out their activities or their regional origins, it becomes evident that the variation in their assessment of the relative importance of different drivers is related to the different social conditions and historical legacies of the interviewees’ regions.

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Based on the statements by the state officials, academics and civil society representatives interviewed, we can conclude that there are four distinct regions when it comes to views on the relative importance of different drivers in the phenomenon of VE, as follows:

- the Centre West;
- the South;
- marginalised areas of the governorate of Bizerte; and
- low-income neighbourhoods of the capital.

In these regions, the drivers of VE vary according to the different social conditions and geographical and historical legacies, as described in further detail below.

## DEVELOPMENTAL DEPRIVATION AS A DRIVER IN THE CENTRE WEST

Several participants who had closely studied individual cases of radicalisation highlighted the readiness of young people in particular regions to accept radical narratives. Cases in the North West and Centre West (e.g., Kasserine) of Tunisia were given as an example of this acceptance and readiness to view these narratives as legitimate. This acceptance was linked to the socio-economic grievances that these regions suffer from through the lack of opportunities, acute absence of access to basic social rights (employment, good public services, infrastructure, etc.) and hence the existence of collective grievances and strong feelings of exclusion from the centre (the capital and the state).

<sup>29</sup> In-person interview with a male senior researcher at International NGOs focusing his research on ethnographic analysis of the VE phenomenon, Tunis, 11/12/2020.

In this context, the willingness to accept radical narratives is not based on “Takfirism” or religious ideology but is instead rooted in narratives of material grievances and the desire for revenge against the central state. Regional disparities, which amplify social grievances and feelings of injustice, appear to be at the heart of what drives youth towards anger and hostility towards the state. The individuals recruited by extremist groups also find opportunities for individual validation and social integration in these groups, which provide financial support, a sense of self-esteem and embeddedness in new types of community.

The impact of the acute absence of services and of development in these areas, which is perceived as an absence of the state, is also exacerbated by the proximity of the Centre West and Northwest regions to the borders (International Crisis Group, 2013), resulting in the intersection of the interests of smugglers and terrorists (Ben Yahia, 2019).

### **THE SOUTH, THE PROCESS OF COLLECTIVE GRIEVANCES**

The geographical mapping of VE in Tunisia also identified the South as another particularly affected region (Meddeb, 2020). The history of collective political grievances that the region experienced extend to the beginnings of the post-independence state. They stem from long standing economic and developmental grievances, which shape the historical relationship between the state and this region. Just as in the Northwest, regional disparities, a sense of socio-economic exclusion, and the absence of policies that attempt to address these grievances all contribute to strengthening feelings of social injustice and marginalisation.

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The perception of marginalisation of their region and the absence of development therein is exacerbated by the concentration of a great number of multinational and foreign oil companies in the region, exploiting that resource without any economic and developmental return for the residents. This creates the perfect soil in which a sense of injustice intersects with the political narratives of terrorist groups “calling for the fight against the state that deals with faithless companies plundering their wealth.”<sup>30</sup> The region’s proximity to the conflict areas in Libya (Fahmi and Meddeb, 2015) also contributes to attracting young people to the dream of a fair state based on “the justice of Islamic law,” which confirms the importance of the cross-border factor as a clear contributor to the attraction process (International Crisis Group, 2014).

### **MENZEL BOURGUIBA, BIZERTE**

In addition to the two previous regions, another region was frequently identified by the stakeholders who participated in this research: the rural and interior areas of the governorate of Bizerte, most notably the city of Menzel Bourguiba. Analysis of the roots of radicalisation drivers there reveals the history of a failed economic development policy in the city through industrialisation and neglect of the agricultural and maritime economic potential coupled with the artificial urban design and building of the city around the steel industry during colonial times and in the first decades after independence, in ways that created social divisions and a very weak sense of social solidarity or community. Steel companies, which began abandoning the city with the decline of their industry, left deep environmental, social and economic impacts on the local community. Weak social ties between inhabitants of the city coming from all over the

<sup>30</sup> In-person interview with a male professor in political sciences whose research focuses on the political economy and drivers of conflicts across the MENA region, Tunis, 07/01/2021.

country to work in the steel industry and the absence of public services have weakened families' ability to provide the basic necessities for their children, contributing to making the town amongst the most affected by crime and violence in the country.

Several respondents confirmed that radical groups have found in criminal groups a good ally for their activities, with criminal and radical networks closely intersecting in the city. Security forces have frequently tracked criminals who transform themselves into terrorists or leaders of terrorist groups. The most important social drivers of criminality thus become also drivers of radicalisation and vulnerability to VE, adding religious cover as justification of violence and VE to the usual criminal pathways to facilitate access to money and social status.

### DRIVING FACTORS IN THE URBAN SPACE

Low-income neighbourhoods in the capital Tunis also suffer from social inequalities and marginalisation that have caused different tensions. These extreme inequalities in infrastructure, economic opportunities and services between neighbouring districts contribute to fuelling violence and weakening social cohesion, all of which provide fertile ground for perceptions of marginalisation and injustice, exacerbated by exclusion despite closeness to the centre of power. The feelings of exclusion and resentment (*hogra*) are heightened in this urban context where young people display the highest levels of frustration towards state institutions and symbols of power, especially towards security forces. This is expressed through acts of violence, but also slang, graffiti and underground music. Psychologists and representatives of state institutions responsible for youth rehabilitation highlighted the fact that as young people from these areas feel rejected by state institutions (educational, correctional, economic, etc.), they in turn reject these institutions, and become perfect prey for criminal and VE networks. Radical narratives become attractive in this context to many youths living in these conditions, who are spatially confined to these areas due to harassment by police who stop them in other neighbourhoods or in the centre of the capital and order them to leave.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, extremist narratives draw their acceptability in the eyes of youth from the failure of the traditional developmental model in the country, as well as of the authoritarian state, which contributed to the lack of both basic human security and social justice. In contrast, extremist narratives create hope for the possibility of individual and collective salvation through the justice of Islamic law and the attractiveness of the image of the strong Islamic state and as well as of heroism through the figure of the "Jihadi". This sense of strong heroism compensates for and promises to replace individual and collective feelings of inferiority and marginalisation. This narrative also derives its appeal from extremist groups' provision of financial support and opportunities to earn a livelihood and social protection within informal networks. Therefore, the VE narrative appears as an alternative that provides solutions to the failure of developmental policies in the urban sphere and compensates for the absence of real, effective and successful economic and social policies (as well as in the fields of education and culture) that invest in human security in its multiple and interrelated dimensions.

<sup>31</sup> National ID cards, which can be requested by police officers in public, state the holder's place of residence.

## CONCLUSION

Analysis of fieldwork results shows that the seven factors that CONNEKT is testing are present as drivers of VE in the Tunisian context. These factors are linked directly or indirectly, interacting within the framework of a very centralised political model. In what follows we present a summary of the role of the impact of each factor in the Tunisian context.

### **Territorial Inequalities**

The imbalance between state policies and territorial planning results in clear economic, cultural and social disparities between the regions of the country. Many research participants mentioned that the map of regional disparities overlaps with the regions most affected by the phenomenon of VE. Interviewees and participants in the stakeholder's workshop revealed that there is a strong correlation between regional disparities and the geographical distribution of social injustice and inequalities, on the one hand, and VE in Tunisia on the other.

### **Socio-political Demands**

Research participants' responses to the question of the role played by socio-political demands considered that the weak role of the state in managing and responding to these claims created an environment that favours the emergence and dissemination of narratives of VE. This factor also relates to the issue of regional inequalities, as socio-political grievances are particularly concentrated in poorer interior regions, which witness the highest levels of protest and social contestation. The post-independence state in Tunisia was based on a model of highly centralised governance that deepened poverty in the interior regions in Tunisia and marginalised them not just on the economic level but also on the political and cultural ones, thus excluding them from decision-making and participation.

### **Economic Exclusion**

Despite the image of openness that the regime was keen to build externally by making the Tunisian economy open to foreign investment since the seventies, the regime adopted laws and procedures that limited competition and restricted private initiative and investment. The Tunisian economy remained monopolised – in terms of production and investment – by state-owned companies exploited and mismanaged by the regime and a small circle of private actors close to those in power. This system contributed to limiting wealth creation. The post-independence state also established an economic system based on a complex system of authorisations that restrict access to economic activity through a wide plethora of security, administrative and political restrictions. These state policies have not only restricted economic inclusion but are also used as a form of control over society, leading not only to economic deprivation but also to social and political exclusion. This gap between state and society builds feelings of resentment and breeds frustration through society members leading to the rejection of the official authority and processes. This rejection can be found at the centre of radical narratives.

### **Educational, Cultural and Leisure Opportunities**

Research participants raised the issue of deep regional inequalities in educational opportunities and access to leisure facilities and cultural activities. The resulting sense of injustice and deprivation affects



mainly the interior regions as well as marginalised neighbourhoods in the capital. State institutions were critiqued for being unable to support young people or invest in their future, particularly in regions where the state is absent in terms of basic services, culture, entertainment, and jobs. This gap between state and society has widened until its members have lost their sense of belonging, which is replaced by strong feelings of resentment and expressed in their rejection of symbols of authority and of official mainstream culture and processes. The education system thus appears to constitute an “incubator of violence” and fails to strengthen youth resilience to violence or provide solutions for social integration and positive socialisation, particularly for youth in urban communities that are stricken with poverty, crime and marginalisation.

### **Digitalisation**

Social media and new communication technologies have enabled the spread of extremist discourse at a speed that exceeds the speed of the response to it. Participants noted that religious institutions in Tunisia have not received sufficient support to enable them to challenge or compete with this extremist discourse, which enjoys sophisticated and large-scale production and dissemination methods. Digitalisation makes it easier for extremist groups to reach all social groups, either by targeting specific accounts or through social media strategies to attract certain types of individuals. Digitalisation is not a collective driver but rather increases the appeal of VE to some individuals.

### **Religion**

Religious-based VE groups justify their violence through a political narrative that presents grievances, injustices and inequalities as a result of the subordination and enslavement of the ruling elite in the country to “the West”. Experts and researchers note that vulnerability to recruitment by VE groups is higher among those with limited religious knowledge. Participants note that Tunisia has produced its own moderate interpretations of religion, largely by the religious establishment within Al-Zaytunah. These teachings oppose the doctrines of Takfirism, which are considered to be the ideological basis of religious extremism. However, the limited reach of religious institutions in disseminating these moderate ideas is seen by experts as being a factor for the spread of extremist ideas.

### **Transnational Dynamics**

The cross-border factor is seen to play an important role in the recruitment process to VE. Transnational dynamics are particularly influential in the southern region of the country where the absence of adequate responses to socio-economic and political grievances contribute to accentuate the feeling of injustice and marginalisation. The South’s proximity to conflict areas in Libya contributes to attracting young people to the dream of a fair state based on “the justice of Islamic law”.

The fieldwork highlighted regional and socio-economic inequalities as particularly important community-level drivers of VE. A highly centralised governance model that was, for decades, based on social, economic and political control and exclusion, and an economic model that exacerbated regional disparities produced the social, economic and cultural marginalisation of entire regions and social groups, creating long standing grievances whose effects were not properly addressed through adequate policies ensuring equal access to basic services and rights covering the various dimensions of human security (healthcare, employment, quality education, etc.). These structural deficiencies in

public policies reinforced feelings of anger and perpetuated tensions and resentment in local communities in many regions of the country.

The triangle of the failed development model, regional disparities, and economic and social grievances have characterised the country's governance model and policies. This triangle has emerged as a major driver of both criminal violence and VE. The geographical map of developmental indicators is identical to that of the territorial distribution of networks and pockets of VE. The areas with low developmental indicators, employment rates and infrastructure are the same areas with high rates of crime, street violence and school dropouts. The fragile economic context in addition to deep social and political grievances contributed to feeding and strengthening these drivers of VE. Extremist discourse has identified and exploited these grievances and given expression to them.

Meanwhile, the effective implementation of policy responses by the state has faced various structural difficulties. The absence of a developmental approach capable of meeting the economic needs of large swathes of society (youth in particular) and many regions of the country has contributed to providing a fertile environment in which the drivers of extremism and VE grow.

Violent extremist narratives have adapted to the grievances found within each region according to its particular conditions, building on existing vulnerabilities (regional disparities, social and political grievances, as well as unequal access to culture, leisure, and lack of political participation). These narratives have transnational effects through the geographical proximity of Algeria and Libya, and become more easily accessible with the widening access in Tunisian society to digitalisation, which has accelerated the spread of the phenomenon by promoting extremist narratives through social media and the Internet. Meanwhile, these narratives face little competition from alternative narratives such as community values or moderate religious values such as those produced by Al-Zaytouna, which have not been empowered to play a role in countering extremist narratives.

The phenomenon of VE can only be addressed through institutions that are able to translate preventive, inclusive policies into everyday practices. However, the inability of government institutions to address the factors driving the phenomenon appears to have contributed to exacerbating existing drivers. This conclusion is built on the exchanges with representatives of several relevant public institutions, which revealed the different internal and external weaknesses that have affected these institutions – with the collapse of the old basis for political legitimacy, in addition to the lack of harmony between the new political and constitutional regime, on the one hand, with bureaucratic and technical implementation mechanisms within the post-revolution administration and institutions, on the other.

In addition, the implementation of CVE policies needs to be improved through strengthening coordination between the various actors involved in confronting and addressing the phenomenon. This requires political stability, giving greater priority to preventive approaches, formulating joint visions co-constructed with local communities, decision-makers, building clear and effective coordination mechanisms, and fostering effective communication within and between institutions. This is possible to achieve with stable international support and in-depth consultation with society and all stakeholders, centred on common interests to help co-define the priorities of PVE and CVE policies and programmes.

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## INTERVIEWS

### Representative of State Institutions

In-person interview with a male representative of a legislative committee in the parliamentary institution. Tunis, 15/02/2021.

In-person interview with a female a representative of the Ministry of Culture, JFRC office. Tunis, 05/02/2021.

In-person interview with a male representative from the Ministry of Youth Sport and Inclusion, JFRC office. Tunis, 28/01/2021.

In-person interview with a female representative of the Ministry of Women, Family and Children, JFRC office. Tunis, 08/01/2021.

In-person interview with a male representative of a legislative committee in parliament and a specialist in psychology. Tunis, 15/02/2021.

In-person interview with a male a senior researcher in a government research agency, and formerly at the Strategic Research Center officially affiliated with the Presidency of the Republic. Tunis, 20/12/2020.

In-person interview with a male representative of a legislative committee in parliament. Tunis, 03/02/2021.

In-person interview with expert on security and representative of Interior Ministry. Tunis, 15/12/2020.

In-person interview with a male representative of the local authority in one of the popular areas adjacent to the capital. Tunis, 04/02/2021.

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### Academics

In-person interview with a male professor in political sociology. Tunis, 01/03/2021.

In-person interview with a female professor at Zaytounah University and senior researcher working on the analyses of violent extremism discourse. Tunis, Higher Institute of Islamic Civilization, 23/02/2021.

In-person interview with a male professor in political sciences whose research focuses on the political economy drivers of conflicts across the MENA region. Tunis, 07/01/2021.

In-person interview with a male senior researcher at International NGOs focusing his research on ethnographic analysis of the VE phenomenon. Tunis, 11/12/2020.

In-person interview with a male writer and researcher in Islamic thought working on religious discourse. Tunis, 23/02/2021.

On-line interview with researcher and expert on IT and defense whose research focuses on communications security, 06/02/2021.

### Representatives of Civil society

Online interview with the head (male) of a local cultural association, 19/01/2021.

In-person interview with a male doctor working with young drugs addicts and civil society activist on the issue of drugs addiction amongst youth and youth delinquency. Tunis, 20/01/ 2021.

In-person interview with a male head of local association. Tunis, 25/01/2021.

In-person interview with the vice President (male) of a local association working on youth issues. Tunis, 15/01/2020.

Head of youth organisation (male) and civil society activist who works mainly on projects of security and youth resilience. Tunis, 18/12/2020.



# MOROCCO

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# INTRODUCTION\*

How do institutions think about the issue of violent radicalisation? By institutions, we refer to state and non-state structures. The development of violent extremism and the multiplication of terrorist groups, but also individuals that are ready to take action, whether as part of a group or in the posture of lone wolves, leads us to question the state and non-state policies and practices that seek to deal with violent thought.

If radicalisation is the upstream side of violent extremism (VE), violence is its downstream side, and it is this double game of extremism and violence that states must confront. To avoid any possible confusion, VE is not recent; it is the experiences that some states are having today in the face of this constantly changing recent phenomenon. It is the historical and political context that has changed because, in the face of VE, the government deals with radicalisation from five pillars: the religious pillar, the security and legal pillar, the socio-economic pillar, the strengthening of human rights and rule of law pillar, and finally the international cooperation pillar.

That said, extremism has become an issue for modern states, and Morocco is no exception. There are social boundaries and barriers between a way of thinking and acting, which refers to VE groups that adopt a different doctrine, and ideas perceived as threatening to social cohesion but especially to political stability. Certainly, radicalisation, especially the kind expressed through violence, seems to find a common definition in the academic field, a definition that emphasises above all the attitude of rupture of groups and individuals from society, the political regime and the religious framework. But this rupture is not perceived in the same way by states and institutions, even if states share the same standard of definition of violent extremism. Thus, in Morocco, a country where Islam is both the reference of the state as the religion of the king’s subjects but also a political framework through which the Commander of the Faithful exercises his monarchical power, violent extremism even attacks the legitimacy of this royal institution.

Throughout the fieldwork period, the CONNEKT research team based in Morocco conducted interviews with different institutions active at the national level that address the issue of VE either as a field of speciality and expertise or as one of the aspects of intervention.

The key actors can be divided into two main types based on the nature of their programmes in the field of CVE in Morocco: state actors and non-state actors.

This report gathers the views of different actors involved in the strategy of prevention and fight against violent extremism in Morocco. The working technique was semi-structured interviews with representatives of these institutions as indicated below:

Number of interviews with state institutions	Number of interviews with civil society representatives
11 face-to-face interviews	6 face-to-face interviews
1 remole interview (by phone)	3 remole interviews (1 via the Google Meet application / 2 via phone recording application)

\* Text translated into English by Sarah Sayarh.

- All interviews lasted 1 hour.
- During the whole phase of fieldwork, the research team followed and complied with the CONNEKT's ethics policies (particularly the consent procedure and the Data Protection Policy established by the Consortium) and the interviewees gave their consent to include their views in this report.

Other actors concerned with the problem of VE were identified. However, they tend to react in an indirect way by spreading their visions within institutions or national events, as well as in some publications reflecting on the phenomenon. An example is the Moroccan Center for Studies and Research, which presented evaluation reports on the religious situation in Morocco, adding the activity of its actors as a tool for deradicalisation.

Based on twenty-one semi-structured interviews, we present the results of a five-month investigation. This investigation was marked by several difficulties, which can be summarised as follows:

- The slowness of administrative procedures to respond to the interview requests.
- The reluctance of certain interlocutors to broach the subject of violent extremism, considered too sensitive.
- The difficulty in accessing official data in terms of the number of people arrested or tried under the anti-terrorism law.
- The lack of interlocution with certain key state authorities on the issue of radicalisation, thus a retention of information.

Despite these difficulties, several interlocutors were very helpful and showed great flexibility in their cooperation, starting from a multidimensional discourse analysis that takes into consideration the context of each interview, and the forms of interaction that structured it, and without locking into a pre-established model. The approach is based on the monitoring of a moving object that is the "discourse". The goal is to seek, through discourse analysis, the meaning that state and non-state actors attach to violent extremism and the way in which power structures frame it.

## INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

Since the 2003 Casablanca attacks, Morocco has experienced a dynamic mobilisation in the fight against violent extremism, both within the state and civil society. This mobilisation will gradually be translated into a two-sided institutional organisation. Firstly, the involvement of several public organisations or civil society, which already existed in this field by investing part of their resources and their fields of activity in this respect (scientific councils, councils of ulemas, human rights, intellectual and artistic associations, etc.). Secondly, the creation of organisations dedicated exclusively to the objective of fighting VE. The institutionalisation of Moroccan mobilisation on this subject will thus give rise to a whole landscape of organisations whose components and actors differ according to their institutional forms (administrations, associations, centres, observatories, groupings, etc.), their areas of intervention (religion, economy, education, human rights, etc.), their relationship with the state (public authorities, civil society authorities), the target of their intervention (the whole population, a specific part only of young people, children, people already involved in VE, etc.). We can thus categorise this landscape in two ways. One is the official policy of the state, while the other is the initiative of civil society.

The institutions involved in the fight against VE are varied and work in different fields, including official state institutions and some civil society actions. It should be noted, however, that all Moroccan institutions work on two main levels: the first level is the theoretical approach, and the second level is the practice through a daily activity schedule. The institutions involved in the programme to fight or prevent VE are divided into two categories:

- 1) State religious institutions, which aim to guide religious discourse according to the model of moderate Moroccan Islam. The programme of the official religious institutions is first of all the religious advice in the different mosques and schools, as well as the theological training in centres like the Mohamed VI Institute for Training Imams, Mourchidines et Mourchidates (*Institut Mohamed VI de formation des Imams Mourchidine et Mourchidat*). Their activities are religious preaching sessions intended for different categories (youth, women and men), national and international conferences on the importance of the promotion of the values of tolerance and living together organised in particular under the control le Conseil supérieur des Oulémas, and the control of religious associations and Quranic schools since the attacks of 2003.
- 2) Civil society organisations (CSOs), which have an optional role in the fight against VE because they do not take the issue of radicalisation as a primary subject in their daily actions. Thus, their framework is limited in the overall state policy, i.e., they do not have great autonomy in the action related to security issues. In spite of the attempts of the Ministry of Education to reform the school curricula in the last few years, which stipulates an openness towards civil society, the actors note a limited impact of these reforms on the cooperation between civil society and the state authorities. We can observe the same result concerning the Ministry of Youth, which is not open to the subject and collaboration with civil society. The field survey showed that CSOs have a different agenda from that of state institutions. The associations target young people in their annual programmes, based on cultural and social training activities, especially in the urban areas.

The actions of civil society are therefore aimed at young people, namely: le Médiateur pour la démocratie et les droits de l'Homme, and the Nordic Center for Conflict Transformation, which aims to work on the training of mothers from the perspective of both gender and the enhancement of the role of the family in the protection of youths. The actors of the social organisations deal with VE at the micro level, as confirmed by our interlocutor: "For us it was the decision to work within the micro framework of what is called everyday peace and not within the framework of peace in crisis"<sup>1</sup>.

## RELIGIOUS STATE INSTITUTIONS

The religious framework within which the ideologues and actors of VE develop their arguments leads to that public religious bodies are the first to be challenged on this issue. The most influential of these bodies are the Ministry of Habous/Religious Affairs (*Ministère des Habous et des affaires islamiques*), the Higher Council of Ulemas (*Conseil supérieur des Oulémas*), and the Rabita Mohammadia of Ulemas (*Rabita Mohammadia des Oulémas*).

**Ministry of Habous/Religious Affairs** is a ministerial portfolio dedicated since 1955 to the management of everything that relates to Islam, the official religion of the state and the one practised almost by the entire population. The role and the margin of intervention of this ministry has been made more imposing since the launch of the restructuring of the religious field in Morocco with the enthronement of King Mohamed VI, but especially since the attacks of 2003, which implies that the fight against VE is now a priority.

**Higher Conseil of Ulemas** is a religious body created in 1981 to support the official religious policy of the state but which remained almost inactive until it was remobilised in 2000 when the new monarch launched the restructuring of the religious field. Moreover, a new dynamic was established in 2004 directly linked with the attacks of Casablanca and the conception of the role that the authorities of its kind must play in the fight against VE. Chaired by the king, through his religious title of Commander of the Faithful, the council deals exclusively with *fatwa* (the issuing of religious opinions in response to requests from believers). Its influence has spread throughout the country's regions through regional councils of ulemas.

**Rabita Mohammadia of the Ulemas** is a body of general interest created in 2006 at the initiative of King Mohamed VI in the context of the restructuring of the religious field and religious policy post-2003. Its declared mission is to promote the prescriptions of the Islamic *Sharia* according to the principles of the *wasalt* Islam ("centrist or mainstream Islam") and moderation that embody the milestones of an open and tolerant Islam.

The work of these three entities is to put into perspective a Moroccan Islam through their regional, disciplinary or sectoral bodies of which the most imposing and reliable are the regional scientific councils, the schools and the religious institutes, such as:

- **Dar El-Hadith El-Hassania:** founded in 1964, and reformulated in 2005, it is a religious institution with the objective of training young people in *Sharia* and Islamic history so that they become theological specialists.

<sup>1</sup> In-person interview with the director of an international CSO, male, Rabat, 28 January 2021.

- **Mohamed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Mourchidines and Mourchidates:** created by the Sharifian Dahir no. 1-14-103 of 20 Rejeb 1435 (20 May 2014). This institution trains imams and reinforces their capacities in the field of Imamat and religious guidance in order to enable them to acquire the methods and knowledge to accomplish their missions.
- **Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulemas** (*Institut Mohammed VI de formation des Imams africains*): founded in 2015 for African cooperation in spreading the values of tolerance and religious education and strengthening Islamic activities in the continent.
- **Moroccan Council of Ulemas for Europe** (*Conseil marocain des Oulémas pour l'Europe*): founded in 2008 to highlight the function of religion and the coordination between institutions that work in the religious arena at international levels, as well as the follow-up of Muslim communities in their daily Islamic practices.

In addition to these religious bodies that focus in a direct way on the fight against VE in Morocco, this issue involves, albeit indirectly, all institutions and administrations of the state, each according to its area of jurisdiction and expertise: the education and teaching sector (reform of school textbooks, promotion of scientific research on the issue...), the justice sector (the rehabilitation of people involved), the official bodies of human rights, especially the National Human Rights Council (*Conseil National des Droits de l'Homme*) (control of procedures, support for victims...), the official media, especially Assadissa (the sixth), the Mohammed VI channel of the Holy Quran and promotion of the figure of tolerant and open Islam.

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## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Since 2003, civil society has been fully involved in the fight against VE. Associations working in the field of human rights, such as the *Association de Défense des Droits de l'Homme au Maroc* (ASDHOM), the *Ligue Marocaine pour la Citoyenneté et les Droits de l'Homme* (LMCDH) and the *Forum marocain des droits de l'homme*, have made it a priority. Their margin of intervention is distributed on several levels, namely the control of security and judicial procedures, the legal accompaniment of victims in addition to awareness and activism in favour of ideas that are supposed to help confront the socio-economic sources of this extremism through the establishment of a democratic political system, the reform of justice, and the reduction of social inequalities. In addition, scientific, artistic, cultural, sports and other associations are also created in this atmosphere. In addition, political organizations not linked to the state, in particular political parties, have also demonstrated their willingness to get involved in this cause. Centres for reflection and awareness have in fact been created within some political parties. We cite as an example the centre al-Mizane (the balance) created within the Istiqlal party and directed by Mohamed Abdelouhab Rafiqi, a former Salafist actor and detainee on the sidelines of the 2003 attacks, and which is involved at all levels in the fight against religious extremism in Morocco.

The nature of their activities varies according to the diversity of the spaces where they are active and the sectors they target: working-class neighbourhoods, school spaces, youth spaces, universities, etc. However, all of these activities are generally based on the same mission, which is to raise awareness of the risk of youth involvement in extremist organisations and to promote the values of tolerance and openness. In spite of the multiplication of these bodies, one observes an omnipresence of the state, and the lack of coordination, as it was demonstrated during our field investigation.

## MACRO-LEVEL CONTEXT IN MOROCCO

### INSTITUTIONAL PERCEPTION OF C/PVE

Since the 2003 attacks and terrorist attempts in Morocco, the state has mobilised five pillars as part of the overall strategy to combat VE at all levels. The five pillars are: the religious pillar, the security and legal pillar, the socio-economic pillar, the human rights and rule of law pillar, and the international cooperation pillar.

#### The religious pillar

It is the main pillar for state action in the fight against VE. In this context, the state has officially launched reforms of the religious field in Morocco, including reforms that affect the institutions that play a theological role, especially the mosques that are closer to citizens. It is within this framework that the **Rabita Mohammadia of the Ulemas** occupies a central place. It is an institution founded on the objective of fighting and preventing VE from a religious approach. The action of this institution is divided into two main axes: the theoretical aspect, which aims at the analysis of religious discourse, on the one hand, and the deconstruction of concepts to shed light on the ambiguities of the religious text, on the other. This work is clearly visible in the publications of the organisation, especially the dissemination of the deconstruction notebooks “Dafatir Atafkik” in the official website.

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On the other hand, the Rabita has founded youth training centres for risk prevention, namely the Ajjal programme, which works primarily with young people, via their socio-cultural support within specialised training centres. For our interlocutor, this role is in addition to the efforts of the Superior Council of the Ulema (*Conseil supérieur des Oulémas*) in the field of religious training: “the Rabita Mohammadia of the Ulemas is a scientific institution that has a scientific council composed of scholars, and its units include the unit of deconstruction of extremist discourse from the dissemination of publications (Dafatir Atafkik)”<sup>2</sup>.

The publications of the Rabita are disseminated with the aim of reconstructing the religious discourse and correcting the elements of extremist discourse based on unity, salvation, dignity and the purity of Islam. As our interlocutor explains, “the whole world is facing the radical discourse and trying to deconstruct it”<sup>3</sup>.

Like the Superior Council of the Ulema, the Rabita also has regional offices, which organise meetings and lead religious debates. However, it is the Imam as a local religious leader in direct daily contact with the citizens who implements the state’s strategy.

#### The security and legal pillar

This aspect represents the main framework in the national project for the fight against extremism. In March 2015, Morocco created the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (*Bureau central d’investigation*

<sup>2</sup> In-person interview with the Head of La Rabita Mohammadia des Oulémas, male, Rabat, 2 February 2021.

<sup>3</sup> (Ibid.)



*judiciaire* (BCIJ)) with the aim of dealing with terrorism cases and territorial control of the country. The judicial work is also applied by the delegation of prisons in Morocco, through the application of the **Musalaha (Reconciliation) programme** intended for prisoners to train and reintegrate them into society. The *Musalaha* programme is divided into four areas: religious training, education, skills training, and psychological support.

The presence of these institutions is remarkable at the international level in terms of security, recognised as a “leading security experience” and the fight against VE and terrorism. From this recognition, Morocco has signed several conventions with other countries and especially the piloting of the **Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF)** launched in 2016.

### **The socio-economic pillar**

In 2005, King Mohammed VI launched the **National Initiative for Human Development (INDH)** to fight against poverty and precariousness, particularly in fragile areas. The INDH programmes are mainly national programmes that provide financial support and monitoring of socio-economic projects of associations and cooperatives, as well as support for young project holders. This initiative works on the principle of territorial development to minimise the rate of poverty and social precariousness.

Other institutions are involved in development actions, such as the **Ministry of Women, Solidarity and Family**, which founded the Social Development Agency (**Agence de Développement Social (ADS)**) that works at the local level with the promotion of programmes within the framework of regional governance. It is noticeable that these institutions do not work directly on the issue of VE. But the actors of these organisations consider that this type of programme can strengthen the role of young people in society in an indirect way, as the local coordinator of the ADS explained: “The issue of violent extremism is not considered in a direct way in the programmes of the ADS, but the variety of axes and aspects of interventions that we carry out to integrate young people in the social process and the valorisation of the sense of citizenship”<sup>4</sup>.

### **The human rights and rule of law pillar**

Morocco has established a human rights protection body, the **National Human Rights Council (CNDH)**, which has become a kind of reference for the state to deal with reports from international NGOs that question Morocco’s respect for human rights. The human rights announced in the constitution are: keeping freedom and equal opportunities, banning all discrimination, parity between men and women, and the generalisation of the participation of young people in the process of social and economic development. Within this framework, the CNDH has produced a teaching guide for human rights education, as well as other actions on digital culture to fight against hate speech disseminated in the virtual space, in order to prevent the danger of propaganda from terrorist organisations. The CNDH also pilots several initiatives such as a model of state presence that indicates the application of the law from the perspective of respect for human rights, and the monitoring of visible changes at the national and international levels. In addition, it monitors the legal reform process. The CNDH has played an important role in the *Musalaha* programme developed by the General Delegation for Prison Administration and Rehabilitation (DGAPR), in cooperation with the Rabita Mohammadia of the Ulemas, the CNDH and experts.

<sup>4</sup> In-person interview with the Head of the Agence de Développement Social (ADS), male, Meknès, 24 September 2020.

**The international cooperation pillar**

The establishment of new international strategies shows that the country seeks to position itself in the African continent. In this sense, Morocco has positioned itself as a peace mediator in Libya (Abouzzohour, 2020) and in Mali with the aim of increasing its value as regional security provider at the international level. Also in this regard, Morocco has recently inaugurated the Office of United Nations Counter-Terrorism and Training Program in Africa (Maroc.ma, 2021).

**C/PVE EXAMPLES FROM INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE**

State institutions	C/PVE actions
Ministry of Habous/Religious Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Coordination with religious institutions and annual planning of programmes for each institution.</li><li>• The formation of partnerships with foreign institutions.</li><li>• The permanent control of the actions established in the religious field in Morocco, notably the programmes of the mosques and the sessions of the religious supervision of the prisoners.</li></ul>
Rabita Mohammadia of the Ulemas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A theoretical programme: notebooks and reviews containing definitions of religious concepts and analysis of religious texts, organisation of conferences, religious supervision within prisons, as well as a programme adopted during the month of Ramadan.</li><li>• A training programme: founding specialised centres for cultural training and supporting youths in several large cities (Ajial Center), capacity building of youths, training of trainers in partnership with foreign institutions.</li></ul>
Social Development Agency (ADS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The training of young people in entrepreneurship, the initiation of socio-cultural spaces in the precarious spheres at the local level, supporting young project leaders, the training of members of associations and cooperatives.</li></ul>
National Human Rights Council (CNDH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Its work is directly related to human rights: monitoring and evaluation of public policies and harmonisation of legislation, parity and non-discrimination of the new generation, training of young people in the field of human rights culture.</li></ul>

We emphasise that these state institutions are committed to a national strategy but carry out their action plans within a hierarchical framework that takes into consideration the specificity of each territory.



### COOPERATION BETWEEN STATE INSTITUTIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

CSOs are also involved in the national approach to CVE. However, have different strategies in the absence of cooperation with the state. Thus, there is a disconnect between the work of these associations and the state. This is mainly due to the monopoly that religious institutions have on the subject. For their part, the actors show a great capacity to mobilise from a human rights approach and also organise meetings for young people. But due to lack of resources their actions remain limited.

Thus, to take the example of the *Observatoire Marocain de Lutte Contre le Terrorisme et l'Extrémisme*, which is developing a strategy to combat extremism and an action plan to prevent VE, its strategy is transnational in scope and it adopts plans to deprive extremist groups of the tacit support of their sympathisers, particularly among youths, and to immunise them against their abuses by broadening the participation of associative institutions in the process of sensitising groups to the regressive thoughts of terrorism. However, this strategy is hampered by the lack of trust between civil society and the state: "The restoration of trust between official and associative institutions has become a necessity in order to fight against VE and terrorism, especially since civil associations are the first interface close to the population, direct interlocutors with it, and a safety valve against all forms of extremism"<sup>5</sup>.

Thus, the civil society strategy is based on family-centred counselling programmes, focusing on individuals who have been convicted of criminal acts related to VE, as well as providing medical and psychological social and legal services to victims of VE, including victims of crime.

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<sup>5</sup> Webinar "Penser le radicalisme violent chez les jeunes au Maroc" organised by the Université Moulay Ismaïl (UMI) in collaboration with the Rabat Social Studies Institute (RSSI) and the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) in the framework of the project CONNEKT the 9th of March, 2021.

## DRIVERS

The multiplication of state bodies in Morocco to combat radical violence is an exception in the context of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The position of religion as the religion of the state and as a political asset of the monarchy allows it to exercise a monopoly on this subject. Thus, state policy consists of implementing what state actors call “an academic approach”. In order to establish an assessment of the impact of Moroccan institutions on the factors of violent extremism, we will follow the drivers identified by CONNEKT: religion, economic deprivation and territorial inequality, digitalisation, political grievances, cultural factors, and transnational dynamics.

### RELIGION

The creation of religious bodies to deal with violent extremism is seen as a positive strategy, aimed at limiting the scope of Jihadist discourse within places of worship. This religious strategy works with a certain regionalism, which consists of creating local authorities and regional offices of the Council the Ulema. These offices or the mosque preachers control Friday preaching. No leeway is left for imams to address other issues. Thus, imams must be politically neutral and preach only on behalf of the state. Other actors active at this level are the religious leaders *qyimin diniyin*, whose role is to provide literacy courses within the mosques and meet the needs of the faithful on religious issues. These leaders are mainly women graduates in Islamic studies, who preach for a so-called Moroccan Islam. Thus, the strategy consists of deconstructing radicalisation from a so-called gender approach, which targets women as being the pillars of the family. However, this omnipresence of the state in the religious field is built on security and scholarly foundations and is aimed at an informed and adult population. Within the framework of young people, the religious policy of the state seeks to develop the religious schools known as traditional<sup>6</sup>. The Quran Tablet — one of the methods of memorising the Quran in Moroccan Quranic schools — is in force in particular in the regions of Sousse-Massa and Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima. These two regions account for 47.91% of schools nationwide. Of these, 50.35% are in rural areas and 71.68% are managed by associations controlled by the Ministry of Habous/Religious Affairs.

In our interview with the expert and actor against violent radicalism Mohamed Abdelouhab Rafiqui<sup>7</sup>, he explained that the religious factor feeds extremism among young people. It is based on a religious understanding of the texts that has remained faithful to the interpretations established by the ancient jurists in a specific socio-political context. This makes it a motivation to nurture extremism among youths.

Even though economic, social and political factors have been, to some extent, one of the main drivers of the adherence to extremist ideology, especially the democratic setbacks in Arab countries and the sense

<sup>6</sup> Documentary “The masters of Quran”, Project production: ANR ILM program “The teaching of Islam in Morocco (18th-21st centuries): Islamology and social sciences” (ANR-16-CE27-0015), coordinated by Sabrina, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Webinar “Penser le radicalisme violent chez les jeunes au Maroc” organised by the Université Moulay Ismaïl (UMI) in collaboration with the Rabat Social Studies Institute (RSSI) and the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) in the framework of the project CONNEKT the 9th of March, 2021.

of civilisational defeat that has driven up the shares of Jihadist movements, the influence of these movements remains limited, and it is not the main harmful dimension of extremism. For Rafiqui, the explanation of violent extremism finds its justification in the texts themselves. According to him, most of the young people who “drifted” to extremism lived in socially comfortable conditions, such as Fatiha Al-Majati, famous in the world of extremism and terrorism. She was distinguished in her studies, and speaks several languages, in addition to the fact that she was received and appointed by King Mohamed VI when he was Crown Prince as an outstanding student. Despite this comfortable position that Fatiha Al-Majati held at all levels, she preferred to join the Jihadist groups, becoming an emblematic figure and occupying leadership within ISIS.

Hence, the religious dimension is a fundamental factor that produces VE in Morocco and outside the country. These young people who join extremist organisations find themselves impregnated by the interpretations of the theorists of these groups by downloading texts, in which they exhort martyrdom as a means of expiation for all sins and faults. These texts are loaded, according to Rafiqui <sup>8</sup>, with themes around sex, and what God is preparing for the martyrs regarding *Houris* in Paradise as a reward. The reason for this extremism in general is thus in texts produced in a political and historical context that no longer exists. This is the jurisprudence that still exists today and is taught even in universities in the departments of Islamic studies, and any talk about its historicity is accused of deviating from the sanctity of the text and exposing its owner to expiation.

### ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION AND TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

After the 2003 attacks in Casablanca, economic factors and territorial inequalities were pointed out as factors of violent extremism. Thus, in 2005, King Mohamed VI launched **National Institute for Human Development (INDH)**. The INDH’s objective was to limit the areas of poverty and reduce inequalities in human development in Morocco. The INDH strategy is based on good local governance according to the World Bank reference. A large number of unofficial studies highlight the gap between the philosophy of the INDH and the reality of the programmes, especially in rural areas. Thus, these studies show that there is no positive and significant impact of the INDH on variables related to health, education and poverty reduction. On the contrary, with the new constitution of 2011, and the creation of regionalisation with 12 regions, new forms of territorial disparity have appeared. Of the 12 regions, three regions participate with 58.7% of the national wealth, namely the regions of Casablanca-Settat, Rabtat-Salé-Kénitra and Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima. However, of the 1,500 Moroccans who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq under the banner of ISIS, between 600 and 700 Jihadists are from the north of the kingdom, despite the economic development of this region since the reign of Mohamed VI. The presence of these Jihadists is most often attributed to the history of this region and its relationship to the reign of Hassan II, neglecting the perverse effect of this development on the emergence of socio-economic inequalities that lurks behind the macro development indicators of this region (Lamlili, 2015).

### DIGITALISATION

The use of digital tools is a main element in the emergence of terrorist propaganda especially among young people, which is well marked in the presence of Jihadist groups in digital platforms and their hate

<sup>8</sup> (Ibid.)

speech in different social networks for the purpose of recruiting adolescents (Hussein, 2017). However, this emergence is not always a result of a lack of digital literacy in the individual, as there is the possibility of strengthening it via the dissemination of content and also the mastery of its tools by manipulators as our interlocutor mentioned: “There are several manipulators, while the absence of digital literacy can integrate young people into extremist groups”<sup>9</sup>. So, state institutions must adapt to the new process of technology to complete its role of preventing and fighting against violent extremism, especially educational institutions.

### POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

A group of interviewees confirmed that the “Islamist” movements in Morocco have indirectly impacted the orientation of young people’s ideas. In Morocco, the different Islamist currents reject radical ideas. According to our interlocutors, radical and violent ideologies are of foreign origin, which pushes young people to look for other forms of belonging to people who is victim of political violence, as is the case with the situation in Syria and Iraq.

The political parties have difficulty in gaining the trust of young people, due to the negative image of the political actors among the population. However, several political parties have special structures to welcome youths and women. Some political actions are done in partnership with state structures, notably the Ministry of Habous/Religious Affairs, for the sensitisation of youths and women. Our interlocutors consider that communication and education on human rights are means of protection against VE: “The party always works under the angle of freedom and the refusal of radicalism at the internal and external level via the training of young members of the party. The main areas of training are freedom, equality, and at the external level activities such as outings, discussions and seminars”<sup>10</sup>. We find that political parties do not really have programmes to fight radicalism. On the contrary, “left” parties use the term “radicalisation” to disqualify the Islamists just as the Justice and Development Party (PJD) uses the term “secularism” —to refer to atheism— to downgrade “leftist” parties.

### CULTURAL FACTORS

The field interviews allowed us to grasp the place of cultural factors in violent radicalisation. Indeed, the return to the past towards a glorious Islam among young people facilitates this radicalisation process. Thus, according to our interlocutors, the interpretations of the Quranic texts insist on the form and divert the substance. These are mechanisms used by certain ideologists of radicalisation. This ideology values the past over the present and eternal life over the present life, etc. It targets young people who are not in the same situation as the others, and who are not touched by the state discourse, because the official discourse is too academic or too far from their reality.

### TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

Radicalisation exposes Morocco at the international level because with its diaspora, particularly in Europe, which exceeds three and a half million, Morocco is subject to internal and external factors of radicalisation. This process of radicalisation, particularly violent, is carried out through migration

<sup>9</sup> In-person interview with male representative from an academic institution, Fès, 18 January 2021.

<sup>10</sup> In-person interview with male representative from a political party, Meknès, 11 September 2020.



channels. Thus, playing on its fundamental aspect of the believers, Morocco mobilises actions that transcend national borders in the form of “religious diplomacy” to European and African countries to deal with religious radicalism, and this through the training of imams. Thus, in 2008 Morocco created the **Moroccan Council of Ulemas for Europe** to preserve the cultural and religious identity of the Moroccan community living in Europe. In July 2015, the country established the **Foundation for African Ulemas**, which aims to unify and coordinate the efforts of Muslim Ulemas in the African continent. These strategies rely heavily on the monarch’s position as Commander of the Faithful, but also through the dissemination of an open and tolerant Islam based on Sufism. While Morocco has succeeded in its international strategy, the security situation at home and its distance from civil society do not allow for a positive assessment of its policy.

## CONCLUSION

According to the definition of the political scientist Galtung and Höivik (2019), structural violence is any form of political and economic coercion that puts pressure on the potential of the individual and is related to unequal access to resources of education, health, justice, etc., as it is a type of violence produced by state institutions through a political system based on the exclusion and privatisation of state power by a limited number of actors.

In moderately open political systems, violence structures daily life, and institutions that are supposed to include youths have become tools of exclusion. Thus, the educational system in Morocco produces social exclusion instead of developing cognitive skills to help social integration, which explains the extremist tendencies of youths as one of the results of the state's failure to educate and integrate them into social life. In addition to the structural violence of the state, which remains faithful to its old approach of restricting the freedoms of opinion, thought and action, exposing large groups of society to exclusion, both economically and socially, the fight against radicalisation is locked in a security logic. However, the fight against violent extremism requires effective actions of a collective nature that bring together civil society, especially young people, through:

- Networking with CSOs, whether cultural, educational, professional or other, to set up programmes to fight extremism and terrorism in partnership with the state, provided that they also strive to fight against the permanent violations of human rights and social exclusion, which may be among the factors that encourage extremism.
- But also by starting from the state's support for civil society as a key partner in the fight against extremism and terrorism.
- Working on the investment in modern technological and social media in order to encourage communication with young people and to confront through these means everything that can quickly cultivate the culture of hatred and rejection of the other.
- To give young people the opportunity to contribute to local and national decision-making, whether at the associative or political level, so that they feel responsible for change and stability.
- Work towards the creation of regional and national youth councils to enable young people to participate in public political debate, thereby building their trust in official institutions, restoring their confidence and interest in political work, and promoting political participation rather than reticence.

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## OTHERS

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Documentary “The masters of Quran”, Project production: ANR ILM program “The teaching of Islam in Morocco (18th-21st centuries): Islamology and social sciences” (ANR-16-CE27-0015), coordinated by Sabrina, 2019.

## INTERVIEWS

### Representatives of state institutions

In-person interview with representative from a political party, male, Meknès, 11 September 2020.

In-person interview with representative of Al Majlis Al ilmi, male, Fès, 12 September 2020.

Phone interview with an academic and preacher, male, Agadir, 19, September 2020.

In-person interview with representative of Al Majlis Al ilmi, male, Fès, 20 September 2020.

In-person interview with representative of the Ministère des Affaires Islamiques, male, Meknès, 21, September 2020.

In-person interview with the Head of the Agence de Développement Social (ADS), male, Meknes, 24 September 2020.

In-person interview with the president of Al Majlis Al ilmi, male, Meknès, 25, Septemb 2020.

In-person interview with representative of a political party in the commune, male, Fès, 3 November 2020.

In-person interview with representative of a political party in the commune, female, Fès, 5 November 2020.

In-person interview with representative of a political party in the commune, male, Fès, 5 November 2020.

In-person interview with representative of a political party in the commune, male, Fès, 6 November 2020.

In-person interview with the Head of La Rabita Mohammadia des Oulémas, male, Rabat, 2 February 2021.

### Representatives of civil society organisations

In-person interview with academic and religious mediator, Meknès, male, 20 September 2020.

In-person interview with representative from an academic institution, male, Fès, 18 January 2021.

In-person interview with representative from a research centre, male, Rabat, 26 January 2021.

In-person interview with representative from a CSO, male, Rabat, 27 January 2021.

In-person interview with the director of an international CSO, male, Rabat, 28 January 2021.

In-person interview with representative from a CSO, female, Rabat, 08 February 2021.

Phone interview with representative from a CSO, male, Casablanca, 28 Mars 2021.

Online interview with representative from a CSO, male, Casablanca, 30 Mars 2021.

Phone interview with journalist and representative from a CSO, male, Casablanca, 5 April 2021.

# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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## INTRODUCTION

The institutional perspectives offer a significant input to the current countering/preventing terrorism (C/PVE) studies and represent an important link in the three stages of the CONNEKT project, especially within the macro level. First, this research relies on the New Institutionalism as a theoretical approach, therefore placing an emphasis on institutional norms, rules and practices. Second, the previously published Country Report on National Approaches to Extremism (D3.2.) serves as a practical overview of what has been done so far and maps the past and current institution-led C/PVE strategies, initiatives and programmes. Third, in order to establish a cartography of contexts of radicalisation and violent extremism, the CONNEKT project links institutions to the meso and micro levels and provides a structural understanding for further research at the community and individual levels.

The principal question that this research attempts to answer is: “Do institutions view radicalisation differently, and are some drivers more relevant than others?” Moreover, by looking into practices of different types of institutions, the research seeks to distinguish the specific roles of institutions in the process of C/PVE, as well as the ways in which they cooperate and communicate individually. This is particularly significant in order to better understand institutional policy choices, and to shape future strategic initiatives of actors directly involved in C/PVE. Additionally, a country-specific contextualisation and analysis of drivers could improve institutional responses and enhance understanding of the processes of radicalisation.

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A macro-level context analysis required a cross-regional approach, which is reflected in the use of the same or only slightly adapted questions in two different regions: the Balkans and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Selection and ranking of institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) were done in accordance with the relevance of C/PVE in their work, with the categories being formed in line with the type of institution. A total of 16 online and in-person interviews were conducted in Sarajevo in the period from the end of December 2020 to mid-February 2021. Conforming to the CONNEKT project’s regulations, this qualitative research was conducted in line with the European Union (EU) General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the legislation of BiH – additionally guided by the principle of confidentiality, meaning that the identity of respondents is protected through pseudonymisation of personal data.

Throughout the research, several important points and findings have been identified. The study revealed different institutional understandings of radicalisation, clarified collaboration patterns among institutions from different sectors, presented the complexity of relationships within institutions and ways of cooperation, and confirmed the roles of formal and informal relationships in communication channels. Moreover, it revealed institutional practices and types of support that institutions receive from the state and abroad. In contrast, although there is no full agreement on this, the research has shown divergences in the relevance of different drivers of radicalisation in BiH, where some are deemed as more important than others. Additionally, some of the drivers are solely perceived as underlying drivers, which could become relevant only when paired with another.



The following section will give an overview of the relevant institutions in BiH that deal with issues of radicalisation and violent extremism, especially prevention programmes. The third section will provide a detailed analysis of the macro-level context in BiH, with special focus on the institutional perceptions of C/PVE and examples from institutional practice, recent changes in norms and behaviours of institutions toward C/PVE, as well as the cooperation of institutions from the state and abroad and communication-related actions. The fourth section provides an overview of seven previously identified drivers of violent extremism (territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political ideas, cultural factors, religion, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics), explores the perception of these drivers within institutional practice and analyses their relevance for the BiH context. The final section provides an overview of the most significant conclusions that emerged from the study, concerning institutional perceptions, practices, norms and behaviours, as well as the contextualisation of seven possible drivers of violent extremism.

## INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

### STATE INSTITUTIONS

A state-run C/PVE nexus includes a wide range of institutions, with the **Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina** being a pivotal state-level institution working on C/PVE initiatives. From 2015 to 2020, the Ministry has been implementing the *Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism*, and currently remains the principal actor responsible for the development of the new strategic document. Other security sector institutions – ranging from those concerned with the early detection of the phenomenon to those concerned with causal effects – include the **Intelligence and Security Agency**, **State Investigation and Protection Agency**, **ministries of the interior at entity levels** and the **Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina**. On the other hand, **ministries of education**, as well as the **centres for social work**, play an important role, particularly within the prevention and repatriation processes.

### INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

International engagement in BiH is strong in terms of funding C/PVE activities, and thus provides a lifeline for the majority of research or prevention-based projects. In addition to traditional partners in a worldwide C/PVE arena, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) Mission, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the largest support for the projects in BiH was provided by the **Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)**, **Embassy of Norway**, **Embassy of the United States**, **Embassy of the United Kingdom**, **Embassy of the Netherlands** and **Embassy of Italy**. As an organisation that has been engaged in BiH since the war, the OSCE's support includes a wide range of political-military, economic and human dimension efforts (Perry, 2016). Moreover, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) oversees small grant pilots and research, with the aim of understanding radicalisation and supporting positive voices, such as youth activists. On the other hand, the IOM emphasises prevention of violent extremism through cooperation with state institutions, focusing on the returnees from Syria and the repatriation process.

### CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Civil society organisations (CSOs) dealing with radicalisation and violent extremism can generally be divided into two groups – those dealing with prevention and those dealing with research. Among the first group of organisations, the most prominent include **PRONI Center for Youth Development**, **Transkulturalna psihosocijalna obrazovna fondacija (TPO Foundation)**, **Global Analitika**, **Youth Resource Center (YRC) Tuzla**, **Humanity in Action**, and **Hope and Homes for Children**. For instance, PRONI emphasises working with young people as a factor of prevention and resilience in larger and smaller communities in BiH, while TPO Foundation's aim is to encourage critical thinking and understanding within wider topics of peace-building, and intercultural and interreligious dialogue. As for the second group, or those primarily dealing with research, the work of the **Atlantic Initiative**, the **Democratization Policy Council (DPC)**, the **International Republican Institute (IRI)**, **GEA - Centar za istraživanja i studije**

and **ProEduca** stands out as the most notable. For instance, the IRI makes its contribution through research work, as well as regional projects related to the phenomenon of violent extremism and the resilience of local communities, while the DPC, composed of domestic and foreign experts, primarily deals with the analysis and research of various aspects of security risks, including hate speech, social unrest and Islamist extremism.

## MEDIA

Some of the more renowned media outlets engaged in C/PVE topics include the **Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)** with its websites **Balkan Insight** and **Detektor.ba**, **Al Jazeera Balkans** and **Preporod**. BIRN is the most active media outlet dealing with the phenomena of radicalisation and violent extremism through investigative journalism, focusing on reports about the criminal trials of returnees accused of terrorism, violent fan groups, and the way in which the *Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism* is implemented.

## RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Four legally recognised religious communities in BiH include the **Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IC)**, the **Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BC)**, the **Serbian Orthodox Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SOC)** and the **Jewish Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina** – all working together through the mechanisms of the **Interreligious Council**, which has been organised as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) since 1997. The Islamic Community is a constitutionally confirmed authoritative body that regulates questions of religious life and is independent of the government in its management and decision-making. Since 2016, the IC has adopted a strategy concerning C/PVE and organised a significant number of activities aimed at combating all forms of violent interpretations of religion. The Bishops' Conference (BC) is an institution of the Catholic Church in BiH, established in 1994. In addition to religious education, the BC was able to organise humanitarian and educational institutions, but its engagements lacked noteworthy programmes dealing with the topics of violent extremism. Likewise, the Serbian Orthodox Church, as an institution of Orthodox believers in BiH, did not conduct any C/PVE-related activities.

## MACRO-LEVEL CONTEXT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

### INSTITUTIONAL PERCEPTION OF C/PVE

A macro-level of analysis, covered by this report, comprises institutions in a broader sense, or more precisely, any form of organised agency such as state institutions, international organisations, CSOs, religious institutions, and the media. In a number of institutions, separate departments, teams, or trained individuals, who deal specifically with C/PVE topics, have been organised, as well as various action plans, informal networks and working groups. One example of institutional C/PVE practice is the opening of the NGO Relations Department within the Islamic Community in 2015, showing the relevance of the civil society sector in promoting the ideas of pluralism, which can hamper the institutional practice and normative values of the Islamic Community. Generally, the research shows that the intensified work on C/PVE actions is one common aspect of all institutions.

Although the *Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Prevention and Combating Terrorism 2015-2020* is the central document guiding state institutions' work, there are several shortcomings, primarily concerning the fact that preventive and security sections are not separated. Therefore, it is expected that an adoption of a newly-developed *Strategy* will occur in 2021, which will consider diverse stakeholders with specified tasks – particularly in the prevention segment – and that it will be followed by an analysis of the previous *Strategy* report. For instance, one interviewee confirms the previously mentioned focus, noting that lately his institution has been putting a lot more effort into the prevention-related strategic tasks and actions, while another interviewee revealed that her organisation has lobbied to have a non-security sector included in the new *Strategy* of the Ministry of Security.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, CSOs are trying to fill the vacuum generated by the work of government institutions. As seen in the previous research conducted by Hamidičević and Plevljak (2018), the activities of CSOs range from research and studies, assistance to state and lower governance level institutions to working directly with youth, media and religious communities in raising awareness (Hamidičević and Plevljak, 2018). One such is a CSO of a respondent that tries to bridge the gap between academic and activist worlds by connecting different institutions, but also improving the skills of teachers within public schools.<sup>2</sup> Others, as seen in the example of a different respondent, attempt to conduct the projects that allow them to network regional actors engaged in C/PVE.<sup>3</sup>

Although most media deal with already manifested forms of violent extremism, or the behavioural part of the issue, recently some outlets started to explore causes of the phenomenon. For instance, an

<sup>1</sup> In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021, and online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020.

interviewee asserts that his media outlet provides a space for critical analysis of professors or theologians regarding the subject of violent extremism.<sup>4</sup>

International organisations' involvement is manifested through multi-sectoral work with academics, individuals, informal community groups, social work centres, and other actors that can be linked to C/PVE, but also through the designation of specific departments and teams that deal exclusively with this phenomenon. The diversity of sector coverage within C/PVE is also confirmed by the statements of several interviewees, all employed in the international organisations, where the first organisation is involved in the assistance in a process of repatriation of citizens from Syria, the second one provides support in the implementation and design of the Strategy, while the third is focused on small grant pilots and research.<sup>5</sup>

### CHANGES IN NORMS AND BEHAVIOURS OF INSTITUTIONS TOWARD C/PVE

Recently, there have been several important changes in attitudes and work of the state institutions toward C/PVE. First, global occurrences such as the foreign fighters phenomenon, new actions of far-right groups, or the international partners' perception of a threat, also dictate the design of practices within institutions. Second, the emergence of new, radicalised milieus leads to a change in behaviour and subsequent adaptations, such as the implementation of analysis, or transition from the state to the local level. Third, changes in the approach to violent extremism are a product and direct consequence of open discussion between the actors involved in C/PVE. For instance, one of the interviewees reveals how his institution attempts to connect communities and stakeholders both horizontally and vertically, while trying to clarify that violent extremism is not something foreign that happens exclusively to others.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, some actors such as donors sought to adapt their practices over time, but also their common stance on C/PVE was strengthened because of the cohesive views on the issue. One interviewee from an international organisation reveals that the initial interest for the topic ensued because of the phenomenon of foreign fighters, but also because the focus and strategy of his organisation have been changing accordingly in the last three years.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, several other interviewees from international organisations stated that, in the last three years, the approach of security institutions has changed, since they take the issue more seriously, and understand the importance of other sectors. Additionally, some organisations tried to move the debate away from Islamist extremism and elucidate the sphere of hate crimes.<sup>8</sup>

In CSOs' C/PVE actions, there has been a change in the perception of what extremism is and who is responsible for it, meaning that it is now seldom presented as exclusively Islamic. An interviewee argues

<sup>4</sup> Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 18 January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 28 December 2020, online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021, and online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

<sup>6</sup> In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 28 December, and online interview with female representative 2 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

that, for instance, recent extremism in the United States (US) has also opened the floor for talking about extremism that is not exclusively Islamic, meaning that people will not be able to ignore it any longer.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, another interviewee also stresses the importance of the shift from offline to online communication, affirming her organisation's attempts to engage in more online-related C/PVE initiatives.<sup>10</sup>

One of the participants from the media believes that access to information has changed: while previously most of the information was obtained through conversations with people, presently those pieces of information could be available online.<sup>11</sup> He also adds that the media now wants to know some of the factors that lead to violent extremism, which was not the case before. Besides, a different participant argues that there are four factors that led to the change in the way the issue of violent extremism is perceived: i) a defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and consequent disappointment within circles that supported this ideology; ii) BiH institutions' increased interest in the topic; iii) a change in the perception of the Islamic Community – from the initial disregard to a public call to close *parajamaats*<sup>12</sup> and reintegrate communities; and iv) a change in the way the international public perceived the issue.<sup>13</sup>

### C/PVE EXAMPLES FROM INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

Instances from the state institutions' practice are permeated by collectivisation of norms, where employees are influenced by formal rules that are contained in strategic documents, or other formal arrangements between institutions. One interviewee from the state institution that deals with both preventive and causal actions reveals that the way in which experts are engaged in her institution highlights a significant degree of systematisation.<sup>14</sup> For instance, after studying the case at hand, there is the process of selection of the relevant institution, where the police, health care services, psychological counselling, educational centres, and others may be involved. Another interviewee reveals that her institution has made significant progress, particularly in prevention, where they have planned a whole set of activities around C/PVE.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, an interviewee from a religious institution speaks in a similar way about her institution, citing extensive education for their own employees, aimed at prevention.<sup>16</sup>

The CSOs use different tactics during the implementation of the programme, meaning that the final aim, as well as the target group, is different for each organisation individually. Some of these programmes focus on peace-building, good governance, human rights, women's rights, interfaith dialogue, conflict transformation, youth engagement, and other topics (OSCE, 2019b). For instance, one respondent cites an attempt to use ethical and normative values in educational institutions, in

<sup>9</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 20 January 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 23 December 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

<sup>12</sup> *Parajamaats* is a colloquial term for *jamaa'ts* that did not accept full authority of the BiH Islamic Community.

<sup>13</sup> Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 18 January 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 9 February 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

<sup>16</sup> In-person interview with female representative from a religious institution, Sarajevo, 27 January 2021.

a wide range of subjects, thus also influencing the C/PVE.<sup>17</sup> Another respondent reveals the attempt of her organisation to influence the established routines of local leaders through financial support and grants, but also through networking at the national and international levels.<sup>18</sup>

The OSCE's *Guide on Reporting on Violent Extremism and Terrorism* pays special attention to the media's reporting practices regarding violent extremism, particularly the accuracy of information, impartiality, accountability and transparency (OSCE, 2019a). One of the interviewed media outlets confirmed active engagement with young journalists through organisation of training, and instruction on how to correctly report on the topic of C/PVE. On the other, when doing their own research and trying to get the verified information, an interviewee reveals that she has to go first to the police, municipality, or social work centres, and then move up toward the state level.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the majority of state institutions she contacts still refer her to the Ministry of Security.

In international organisations' approaches there has been a degree of standardisation regarding the target groups. For instance, there was a noticeable shift in focus to young community leaders and positive youth voices. According to one of the respondents, in addition to working with young people, the focus remains quite wide and includes training for trainers within the repatriation process, research and initiatives with religious communities.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, another respondent added that her organisation has sought to improve inter-institutional cooperation in BiH through a specifically designed programme.<sup>21</sup>

## FORMS OF SUPPORT FOR INSTITUTIONS FROM THE STATE AND ABROAD

State institutions have a developed communication spectrum, which includes all relevant international actors such as the OSCE, IOM, Council of Europe, RCC and others – providing all kinds of assistance in C/PVE efforts. This goes to the extent that a significant portion of government regulations is heavily influenced by expertise from abroad (Kapidžić et al., 2020). For instance, one interviewee from an international organisation claims that his organisation was active in developing a communication strategy for the Ministry of Security, but its implementation did not materialise.<sup>22</sup> In addition to foreign organisations, state institutions have developed a system of cooperation between its own sectors, involved in C/PVE. An interviewee from a state institution reveals that several actions initiated by her institution included various departments such as education, health, security and the police.<sup>23</sup>

CSOs receive the most assistance from foreign governments and organisations, primarily the US government, the OSCE, IOM, the United Nations (UN), and others. For instance, the previous research indicates that a careful look at these programmes and projects reveals that many CSOs have relied on

<sup>17</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020.

<sup>19</sup> In-person interview with female representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Online interview with female representative 2 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 28 December 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

international partners in order to carry out C/PVE work within the country (The Soufan Center, 2020). In addition to “traditional” partners, one of the interviewees asserts that there is also a developed cooperation between her organisation and foreign universities and foreign CSOs.<sup>24</sup>

The central partner in international organisations’ work is the Ministry of Security, with which, according to an interviewee from one international organisation, they sometimes have a “difficult relationship, for a number of reasons.”<sup>25</sup> For instance, one reason for slow changes in routines of the state institutions and the lack of personal connections can be linked with frequent institutional changes of leaders or entire teams, which then makes the adoption of an initiative more difficult. In addition to the Ministry, international organisations cooperate with social work centres, municipalities and CSOs.

The normative framework, represented by the religious institution, is adhered to within the cooperation mechanisms between religious institutions and foreign donors, without attempting to influence the so-called “appropriateness” of existing rules and practices. For instance, one of the participants regards the Islamic Community as a positive example of C/PVE-related practices, where her organisation and the Islamic Community have successfully formalised their cooperation since 2015. Religious institutions, on the other hand, refuse to cooperate with NGOs on issues related to interpretation of religion that are seen as the sole purview of officially recognised religious institutions, in addition to keeping up the “appropriateness” of traditional rules and practices.

## COMMUNICATION ASPECT OF INSTITUTIONAL WORK ON C/PVE

An interviewee from a state institution argues that communication between state institutions is efficient when occurring both online and in person, while another interviewee believes that communication between her colleagues and other institutions takes place continuously, but mostly after the problem arises.<sup>26</sup> According to one of the respondents, the Ministry of Security is the focal point for most of the stakeholders involved in C/PVE and is a pivotal partner, while another asserts that communication with the Ministry is much more formal compared to CSOs.<sup>27</sup> They also add that mutual communication between foreign actors is easier, primarily because they try to synchronise their ideas and standings in order to make it easier for the Ministry, noting at the same time that the current communication between international partners is much better than it was between 2015 and 2018. On the other hand, several interviewees from the media believe that there is poor communication with the Ministry, which fails to provide quick and easy access to its reports and information, and forwards them to request information from other security institutions.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, they stress that communication with religious institutions is also not fruitful, and that some topics are, as they describe them, “a washed-up subject.” Although present, an informal relationship only enhances communication but is not a substitute for a

<sup>24</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021, and online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 9 February 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021, and online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020, and in-person interview with female representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.



formal relationship. This is evident through a systematised way of sharing information by, for instance, signing a memorandum or some other formal document. One interviewee believes that communication and initiatives is a two-way street, where it is important to know the needs of the partner on a project, which essentially becomes a mixture of formal and informal networking, coupled with personal connections.<sup>29</sup> Another interviewee asserts that, by looking into his own case of having a connection with representatives of religious institutions, he can confirm that personal acquaintances could play an important role in institutional cooperation.<sup>30</sup>

All this shows a complex and developing relationship between institutions in BiH that deal with C/PVE. While all institutions are aware of the other actors in the field, openness is not always the preferred option. There is some positioning either towards, for example, media, or on select topics. There is often a need to complement this with less formal and official approaches, especially when it comes to formal communication. On sensitive topics such as foreign fighters or radical interpretations of religion, we notice one institution often taking the lead and others having a supportive role. Nevertheless, the general impression is one of cooperation while retaining a sense of institutional distinctiveness, both in terms of aims and working culture.

<sup>29</sup> Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 28 December 2020.

<sup>30</sup> In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

## DRIVERS

### TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

Although radicalisation in post-Dayton BiH was primarily associated with isolated and often rural communities, which in the context of territorial inequalities could be observed as a potential factor of radicalisation, the research suggests there has been a change in this trend in recent years. While some radical milieus may still be looking for a more specific and closed-off community, many da'is or preachers choose to be present in urban centres, no longer seeking isolation. One interviewee believes that there is an evident trend of shifting from rural to suburban areas within these groups.<sup>31</sup>

A respondent from a CSO believes that, if the territorial inequalities were relevant for BiH's context, she would have to mark mono-national spaces as more susceptible to radicalisation. In contrast, a different respondent from a state institution highlights multiethnic environments as potential hotspots, primarily because of prejudices.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, a respondent from an international organisation attempts to make a cause-and-effect relationship, marking the returnee space as a potentially fertile ground for radicalisation, where war legacy and isolation became striking issues in the so-called "backwater areas" such as Prijedor, parts of Herzegovina and the eastern parts of Republika Srpska entity. The post-war frustration, which particularly affects the youth, has also been mentioned in the previously-conducted research by Perry, who writes that although without prior experience of the war, young people are often dissatisfied with the slow pace of post-war change (Perry, 2016). Within such communities there is a mindset of exclusion, coupled with the perception of neglect, marginalisation, and injustice – both of a person and a space. One of the interviewees believes that, in some cases, it does not have to be actual deprivation but rather individually perceived deprivation.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, rather than territory-exclusive inequality, the context of BiH shows that the more suitable driver is an individual perception of marginalisation, injustice and disenfranchisement of a particular territorial area.

### ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

As Oruč and Obradović argue in their study, the radicalisation among youth in BiH is the result of a complex interplay of various factors and should not necessarily be simplified to any of them (Oruč and Obradović, 2020). This statement complements research findings, where the majority of interviewees emphasised that poverty could be observed as an indirect trigger, working in combination with other drivers. One of the prominent factors that coincides with poverty is education – both representing the blend that could lead to an easier indoctrination and manipulation. One of the interviewees believes that there is a direct link between poverty and education, while another argues that the lack of dignity and lower education are a double package, either potentiating or exacerbating one another.<sup>34</sup> Several interviewees from the media, a state institution, a CSO and an international organisation all

<sup>31</sup> In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 23 December 2020, and in-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 4 January 2021.

<sup>33</sup> In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 4 January 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021, and online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 20 January 2021.

agree that marginalisation and hopelessness act as a significant sub-driver of poverty.<sup>35</sup> Dissatisfaction resulting from economic exclusion provides a strong instrument that could be used for easier mobilisation of people. Although poverty manifests itself more as an individual rather than a group phenomenon, it is necessary to consider personal perception of poverty. Additionally, there is an individual perception of the lack of upward mobility, professional achievements, perspective and dignity, with the radicalised groups acting as a benefactor, or the only alternative within a dysfunctional system. The OSCE-supported *Guide for the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism through the Educational Process* highlights aloofness, low self-esteem, and self-doubt as some of the personality traits that can favour radicalisation (OSCE, 2019c). Moreover, a recent study conducted by the Dialogue about Radicalisation and Equality (DARE) project shows that the connection between inequality and radicalisation is case-by-case dependent, where perceived injustice as a driver can be a subjective reality of individuals and groups (Poli and Arun, 2019).

In contrast, Atlantic Initiative's 2018 research findings show that, in many cases, those most sympathetic to violent extremism are economically comfortable (Atlantic Initiative, 2018). An interviewee believes that elites within radicalised communities are well-situated, even if their peers are struggling.<sup>36</sup> Azinović and Jusić confirm this assertion by describing it as a dual morality – while leaders preach to their followers about the absurdity of this secular, material life, they enjoy lives of luxury (Azinović and Jusić, 2016). These conflicting views indicate that while economic deprivation is a driver of radicalisation, its effects are manifested at the individual rather than societal level. Relative and perceived deprivation is considered to have an effect on radicalisation, but at the same time wealth (lack of perceived deprivation) does not protect individuals from expressing violent extremism.

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## POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

In the context of BiH, political ideas and grievances are primarily expressed in terms of ethnic politics and narratives propagated by ethnic entrepreneurial elites. One of the interviewees believes that the perception of the conflict between the three ruling streams in BiH could facilitate the “us against them” mentality. Rhetoric that leads to polarisation, political incentives and political goals manifested through political opportunity structures are, as one of the participants states, prevalent occurrences in the context of the Balkans.<sup>37</sup> Another participant adds that this, in turn, produces a space where everything is allowed.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, political ideas can propagate a narrative of vulnerability, thus leading to a state of fear or caution. Within the political arena, there could be an instrumentalist understanding of the issue of violent extremism, where narratives could be used for specific means – more precisely, as an instrument for the purpose of staying in power, rather than out of conviction. An interviewee reveals that even some humanitarian organisations, with attractive characteristics such as uniforms or symbols, are placed in the service of politics.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021, online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020, online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021, and online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 18 January 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

<sup>38</sup> In-person interview with female representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

At the same time, radical groups represent interest groups that do not seek to be in power but strive to incorporate their values and ideas into policies. One of the interviewees believes there might be support in the future for political projects that show understanding for such beliefs and ideas, while another adds that such groups are apolitical, meaning that their interest lies in destroying the system, not changing it.<sup>40</sup>

## CULTURAL FACTORS

Through depiction of the cultural driver as a “way of life”, an interviewee argues that this driver is more of a form of perception than a factor of radicalisation in the context of BiH. It is primarily manifested through sub-cultures and means of identification such as uniforms, insignia, iconography, vocations within structures, and other forms of expression. These are mostly closed, social groups in which the omnipresent “us against them” narrative could exist but, as one of the respondents states, without a clear perception about whether radicalisation occurred prior to joining a group or after.<sup>41</sup> An interviewee from a state institution believes that contemporary society is dominated by the “Al Capone matrix of success”, where young people are “excluded from social occurrences and often faced with a sense of hopelessness” and this could lead them toward radicalised groups.<sup>42</sup>

One of the interviewees connects the issues of radicalisation and violent extremism with the patriarchal society and the so-called “toxic masculinity”, believing that such behaviour can harm both individuals and families.<sup>43</sup> Nikola Vučić, N1 television journalist, argues that “toxic masculinity, in its various nuances, is what conservative thought protects and the far right glorifies” (Buka, 2021).

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A respondent from the media believes that there is still a palpable fear of change and “otherness” in BiH society. For instance, a specific way of life in Salafi circles such as separate cultural and sports facilities, agricultural holdings, patterns of behaviour or eating habits, worries an interviewee from a CSO, who would not want to see a change in the social fabric of BiH.<sup>44</sup> Speaking about such circles in their previous research, Azinović and Jusić note that adherence to form can be one of the characteristics of the newly faithful, dedicated to physical appearances, symbols and customs (Azinović and Jusić, 2016).

## RELIGION

Although Islam is thought to be a dominant factor of radicalisation in BiH, interviews conducted have not confirmed this assumption. One of the interviewees states that, in many cases, radicalised individuals were not practitioners, and their first knowledge of religion occurred within radicalised groups, where they sought a sense of belonging, which correlates with the previously conducted studies (see: Richardson et al., 2017). Moreover, another interviewee believes that the majority of extremists went “from nothing to extreme.”

Interpretations of a legally recognised religious institution may significantly differ from individual

<sup>40</sup> Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 18 January 2021, and in-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

<sup>41</sup> In-person interview with female representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 28 December 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020.

interpretations. While official institutions and religions do not justify violence, individual abuse or misinterpretation could occur. In her study, Bećirević (2018) also reveals that a lack of institutional religious education may limit the ability of individuals to think critically about extremist rhetoric or place it within an ideological context (Bećirević, 2018). For instance, one of the interviewees mentions her organisation's attempts to even work with some institutionally educated teachers of religious studies, who have shown radical worldviews.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, another interviewee believes it is problematic to impose an accurate interpretation of religion – representing a tactic often employed by the C/PVE educational programmes.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, a respondent from an international organisation asserts that her organisation does not attempt to link violent extremism to any religion, when working on prevention.

In most radicalised groups, the existing knowledge is challenged in order to impose one's own worldview. The leaders themselves may have questionable knowledge but also a strong desire for attaining religious charisma. Several interviewees highlight the fact that religion is also used to legitimise one's own opinion through, for instance, declaring another person an infidel, or through the process of "othering". Moreover, leaders have a sense of superiority and use religion as a powerful lever to give themselves legitimacy through reference to supreme authority, which essentially represents a resource to play on people's emotions. An interviewee argues that places of worship that are turned into places of socialisation could serve as the main points for absorption of the aforementioned narratives.<sup>47</sup>

## DIGITAL LITERACY

Cyberspace is the dominant factor in spreading radical ideas because of its effectiveness, and, at the present time, there are virtual variants of gathering places and communities that could be considered as potential sites of radicalisation. One of the interviewees from a religious institution believes that there is no need to wait for permission to build a TV or radio network for sending a message, meaning that this type of organisation and mobilisation is cheaper and more efficient.<sup>48</sup> Bećirević (2017) confirms the importance of peer-to-peer contact, but also considers the importance of online interaction, suggesting that it remains unclear whether cases of radicalisation have been driven purely by online interactions (Bećirević et al., 2017). Moreover, Paton believes that the Internet and social media are implicated in both ideological radicalisation and recruitment through what is termed "self-radicalisation" (Paton, 2020). One of the interviewees confirms this idea by arguing that access itself is not an issue but rather how we consume the content.<sup>49</sup>

Online space provides an opportunity to build a sense of community and gives an illusion of personal contact with charismatic leaders. For instance, a participant points out the expertise in producing online content and using the most modern marketing methods.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the existence of closed

<sup>45</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 20 January 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

<sup>48</sup> In-person interview with female representative from a religious institution, Sarajevo, 27 January 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020.

communication tools protected by encryption, but also the availability of online content that has not been removed, allows access even when individuals accused of violent extremism are imprisoned. For instance, even when ISIS was beaten, it was not possible to put an end to the dissemination of online content through social media (Balkan Insight, 2019a). Anonymity could, in some cases, play an important role due to the dose of secrecy and distance, but more in right-wing groups that tend to use forums and gaming platforms. On the other hand, “superstar” *da’is* from Salafi circles have a much greater influence than the media or academia, notes an interviewee from the media. Their online profiles allow them much higher visibility in comparison to the official religious institution, which overall represents an important sociological phenomenon, especially due to susceptibility of youths to online content. Such informal groups, although mostly operating independently, are often seen as part of one network, within which the religious exclusivity could be promoted.

While some state institutions are working on early detection in the online space, one of the participants states that it is still a largely unregulated field in BiH, with the Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA) being in charge.<sup>51</sup> However, in previous years, the CRA made it clear it was up to the police and judiciary to tackle violent and terrorism-related content (Balkan Insight, 2019b). Previous research has shown that many online contributions fall under the radar of law enforcement or social media’s own standards to remove hateful content from their platforms. Although hate speech and violent speech occur on a daily basis in BiH’s online space, there is still no institutional solution for “blacklisting” websites with inappropriate content, questioning the functionality of established channels of communication with the largest social networks.

Nevertheless, the majority of interviewees stressed the importance of initiatives and educational programmes that encourage critical thinking and media literacy. An interviewee from a CSO states that for this reason her organisation decided to work on media pedagogy, in order to educate teachers, who in many cases are less advanced in media literacy than students.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, an interviewee from a religious institution pointed out that her institution recognised media literacy as an important step forward, providing educational programmes for their own employees.<sup>53</sup>

## TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

One of the interviewees argues that external extremism is primarily fostered through social identification and the narrative of “us against them.”<sup>54</sup> Calls from the region, primarily Croatia and Serbia, could mobilise BiH citizens to go to foreign battlefields such as Ukraine and Syria – in many cases, even with the soft power instruments such as lectures and texts. Several interviewees suggest there are groups actively working together and maintaining communication, as in the case of groups from the entity Republika Srpska and Serbia, but the system hardly recognises such groups as potentially dangerous.<sup>55</sup> A participant from the media believes there is a direct connection between fan

<sup>51</sup> Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

<sup>53</sup> In-person interview with female representative from a religious institution, Sarajevo, 27 January 2021.

<sup>54</sup> In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 4 January 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020, in-person interview with female representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020, and in-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 4 January 2021.

groups, as well as Chetnik associations in Serbia and Russia, with Russia showing a clear support for these ideas.<sup>56</sup> In that respect, formal groups enable the environment for informal groups to act, which is visible through both religious and far-right extremism. Therefore, one interviewee adds that official foreign influences do not forward radicalisation but use more of a divide and conquer strategy.<sup>57</sup> In some cases, assistance might be conditioned in different aspects, particularly in an investment-dependent society, where the process of getting into people's minds occurs straightforwardly. A respondent from an international organisation considers that the influence of the diaspora should also not be ruled out in the aforementioned context.<sup>58</sup>

One of the interviewees believes that there must be a personal identification with global threats or occurrences in order to see their repercussions in BiH, with only the Russian and ISIS channels currently being relevant.<sup>59</sup> In his work, Jusić states that a silent battle for the "spirit of Islam" in BiH began in the 1990s, during the war (Jusić, 2017). Bećirević writes that, even today, students from the Balkans leave for the Gulf States, where they are being educated in the more conservative way and, upon return, they call for the "purification" of Islam (Bećirević et al., 2017). A respondent from the media argues that influences of Gulf States such as Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Jordan are visible through scholarships schemes and training of a large number of contemporary lecturers, but at the same time, adds that the current Salafi system in BiH is self-sustainable and does not have to rely so much on external financial support.<sup>60</sup> According to a BIRN investigation from 2019, some Salafi preachers were not receiving political and financial support from abroad but rather from local authorities (Balkan Insight, 2019c).

<sup>56</sup> Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021. <sup>59</sup>

In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 18 January 2021.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to present a comprehensive overview of institutional (macro) drivers of violent extremism, as well as the complexity of C/PVE cooperation between different types of institutions, patterns of support from domestic and foreign actors, and the dynamics of establishing formal and informal communication channels. Furthermore, the goal was to map the drivers of violent extremism through qualitative research methods that are recognised by institutions as relevant for the BiH context. The research covered state institutions, international organisations, CSOs, religious institutions and the media, looking into drivers based on territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political ideas, cultural factors, religion, digital literacy and transnational dynamics.

The research primarily focused on two points – institutional interrelations and macro-level drivers. In regard to the first point, the study primarily explored norms and practices within institutions that emphasise C/PVE in their work, and especially focused on examples from practice, institutional perception of C/PVE, the main causes of changes in behaviour towards C/PVE in past years, cooperation between relevant domestic and foreign actors, and mutual communications. The research on possible drivers of violent extremism in BiH looked at the institutional point of view in the analysis of macro-level drivers.

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Most institutions show clear and specific forms of institutional practice. Furthermore, they place special focus on the necessity of preventive C/PVE action, and some have separate departments that specifically deal with this topic. CSOs try to fill the gaps created by the work of state institutions, the media provides space for critical analysis of consequences and causes of radicalisation, and foreign organisations usually adopt a multi-sectoral approach with a special focus on young leaders. Perceptions of threats by international organisations strongly affect behaviours and institutional practices. Several changes in the last couple of years, such as the focus on the returning foreign fighters phenomenon, new activities of right-wing groups, emerging radical milieus, engaging local levels in C/PVE, and perception of extremism beyond religion (Mainly Islam) have found their way in programmes and activities of most institutions. The Ministry of Security stands out as the central partner of most institutions, and the institutional cooperation nexus in BiH has its own dynamics where most financial and knowledge support comes from foreign partners. Lastly, the communication aspect of the collaboration proved to be complex, with pronounced limitations towards certain actors, such as the media, and on particular issues.

In regard to the drivers of violent extremism, the research has shown that not all are considered as equally relevant, but there is no full agreement on this. The first driver (territorial inequalities) is largely seen to go hand-in-hand with individual perceptions of marginalisation and injustice and is no longer linked to a rural-urban divide. It is not seen as an independent driver in its own right. Likewise, the second driver (economic deprivation) has been described as an indirect driver manifested on the individual level, functioning in combination with other drivers, such as education. As with territorial inequalities, individual perception, lack of perspective, professional success and low self-esteem play an important role. The third driver (political ideas) is primarily reflected through political polarisation



based on ethnic narratives and vulnerability. Research has shown that radical groups and organisations in most cases do not engage with politics, they do not aim to incorporate their values into the system or produce change but rather seek to replace it. The fourth driver (cultural factors) primarily relates to the “way of life”, which in the context of BiH can be seen through the prism of sub-cultures and ways of identification, but also through the issue of toxic masculinity. Speaking of the fifth possible driver (religion), the research has shown that there is significant misuse of religion in order to legitimise particular opinions and worldviews, foremost the assumption of Islam as the dominant factor of radicalisation. Research has repeatedly found this to be a false narrative in BiH, where Islam can even act as a protective factor against radicalisation. The sixth factor (digital literacy) is mostly used to spread radical ideas simply and effectively. It represents a significant challenge to analyse and affect because of the different ways individuals consume online content, as well as the inability to find an institutional solution to remove unwanted content from social networks. Finally, the last driver of radicalisation (transnational dynamics) is viewed as significant and is manifested both through actions from the immediate neighbourhood and from the wider region.

The CONNEKT project is methodologically envisioned in a way that each phase is based on key data and findings of previous phases; each of the project steps builds on the previous one, and each level maximises the use of a cross-regional approach. Therefore, when moving forward with meso- and micro-level research, the results obtained in this study will help to identify relevant communities and individuals. Institutions, together with the policies they make, are pivotal for any planned action at the community and individual levels – starting from the Ministry of Security that adopts the Strategy, international organisations or CSOs that carry out activities in vulnerable communities, or social work centres that deal with individuals.

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## INTERVIEWS

### Representatives of state institutions

In-person interview with male representative, Sarajevo, 4 January 2021.

In-person interview with male representative, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 9 February 2021.

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### Representatives of international organisations

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 28 December 2020.

Online interview with male representative, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

Online interview with female representative 1, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

Online interview with female representative 2, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

### Representatives of civil society organisations

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020.

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 23 December 2020.

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 20 January 2021.

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

### Representatives of the media

Online interview with male representative, 24 December 2020.

In-person interview with female representative, 24 December 2020.

Online interview with male representative, 18 January 2021.

**Representatives of religious institutions**

In-person interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 27 January 2021.

\*All interviewees were based in Sarajevo.

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## INTRODUCTION

Studies on violent extremism (VE) have attracted a great deal of attention from academia since the emergence of Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Al-Nusra Front and numerous terrorist attacks conducted by them throughout the world. Kosovo, as a European country with a high level of foreign fighters that joined the war in Syria, remains an interesting case for further exploration. The aim of this study is to contribute to the body of literature on this topic and its understanding from the macro-level perspective by analysing the complexities of VE in Kosovo, with the focus on major drivers and institutional responses to this phenomenon.

Initially, this study briefly presents the main institutional stakeholders related to VE and the most important recent developments. In terms of institutional approaches, it pays particular attention to certain practices and norms of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Islamic Community of Kosovo, who have a leading role in countering violent extremism (CVE). Further, it analyses the seven identified drivers of extremism: religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, digital literacy, political grievances, cultural factors, transnational dynamics, as well as the respective institutional responses.

The conclusion presents the major findings about these drivers and respective institutional responses in relation to VE. In this regard, this study underlines two major corollaries: first, CVE has a two-dimensional approach, security-centric and doctrinal/ideological. The second corollary is that, of the seven identified drivers to VE, the (mis)interpretation of Islam represents the major factor and this driver is inherently intertwined with two other drivers: digital literacy (online propaganda) and transnational dynamics (global Islamic ideologies and movements).

This study is based heavily on primary sources, such as interviews with relevant stakeholders and official documents. Interviews were designed in semi-structural format and the questions were adapted to the nature of the stakeholders, namely: state officials, municipal officials, religious communities, international organisations, and civil society. In total, 11 interviews were conducted, with the following stakeholders: the officials of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, senior police officers, senior municipal officials, high level representatives of religious communities, senior officials of the European Union (EU) Office in Kosovo and a representative of civil society. The interviews took place in Pristina, Ferizaj and Gjilan, in March and part of April 2021. All interviews were conducted in person, with the exception of one that was conducted online. In addition to interviews, this study also relied on other primary sources, including legal acts and official government documents, as well as secondary sources, such as scientific articles, books and policy reports.

## INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

There are several public institutions that play a major role in countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) in Kosovo. This includes the **Office of the Prime Minister (OPM)**, **Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA)**, **Kosovo Intelligence Agency (KIA)**, **Security Council of Kosovo (SCK)**, **Ministry of Justice (MoJ)**, **Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST)** and **Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MLSW)**. The coordination of the implementation of the **Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalism Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020 (SPVERLT)** is the responsibility of the Kosovo Security Council (KSC) and its Secretariat is in charge of harmonising all activities of state institutions regarding the prevention of VE. The OPM has a primary role when it comes to implementation of all state policies in Kosovo, and is responsible for supervising the progress made, in close cooperation with KSC.

In terms of policy framework, the most important recent development was government's decision in March 2020 to merge the SPVERLT and the Counter-Terrorism Strategy of Kosovo into a single strategy. Since then, a designated inter-ministerial body has been working on drafting such a strategy, but no further information is available<sup>1</sup>. This decision was part of the arrangement to implement the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans, signed between the EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris Avramopoulos and the Minister of Internal Affairs of Kosovo Ekrem Mustafa in October 2019 (European Commission, 2019).

Another important development was the decision of Kurti's government on 12 February 2020 to abolish the post of the National Coordinator against Violent Extremism and Terrorism (Government of Kosovo, Decision 02/02, 2020). Later, the new government of Prime Minister Hoti, on 14 July 2020, appointed the Minister of Interior Affairs as the National Coordinator for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism (Government of Kosovo, Decision 08/14, 2020). The newly-elected government of Kurti, 2 April 2021, charged the Minister of Interior with this task (Government of Kosovo, Decision 08/14, 2020).

MIA is mandated to advance legislation and the policy framework in the field of security issues. Whereas MoJ is responsible for the implementation of re-integration and deradicalisation programmes within the Kosovo Correctional Services (KCS). In terms of security institutions, the Kosovo Police (KP) is the only institution in Kosovo with a solid capacity to deal with issues related to VE and terrorism. KIA also plays a crucial role in collecting and disseminating information to the Government of Kosovo and security institutions related to any activity that might be detrimental to the national security of Kosovo. The main developments related to the responses of the institutions in Kosovo were a consequence of the changing context of VE, at domestic and global level. During the period 2012-2016, almost all activities were directed to prevent individuals from Kosovo from going to war zones in the Middle East.

<sup>1</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.



However, during the years 2017-2019, the focus and priorities have shifted towards the returning of Kosovo citizens from the war zones and the security challenge that this process entails (interview, SOMIA; SPO 1). It is worth noting that, during this time, the KP in cooperation with the KIA has prevented four planned terrorist attacks in Kosovo<sup>2</sup>.

At the local level, municipalities of Kosovo are entitled to play an important role in preventing violent extremism (PVE), according to the SPVERLT. The Municipal Community Safety Councils functions within all municipalities. They are led by the mayors and with the participation of the representatives of municipal assemblies, local governments, security institutions, ethnic communities, religious communities, civil society, media and business (Ministry of Local Government Administration, 2014). In 2016, the first C/PVE Referral Mechanism was established as a pilot project in the municipality of Gjilan, which proved to be a success story. In this context, the main development is the proposal to replicate such mechanisms in three of the regions most targeted by the VE<sup>3</sup>.

Other relevant stakeholders include civil society and local experts in Kosovo, international governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGO), and the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK). Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Kosovo undoubtedly represent one of the most important stakeholders in awareness raising, deradicalisation and PVE. The international community mainly has a capacity-building and advisory role. It has to be emphasised that they contribute to the major share of funding of local CSOs combating radicalisation and VE. The most active international actors in combating violent extremism in Kosovo are the US Embassy, followed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the EU, as well as some other individual countries<sup>4</sup>.

As the main institution representing the Muslim community, BIK plays an important multifaceted role in different aspects linked to VE. The involvement of the BIK in all activities aiming to prevent extremism and de-radicalise individuals remains essential. The role of BIK is explored in depth in the following section.

With regards to the role of the CSOs, there is a trend of readjustment to the changing context of VE. Initially, research and training programmes of CSOs were mainly focused on PVE and the phenomenon of foreign fighters. In recent years, the focus has shifted towards the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees and other individuals prone to VE<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

<sup>4</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Online interview with a female Civil Society Representative, Pristina, 21 April 2021.

## MACRO-LEVEL CONTEXT IN KOSOVO

Two key findings of the *CONNEKT Balkan Regional Report (2021)* and the *CONNEKT Country Reports (2020)* is that VE in the Balkans has been generally associated with Islamic religious fundamentalism and the leading role in combating VE has been played by the security sector institutions, particularly ministries of interior affairs/police. Kosovo does not vary from this overall picture and this is confirmed by interviews conducted with the representatives of stakeholder institutions and actors.

At the macro-level milieu, the underlining corollary of the interviews with the stakeholders in Kosovo is that the efforts against VE are two-dimensional. The first line of action in CVE is security-centric and encompasses measures to counter it through the conventional rule of law mechanisms. The second dimension is ideological/theological and has to do with countering radical religious preaching at the doctrinal ground. The MIA plays a crucial role in the first domain and BIK is the key actor in the second. Hence, in depicting the macro-level context related to VE in Kosovo, the practices and norms of these two institutions have to be particularly analysed.

**Ministry of Interior Affairs (MIA):** All participants in this research recognise the central role of the MIA in combating VE and they have emphasised their regular collaboration with it. Some of them go further in claiming that, initially, political levels had a poor understanding of what was going on in Syria and Iraq, and KP is ahead of the prosecutorial and justice systems when it comes to C/PVE<sup>6</sup>.

The MIA has also played a leading role in multi-institutional efforts to return and reintegrate 110 Kosovar citizens who returned from the war zones in the Middle East. Rehabilitation and reintegration of the persons who have been repatriated from the war zones includes deradicalisation programmes in prisons, the legal status of the families of repatriated foreign terrorist fighters, schooling and counselling for children, providing social welfare and housing, etc<sup>7</sup>.

The MIA and other stakeholders share the opinion of other respondents who see a decline in the trend of VE. This is attributed mainly to the decline of ISIS and to the massive arrests that took place in 2014 and the ensuing court processes<sup>8</sup>. However, the relevant MIA officials have expressed their opinion that the decline in the visibility of the extremist groups has to do with the tactical change. In their view, these groups have changed their modus operandi, which means that they have become more cautious, secretive and rely heavily on digital platforms, but they still represent a serious security threat<sup>9</sup>. The same opinion is shared by the official of one of the biggest municipalities, who claims that “these radical groups will become active as soon as another conflict zone, or ‘another cause,’ emerges somewhere in the world”<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the EU Office in Kosovo, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>7</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>8</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.  
In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 3 March 2021.

<sup>9</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>10</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Ferizaj, 23 March 2021.

At the local level, the MIA and KP are also engaged in pilot activities to counter VE. One such example, which deserves particular explanation, is the Referring Mechanism in the municipality of Gjilan. With the leading role of the MIA and the mayor, this was established as a pilot project in 2016. This is an ad-hoc body composed of the representatives of many institutions and actors, including police, municipality, religious communities, school, civil society and other relevant stakeholders. The principal role of this mechanism is early identification of the vulnerable persons and prevention of their radicalisation. As soon as it receives information that a person might be vulnerable to radicalisation or extremism, the case is discussed within the "group for analysis" that exists within its structure. Then, the Referring Mechanism confirms whether that person is under police investigation (the mechanism does not interfere with the police investigation). As a third step, the "group for analysis" makes the evaluation of the case and decides how to engage with that person, without letting him/her know that he/she is subject of the treatment from the Referring Mechanism. This "treatment" may involve communication/socialisation with that person through parents, imams, schoolteachers, pedagogues, psychologists (depending on the profile of the persons and the nature of the VE)<sup>11</sup>.

Overall, the MIA has been playing a key role for several years now in the multi-agency efforts to counter VE in Kosovo. Undoubtedly, the impact of the MIA in CVE has been tangible. This positive fact notwithstanding, the interviews conducted for this research have revealed significant deficiencies and failures. The most important one is that the permanent coordinating mechanism for implementation of SPVERLT has ceased to exist since 2020<sup>12</sup>, altogether with the initial abolition of the post of national coordinator for counter-terrorism (CT)/CVE (as explained above). This was considered by the EU official as a mistake of the Government of Kosovo<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, the representatives of the MIA and KP have warned that retreat of the radical Islamic movements might be a tactical move and that persons who have been repatriated represent a great threat. Moreover, some respondents have warned that radical Islam is evolving towards political Islam, with Turkey assuming a pre-eminent role<sup>14</sup>. Although the respondents have not delved into the conceptual explanation of "radical Islam" and "political Islam", their implicit understanding of this transition pertains to the growing trend of active involvement in politics of persons who adhere to a more moderate religious Islamic teaching (resembling the Turkish model, as manifested by Justice and Development Party of the President Erdogan). Although, it needs to be emphasized that, for the time being, the individual political voices who utilize religious discourse or propagate Islamic tenets are very marginal and insignificant. Yet none of the respondents has indicated that the MIA, nor any other state institution, has any clear strategy to respond to these threats. Furthermore, the grave loophole in the inter-institutional cooperation in CVE became apparent when the names of the imams of BIK, who were engaged through the government programmes of deradicalisation in prisons, were made public. This has publicly exposed imams who were engaged in these government programmes and has put them and their families in danger<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Official, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

<sup>12</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>13</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the EU Office in Kosovo, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>14</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the EU Office in Kosovo, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

In-person interview with a male High Level Official Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Pristina, 7 April 2021.

<sup>15</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.

**Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK):** The religiously-motivated extremism strives against the particular (mis)interpretation of the religious tenets, which creates a fake religious cause of a holy war against “injustices” and “victimhood”. Consequently, efforts to counter VE involve a sharp ideological/doctrinal counter-narrative. Competing theological interpretations of religious tenets is at the crux of the battle to counter religiously inspired VE. BIK has been at the forefront of this battle. However, it has to be noted that some of the respondents have argued that ethno-religious extremism<sup>16</sup>, particularly among certain segments of the Serb community in Kosovo, is no less a threat<sup>17</sup>.

Based on the interviews, it appears that BIK is involved in the efforts to counter VE in two aspects. First, BIK has been part of the major national inter-agency activities to counter VE. Thus, it participated in the adoption of national strategy/strategies against VE and terrorism; in the coordinating bodies (including within the KSC)<sup>18</sup>; in programmes of deradicalisation in prisons<sup>19</sup>; in the consultative religious council convened under the umbrella of the NATO-led KFOR mission, and was also part of local initiatives and mechanisms against VE (Ibid.).

The other aspects of BIK’s work against VE are tailor-made initiatives and projects. This includes: regular seminars with imams, with the aim of raising their awareness about the threat from religious fundamentalism; training and lecturing in schools against extremism; direct engagement in particular mosques and with specific individuals who show extremist tendencies during services; special project with the MIA targeting women and children repatriated from the war zones (Ibid.). BIK has regular cooperation/dialogue with the Catholic Church and occasionally has engaged with the Serbia Orthodox Church. It is worth mentioning that on one occasion high representatives of BIK visited the Decan Orthodox Monastery in a show of public support when the Monastery felt provoked by some hostile slogans written on its surrounding walls (Ibid.).

It is interesting to note that BIK portrays its efforts to push for religious rights (such as the right of girls with headscarf to enter schools), or the lobbying for the adoption of the law on religious communities, as related to fight against VE. This is argued on the ground of stripping the radical groups out of the cause of victimhood (i.e., headscarf issues), and preventing the penetration of outside radical elements in BIK (through regulating its legal status and enhancing financial independence). In conjunction with this, BIK also views the source of radicalisation in the stigmatisation of Muslim believers, false reporting by the media against Islam and BIK, and some provocative statements by other religious preachers (Ibid.).

Recently, BIK has intensified its proactive efforts to condemn hate speeches delivered in some mosques or by some high-profile imams<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, BIK has been working with the government to gain an overview of all mosques in Kosovo with a goal to controlling narratives aimed at curtailing radical messages from being spread in religious institutions<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Official, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

<sup>17</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>18</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.

<sup>19</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official, Ministry of Justice, Pristina, 31 March 2021.

<sup>20</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.

Although the indispensable role of BIK in defeating Islamic extremism and VE is recognised by all respondents, they have differing views on how this role has been played. Thus, an EU official thinks that BIK is in line with the official state approach of Kosovo on the issue of VE. But, in his view, there are islands of (self-proclaimed) imams and mosques built with the funding from the Gulf States that preach extremist narratives<sup>22</sup>.

Nevertheless, some respondents from the governmental institutions have doubts about the readiness and sincerity of BIK in countering Islamic radicalism and VE. Some of them think that BIK flirts “with all sides,” has tolerated radical imams and has opened its gates to negative influence from Turkey<sup>23</sup>. It transpires that there are mutual crises of expectations, whereby BIK expects more support from the state institutions and other actors, while some of the other actors expect BIK to be resolutely at the forefront of the fight against Islamic radicalism and extremist tendencies.

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<sup>21</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.

<sup>22</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the EU Office in Kosovo, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>23</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Official Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Pristina, 7 April 2021.

## DRIVERS

In Kosovo, the identified drivers related to VE coincide to a certain extent with the “push-pull” factors that were identified in the SPVERLT as factors contributing to radicalisation and VE in the country (OPM, 2015: 12-16). It is worth noting that until now no research with a strict academic methodology that would explore macro factors of radicalisation and VE in depth has been conducted in Kosovo. On the other hand, the KSC has not employed an advanced critical evaluation system to measure the impact of activities envisaged by the Action Plan of the SPVERLT, related to identified factors. Therefore, this research conducted at the macro level aims at confirming or refuting the validity of these seven identified drivers.

### RELIGION

Religious violent interpretations perpetuated by radical imams are considered by the SPVERLT as the most important factor that contributes to radicalism and VE (OPM, 2015: 14). In this context, a literature review study by the Royal United Services Institute on the drivers of VE highlights that there is sufficient evidence proving that religion and ethnicity are among the most powerful expressions of group and individual identities. According to this study, the idea of a transnational Muslim identity that emerged in the 1980s was initially aiming to supersede specific ethnic, cultural or geographical notions of identity for rather defensive purposes but was subsequently developed by Al-Qaeda and other radical and violent extremist groups into a doctrine of global terrorism and revolution (Allan et al., 2015: 21).

In the case of Kosovo, the violent interpretation of religion was an unknown phenomenon in the public sphere from the establishment of Tito’s Yugoslavia in 1945, until the rise of Serbia’s leader Milošević by the end of 1980s. At that time, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) joined and served in large measure the nationalistic euphoria led by Milošević, by proclaiming that Serbia “had finally found a true leader” (ICG, 2001: 10). Only a few Serbian Orthodox clergymen, including some of those serving in Kosovo, opposed Serbia’s aggressive nationalistic discourse (Ibid.). This aggressive nationalism ultimately led to armed conflicts in Former Yugoslavia and atrocities unseen in Europe since WWII. Since the end of the Kosovo War, the SOC continues to play an important role in shaping Belgrade’s nationalistic policies towards Kosovo by trying at the same time to distance itself from Milošević’s violent policies and putting the “martyrdom” and historical heritage of the Orthodox Church in Kosovo at the forefront of their appeals to the West (Saggau, 2019: 16).

The radical interpretation of religion among Kosovo Albanian religious communities was virtually inexistent prior to the end of the war of 1999. Nevertheless, after the instalment of the United Nations (UN) Administration in Kosovo in 1999, a number of charity organisations with religious background from the Middle East entered Kosovo. Under the guise of humanitarian aid, they introduced the Wahhabi and Salafi religious interpretations that were unknown to the local population. The tensions between secularism and radical interpretations of Islam that aimed at transforming and undermining Albanian national identity soon came to the surface. A number of local imams embraced the radical and violent interpretation of Islam and adjusted it to the domestic circumstances (Demjaha and Peci, 2016: 35). The amplitude of the effects of the radical and violent interpretation of Islam in Kosovo became

visible with the emergence of ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front that resulted in more than 250 Kosovar Albanian foreign fighters joining these terrorist organisations.

All stakeholders interviewed have confirmed that the violent (mis)interpretation of Islam is the underlining driver of VE in Kosovo. A number of imams and self-proclaimed preachers have openly propagated extremist ideas and have been directly or indirectly recruiters of the terrorist fighters that went from Kosovo to Syria and Iraq<sup>24</sup>. During the last two decades, there has been a continuous public tendency from these radical Islamists to change the values of religious tolerance and cohabitation in Kosovo but they could not achieve a significant influence within society at large<sup>25</sup>.

These interpretations have also negatively affected socio-religious distance (Demjaha and Peci, 2016: 74), as well as social habits among the Kosovo Albanian community. This includes nurturing animosity towards the key personalities that shaped Albanian national identity of the Christian religion or towards Albanians that are Muslims but do not respect the basic rules of Islam<sup>26</sup>. Radical imams and clergy strike at the heart of Albanian national identity by, for example, expressing animosity towards the struggle for independence of Albanians from the Ottoman Empire, rejecting Albanian national symbols and denigrating key historic figures of Albanian history such as Scanderbeg (by claiming that he has killed Muslims). At this point, it is interesting to highlight that irrational debates about Scanderbeg are sometimes aggravated by some Christian clergy who claim that he was a saint<sup>27</sup>.

Furthermore, some religious extremists have implanted hate and animosity against BIK by propagating that it does not represent Islam. They also claim that their rights can be solely protected by the Islamic state, which one day will include the entire Islamic world<sup>28</sup>.

In the light of the above analysis, it seems that radical (mis)interpretations of Islam are the major source of VE. Furthermore, these interpretations that call for a transnational Islamic state with *Sharia* at its epicentre and *Jihad* as its appeal are in inherent contradiction with Albanian ethno-national identity, disturb interreligious traditional harmony among Albanians and are in sharp collision with the official theological interpretations of BIK, which are based on tolerant traditions of the Hanafi school inherited from the religious tradition of the Ottoman Empire.

## ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

Economic deprivation is considered one of the key factors of radicalisation by the SPVERLT (OPM, 2015: 13). However, the results of the opinion polls commissioned by KIPRED in 2016 provide an interesting correlation between monthly incomes and socio-religious distance that substantially challenge the importance of economic deprivation as a driver of extremism. These results indicate that the standard of living is not a determinant of either religious cohabitation or religious intolerance

<sup>24</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>25</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>26</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Ferizaj, 23 March 2021.

<sup>27</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 3 March 2021.

<sup>28</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.



(Demjaha and Peci, 2016: 77-78). Furthermore, another study concludes that there is no clear correlation between the socio-economic conditions at local level and the amplitude of radicalisation and of VE (Demjaha, 2018). Moreover, according to the data of another think tank in Kosovo, no causal link has been found between economic deprivation and involvement in VE. But there are individual cases when households affected by VE in some municipalities were in fact the poorest families in the area<sup>29</sup>.

All interviewed stakeholders consider that economic deprivation is not an overarching driver of VE, although it is an important factor for some individual cases. Although there is a relevant link between social unrest and poverty and hopelessness, in terms of not being able to create their own economic independence, poverty as such is not considered a substantial marker for embracing VE<sup>30</sup>. In this regard, it has to be emphasised that the majority of individuals that went to Syria, or got radicalised, were not from an economically deprived background<sup>31</sup>. On the other hand, there is also an argument that a lack of job prospects, of equal employment opportunities and of adequate education has pushed some youths to seek spiritual comfort within extremist groups. But there are cases of successful businessmen that joined ISIS or gave money for the recruitment of youths to join the conflict in Syria, who have been brainwashed in a form that they felt as an obligation to give money for Islamic State, and that was for them a duty above all duties<sup>32</sup>. There is a known fact that there were groups or individuals who went to Syria for the purpose of getting rich but did not go to the war zones because they belonged to the poor<sup>33</sup>.

## TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

Territorial inequalities that are evident in Kosovo, especially between big and small/rural municipalities, in terms of economic development and infrastructure, are not considered a factor of VE by the Kosovar authorities (OPM, 2015). The conditions for youths in rural municipalities are disproportionately worse as compared to those in urban municipalities, due to the severe lack of cultural and sport infrastructure<sup>34</sup>. On the other hand, the territorial patterns of the number of individuals engaged in VE in Kosovo are not linear. The highest number of foreign terrorist fighters that joined the wars in Iraq and Syria per 1,000 inhabitants is evidenced in the municipalities of Hani i Elezit (1.00) and Kaçanik (0.93), whereas the lowest number is noted in the municipalities of Suhareka (0.00) and Podujeve (0.01) (Demjaha, 2018).

In terms of scope and intensity of engagement in CVE in different parts of Kosovo, from the interviews it appears that there are different approaches of institutional stakeholders. The MIA and KP have tried to avoid dealing only with certain municipalities, due to the fact that the intensity of cases of VE and radicalism in certain parts of the country has not been linear over the years<sup>35</sup>. Instead, their approach was holistic and covered all municipalities (Ibid.). At the local level, the efforts of municipal authorities

<sup>29</sup> Online interview with a female Civil Society Representative, Pristina, 21 April 2021.

<sup>30</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the EU Office in Kosovo, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>31</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Ferizaj, 23 March 2021.

In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

<sup>32</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.

<sup>33</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 3 March 2021.

<sup>34</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>35</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021, and In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.



have been focused on their entire territories<sup>36</sup>. On the other hand, the leadership of BIK has been rather focused on the areas most affected by VE<sup>37</sup>.

## DIGITAL LITERACY

Digital literacy is considered an important driver that contributes to radicalisation and VE, but can also help in creating powerful counter-narratives as part of preventive institutional responses to VE in Kosovo (OPM, 2015:14). All stakeholders interviewed have confirmed the key importance of communication technologies as a catalyst for radicalisation and VE in Kosovo. KP maintains that, similarly to other countries in the region, Kosovo has also often witnessed cases in which extremist elements used internet to spread their extremist ideologies and to recruit individuals for their cause<sup>38</sup>. In fact, the majority of those radicalised in Kosovo have been indoctrinated online through lectures on YouTube and other online portals and social media platforms<sup>39</sup>. Certain websites/networks still transmit lectures with extremist content of the same imams imprisoned for extremist activities<sup>40</sup>. Information technologies are increasingly being used for propaganda, which has clearly served as an amplifier for dissemination of radical extremist messages<sup>41</sup>.

In this context, it is particularly important to take into account the role of communication technologies for Kosovo's diaspora. Namely, according to available data, a considerable number of Kosovo's individuals who joined different terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq were from the Kosovo diaspora. Out of the 255 foreign fighters from Kosovo who have travelled to conflict zones, 48 of them or some 20% of Kosovo's total number of foreign fighters were young individuals who had no relation to Kosovo, or were born in another country (Perteshi, 2018: 30). The case of Arid Uka, who was born in Kosovo in 2000 but as a one-year-old child went to Germany with his parents, is interesting for analyses. In March 2011, at Frankfurt airport, he killed two US Airman and wounded two others. During the trial, Uka claimed that he has been radicalised by online Jihadist propaganda. Also, the prosecutors claimed that he had no direct contacts with Jihadist groups (BBC, 2012; and interview<sup>42</sup>).

## POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

Political grievances represent one of the factors for VE due to the transition of Kosovo from an armed conflict, through a UN protectorate, to an independent state. Accordingly, ineffective state apparatus, poor governance practices, lack of political accountability, high level of corruption and low trust towards both local and central institutions have been mentioned by some authors as important factors driving towards radicalisation and VE (Morina et al., 2019; Zaimi, 2017; Krasniqi, 2019; Hunsbiker et al., 2015). The identity crisis among certain individuals and groups affected by transition and reinvention of religion, who felt that they cannot rely either on the state or on the international community, was

<sup>36</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Ferizaj, 23 March 2021.

In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Gjiilan, 29 March 2021.

<sup>37</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.

<sup>38</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>39</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>40</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Gjiilan, 29 March 2021.

<sup>41</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the EU Office in Kosovo, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>42</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Gjiilan, 29 March 2021.

exploited by religious leaders to promote radical Islam (Püttmann, 2020: 315). These extremist currents have reinforced the narrative that Kosovo is a “failed state”, under the control of Western states, which is incapable of deciding for itself. According to them, such a reality made the political elite prone to oppressing the local Muslim population in their efforts to preserve the secular image of Kosovo<sup>43</sup>. Such religious ideologies with political background oppose the core principles and values of Kosovar society and are often directed against state institutions. In some cases, there were even tendencies of political empowerment through raising of certain issues, including public protests<sup>44</sup>.

Certain political parties in Kosovo (i.e., the Justice Party and Fjala) and movements (Bashkohu) have openly requested allowing the hijab and introducing religious instruction in public schools (Demjaha and Peci, 2016: 51). When in 2010 the Ministry of Education banned headscarves in public elementary and secondary schools of Kosovo, street protests were organised in which protesters threatened to resort to violence and even block roads<sup>45</sup>. Furthermore, the Justice Party, BIK and several Muslim faith-based NGOs also organised street protests in August 2011, when the Kosovo Assembly rejected the two amendments to the Kosovo Constitution, related to issues of headscarves and religious teaching in public schools. Similar signs of resentment of extremist groups were witnessed in September 2010, when soon after the official opening of the new Catholic Cathedral “Mother Theresa” in Pristina, its walls and some buildings in Pristina were covered in graffiti and flyers (Ibid.). Furthermore, part of political Islam and extremist groups often advocate violent actions against Europe, European member states and European citizens<sup>46</sup>. However, it has to be noted that, as some of the stakeholders have indicated, the political grievances in Kosovo are predominantly ethnically-based and hence religion is not the major source of divide in this regard (Ibid.).

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## CULTURAL FACTORS

Cultural factors have not been identified as a factor of VE by the Government of Kosovo (OPM, 2015). However, the correlation between VE and culture has been explored by a number of scholars in recent years. In this regard, for example, Gefland, LaFree, Fahey et al. have come to the conclusion that certain cultural dimensions – “gender inequality, fatalism and cultural tightness” – are correlated positively to the number of terrorist attacks (Gelfand, LaFree, Fahey et al., 2013). On the other hand, Kluch and Vaux argue that terrorism was related to none of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (power distance, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, long-term-short-term orientation, and indulgence-self-restraint) (Kluch and Vaux, 2015). Nevertheless, the relationship between culture and VE has remained a largely uncharted path in social sciences.

Against this background, the interpretations of the cultural driver by the interviewed stakeholders are slightly different. One argument is that, in terms of specific norms and behaviours of Kosovar society in general, which is characterised by a religious coexistence, or of the attitude of the state towards

<sup>43</sup> Online interview with a female Civil Society Representative, Pristina, 21 April 2021.

<sup>44</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>45</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Official Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Pristina, 7 April 2021.

<sup>46</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the EU Office in Kosovo, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

certain groups, culture cannot be considered as a driving factor of VE in the country<sup>47</sup>. However, there are also arguments that particular norms and behaviours, such as social norms of not separating individual responsibility from their families or from certain communities, as well as the sense of victimisation, stimulate VE. In this direction, as some of the stakeholders emphasised, the stigmatisation of members of families of those that have joined the war in Syria has created a perceived sense of an unjust society and hence contributed to VE. On the other hand, by instilling the sense of victimisation, a number of radical imams and Islamic activists have accused the state of Kosovo of oppressing Muslims<sup>48</sup>.

As some of the stakeholders have argued, there are cases of girls with headscarves that have been deprived of equal employment. This apparent cultural prejudice causes various dissatisfactions, which are misused by certain groups and individuals to push certain vulnerable individuals onto the mill of extremism and radicalism<sup>49</sup>. The using of headscarves, as a Muslim cultural symbol, especially in public schools, if not treated in a careful, informed and just manner, may lead to the increasing sense of discrimination among members of Muslim Community in Kosovo<sup>50</sup>.

With regards to the cultural driver, it is important to reiterate that, as some of the stakeholders have claimed, a dimension of the culture of ethnic nationalism that is prevalent in the entire Balkans, which is also accompanied by hate and denigrating speech towards others, is a significant driver of VE. In this vein, there were tendencies to instigate a shift from religious to ethnic extremism, when those that joined the war in Syria were blamed that instead of going to fight in the Middle East for the wrong cause, they should have gone to the northern part of Kosovo that is largely populated by the local Serbs<sup>51</sup>.

## TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

Transnational dynamics have obviously played a crucial role as a driver to radicalisation and VE and all stakeholders have recognised this fact. Transnational Islamic movements, migratory dynamics and diaspora networks, pilgrimage as well as cultural and educational links have further catalysed such trends (Demjaha and Peci, 2016: 54). On the socio-cultural dimension, such radical forms of Islam have constantly pushed local Muslims in Kosovo to shift their loyalties from nation and ethnicity to universal Islam (Ibid.)

As all respondents interviewed have underlined, the source of VE stemming from extremist ideologies is in itself a transnational phenomenon. Similar to other Balkan countries, Kosovo has faced and still faces the tendency of penetration from abroad of extremist ideologies<sup>52</sup>. Various religious organisations, often with a humanitarian veil, primarily from the Middle East and Turkey, have invested

<sup>47</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>48</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>49</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.

<sup>50</sup> In-person interview with a male High Level Official Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Pristina, 7 April 2021.

<sup>51</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

<sup>52</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

heavily in building new mosques, offering courses and providing scholarships for children and youngsters, financially supporting local religious courses, as well as translating and distributing radical religious literature<sup>53</sup>. Initially, the biggest number of recruiters and propagandists was not from Kosovo but from North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Sandzak of Serbia<sup>54</sup>.

It is also worth mentioning that transnational dynamics and communication technologies are very much linked and complementary to each other. In this vein, much of the online religious propaganda is transnational<sup>55</sup>. It should be noted that now when ISIS has lost almost all of its controlled territory, its supporters and like-minded radicalised individuals in Kosovo have gone underground. However, as already indicated above, there are fears that if a similar religious conflict zone appears somewhere else in the world, they will resurface and might undertake concrete violent actions<sup>56</sup>.

### INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Meaningful institutional responses by Kosovar authorities to VE, and in terms of violent interpretation of religion, started only when it was reported that Kosovo has one of the highest numbers of foreign fighters per capita in Europe, who have joined the ranks of ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front. Since then, representatives of Kosovo's state institutions have viewed VE threats mainly through the Islamic religious prism. Within measures to safeguard constitutional order and security in the country, in August 2014 police searched 60 locations throughout Kosovo and arrested 40 Kosovar citizens suspected of having joined terrorist organisations in Iraq and Syria. Until January 2015, an additional 80 people were arrested under similar charges including a number of influential radical imams (Demjaha and Peci, 2016: 57). Initially, the country's policy framework to counter VE was relying only on the Counter-Terrorism Strategy of Kosovo adopted in 2009. Due to the necessity of addressing the increasing threat related to the foreign terrorist fighters, in March 2015 Kosovo's Parliament adopted a Law on Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts outside State Territory. In September 2015, the OPM prepared a Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020 (SPVERLT). The Government of Kosovo has also drafted the National Action Plan, which in addition to providing a detailed description of the activities divided by each of the objectives of the Strategy, also specified the institutions in charge of implementing the activity (OPM, 2015: 25). Afterwards, the Strategy and Action Plan guided all institutional responses to VE in Kosovo.

In conjunction with the institutional response to VE, it is important to highlight two facts. First, when it comes to the cooperation between national and international actors in CVE, most of the respondents in this research have mentioned the leading role of the US Embassy, while the other countries and international organisations are less involved. Second, the situation with Covid-19 pandemics has created additional obstacles in providing EU assistance to Kosovo in dealing with VE. The EU official in Kosovo gave an example: when Kosovo could not participate in the EU project related to the Western Balkans, pertaining to the training of the law-enforcement agencies to work according to specific

<sup>53</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.  
In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.

<sup>54</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>55</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the EU Office in Kosovo, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>56</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Ferizaj, 23 March 2021.

methodology in fighting VE. Consequently, Kosovo remained the only country not to receive any training or information about this methodology<sup>57</sup>.

In practical terms, a large number of concerted activities have been undertaken by the Kosovo authorities in relation to the violent interpretation of religion. This includes activities such as information meetings in schools with students and school management on prevention and identification of negative phenomena, adaptation of official UNESCO materials for teachers for PVE, inclusion of components on the risks posed from radicalism and extremism in the curricula of pre-university education (Action Plan for Implementation of the SPVERLT, 2018). At the local level, Municipal Community Safety Councils and Referring Mechanisms have treated cases of radicalism, in cooperation with teachers and local communities<sup>58</sup>.

In terms of the impact of each of the identified drivers on institutional responses to VE, it should be noted that while communication technologies have contributed to VE in Kosovo, they have also been utilised for creating powerful counter-narratives as part of preventive institutional responses to VE in Kosovo. BIK representatives were charged for creating a counter-narrative for those who are at risk of becoming radicalised<sup>59</sup>. In order to confront any form of the use of internet for terrorist purposes, the KP has strengthened its capacities for monitoring the content of various internet sites<sup>60</sup>. The MIA has created different online programmes to raise the awareness of citizens, especially of secondary and high school students<sup>61</sup>.

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As long as such political Islam opposes the core principles and values of society vested in the Kosovo Constitution, institutionalised responses to political grievances and cultural differences are basically directed towards the safeguarding of the secular constitutional order of the country. However, institutional responses are sometimes limited, because, on the one hand, the Constitution defines Kosovo as a secular state neutral to religion, while, on the other, it guarantees the freedom of belief and religion as well as freedom of expression (Constitution of Kosovo, 2008). In order to enable articulation of political grievances through democratic means, the Kosovo authorities have also registered the political parties, the Justice Party and Fjala, which have a religious Islamist background. In the past, the Justice Party has even had its MPs in the Assembly of Kosovo and held ministerial and other executive positions in the government. Nowadays, neither of these two parties is represented in the parliament, and in the last few elections they have received a negligible number of votes. Such a reality might signal that political Islam is losing its support among Kosovo's citizens.

Institutionalised responses related to the economic deprivation and territorial inequalities were very limited by the Kosovo authorities. The main obstacle in addressing these two identified drivers was

<sup>57</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the EU Office in Kosovo, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>58</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Ferizaj, 23 March 2021.

<sup>59</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.

<sup>60</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>61</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

that the Government of Kosovo has not allocated a separate budgetary line for implementation of the SPVERLT. These shortcomings to a limited extent were addressed by the international donor community in Kosovo that worked in close cooperation with the National CVE Coordinator<sup>62</sup>. On the other hand, cultural factors remained almost completely unaddressed by the Kosovo institutions since they were listed neither in the SPVERLT, nor in the Action Plan for its implementation.

Responses related to the transnational dynamics have ranged from shutting down a certain number of “charity” organisations with religious background, expelling foreign radical imams, and strengthening regional and cross-border cooperation to improve measures against VE. Thus, in 2014, Kosovar authorities closed down 14 charities that were suspected of having ties with Islamic extremist groups. These included organisations linked to extremist circles in the Gulf States, Turkey and Iran (Peci and Demjaha, 2016). On the other hand, although the KP is not a member of international policing institutions, such as Interpol and Europol, it has very close cooperation with almost all countries in the Western Balkan region and beyond on issues related to VE<sup>63</sup>. This cooperation has been especially productive with North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro. In addition, three regional forums of National CVE Coordinators from Western Balkan countries have been functioning in the past. The first one took place in Sarajevo and was organised and supported by the Regional Cooperation Council, the second is supported by the European Commission and the third one by the International Security Forum (ISF). These regional initiatives have created a range of activities within three main pillars: terrorism, organised crime and national security<sup>64</sup>.

<sup>62</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

<sup>63</sup> In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

<sup>64</sup> In-person interview with male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

## CONCLUSION

The research on the macro-level context pertaining to VE in Kosovo depicts a complex picture, with many factors and dynamics. In the general perspective, the struggle against VE has been taking place in two dimensions. The first dimension is related to security-centric measures that aim to prevent and combat VE through the conventional rule of law mechanisms. The second dimension pertains to countering radical religious preaching at the doctrinal/ideological level. The Ministry of Interior Affairs and the KP lead the efforts in the first dimension, whereas the Islamic Community of Kosovo is at the epicentre of the second dimension.

This study has explored the impact of seven identified drivers of VE, namely: religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, digital literacy, political grievances, cultural factors, transnational dynamics, as well as the respective institutional responses. The underlining finding from the interviews and other sources is that, among the identified drivers, the violent (mis)interpretation of Islam represents the major factor of VE. Furthermore, this driver is inherently intertwined with two other drivers, digital literacy (online propaganda) and transnational dynamics (global radical Islamic ideologies and movements), and as such they represent the most important drivers related to VE in Kosovo.

The research shows that the impact of other drivers is more peripheral. This means that their impact does not represent a general pattern of VE but is rather limited to certain individuals and specific contexts. Moreover, cultural factors and territorial inequalities were not included in the SPVERLT. On the other hand, although this Strategy has addressed the factor of economic deprivation as a driver of VE, this was largely neglected in practice due to the budgetary shortcomings.

In terms of institutional responses, the research highlights three crucial findings. First, at the initial phase, the institutional response to VE was rather reactive and was triggered by the high number of Kosovars joining terrorist groups in the Middle East. The institutional responses undertaken in this phase entailed classical security-oriented measures. These measures were based on the existing legal and policy framework, such as the Criminal Code, Code of Criminal Procedure and the Counter-Terrorism Strategy. In the second phase, the legal and policy frameworks were consolidated with the adoption of the Law on Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts outside State Territory and the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020 and respective action plan. In this phase, the efforts in C/PVE were diversified in terms of measures and actors involved, including religious communities, CSOs and international donors. In terms of diversification of measures, the focus was expanded to include activities entailing countering the extremist interpretations of Islam on ideological grounds. In addition, efforts were made towards curtailing transnational Islamic radical movements in Kosovo and using digital platforms for building counter-narratives to extremist interpretations of religion. The third phase is characterised by three parallel developments. Firstly, the nature of threat has changed and is shaped by the potential threat from the foreign terrorist fighters and their families who were repatriated from the war zones, and the changing of the modus operandi of the extremist religious groups who went underground. Secondly, the efforts to adopt an all-inclusive national strategy against VE and terrorism – which has been agreed with the EU Commission – has not been concluded. Thirdly, the institutional gap as a consequence of the abolition of the professional post of National Coordinator against Violent Extremism and Terrorism, and transfer of his tasks to the Minister of Interior, has not yet been addressed.



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## INTERVIEWS

### Representatives from state institutions

In-person interview with a male Senior Official, Ministry of Interior Affairs, Pristina, 26 March 2021.

In person interview with a male High Level Official Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Pristina, 7 April 2021.

In-person interview with a male Senior Official of the EU Office in Kosovo, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

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### Representatives from civil society organisations

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### Representatives from religious institutions

In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 24 March 2021.

In-person interview with a male High Level Religious Representative, Pristina, 3 March 2021.

# NORTH MACEDONIA

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## INTRODUCTION

The former southernmost Yugoslav federal unit Republic of North Macedonia got its independence after the successful referendum in September 1991. Even though successful at encircling the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, a violent conflict between the Macedonian security forces and the Albanian radicals broke out in 2001.<sup>1</sup> After the insurgence, settled with the so-called Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), a power-sharing model was introduced in the state which is now applauded in the scholarly literature (Bieber, 2008; Ilievski & Wolff, 2011; Horowitz, 2014). Just five years after the conflict, there was a rightist political shift, followed by a decade-long amplification of the ethno-centred, exclusivist discourses in the public sphere within both dominant ethnic-political camps in the state: Macedonian and Albanian. The key juncture in North Macedonia's recent history is certainly the state's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a full member state in March 2020. The steps forward in the state's European Union (EU) integration will culminate with the opening of the highly-anticipated association negotiations. This breakthrough came after the Greco-North Macedonia Prespa Agreement from 2018 and the Bulgarian-North Macedonia Friendship Treaty from 2017. Amid the focus on the good-neighbourly relations, the two accords broached security-related issues: both were signed in the name of strengthening the regional security and project closer inter-state cooperation within the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe, among others.

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The present paper is part of the CONNEKT research project and aims at mapping the macro-level drivers of radicalisation in North Macedonia. It dwells upon the new institutionalism theory and triangulates a set of 20 expert interviews with a close reading of the relevant institutional discourses and secondary literature on radicalisation and violent extremism in North Macedonia. New institutionalism is employed as a theoretical model that allows a better understanding of the individual agency in politics and policy-making, as well as the norm diffusion in institutional work (more in March & Olsen, 2006). As for the profile of the interviewed experts, we approached 11 representatives of the relevant governmental institutions, six experts from the civic sector and three experts affiliated with academic and research-oriented institutions. The interviews were conducted in the course of October, November and December 2020 as one-on-one online or in-person interviews, or via a specially designed online questionnaire (an online researcher-administered survey). As for the paper's structure, we discuss the findings in separate sections, each of them related to a pre-assigned set of seven drivers of radicalisation. Before proceeding with the discussion, we will present a brief contextual overview of violent extremism in post-2001 North Macedonia, a literature survey of the most relevant publications, as well as an overview of the institutional setting in the state.

<sup>1</sup> In terms of its population structure, North Macedonia is a multi-ethnic and a multi-confessional state, with two major and several minor religious groups: Orthodox Christian and Muslim and, subsequently, Roman Catholic, Judaic, and Evangelical Methodist communities. According to the last population census, which took place in 2002, 64.7% of the North Macedonia population identified as Orthodox Christians, while 33.3% as Muslims (Georgieva et al., 2010). In terms of ethnicity, according to the last census (2002), 64.18% of the population identified as ethnic Macedonian, 25.17% as Albanian, 3.85% as Turkish, 2.66% as Roma, 1.78% as Serbian, 0.84% as Bosnian and 0.48% as Vlach (Kambovski, Georgieva & Trajanovski, 2020). A separate and independent body, the Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG), formed in the immediate aftermath of WWII, is responsible for registering these denominations, as well as the issues concerning the religious freedoms in the state, its secular character, and advancement of interreligious relations, among others.

## MACRO-LEVEL CONTEXT OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

With the bulk of minority groups' demands institutionalised by OFA in 2001, violent extremism in the state was significantly settled – yet, the state faced several challenges in the course of the next two decades. The loudest cases involved, anew, Macedonian-Albanian shootouts and were contextualised within the Kosovar-Macedonian cross-national network of radicals: 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” (Jakov Marusic, 2012). In early May 2015, a shootout between the Macedonian forces and the self-identified ethno-Albanian National Liberation Army erupted in the town of Kumanovo, taking the lives of eight policemen and 10 militants and leaving 37 officers hospitalised. As a result, 28 men were arrested and charged with “terrorism-related charges” by the Macedonian authorities (Jakov Marusic, 2015).

The most recent wave of radical groups in North Macedonia was pinned down to the names of two influential imams in Macedonia in the state. 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 *parajamaats*. 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.” In 2017, a report by the Soufan Center (2017) counted 135 Macedonian foreign fighters in Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) between 2011 and 2016. 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 (Kambovski, Georgieva & Trajanovski, 2020). These departures “effectively stopped” in 2018, according to Stojkovski & Kalajdzioska (2018).

Even though the state did not, thereafter, ban any political party on the grounds of spreading “anti-democratic ideology and violence” – an active legal mechanism in North Macedonia’s legislation (Bourne & Casal Bértoa, 2017) – several fringe organisations, which oftentimes evoke violent symbols and use militant discourses and hate speech, are operating in the country. Zdravko Saveski notes that the common feature of the “Neo-Nazi and Islamic fundamentalists” is the very fact that they are “very obscure and absent from the public sphere” – while, in recent years, their presence on social media was much increased (Zdravko Saveski, 2021: 100). Moreover, as of the mid-2010s, there has been a tendency to register so-called “patriotic organisations” in the national registry of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of which were instrumental in the infamous storming of the Macedonian Parliament, also known as Bloody Thursday<sup>2</sup>. This event happened after the parliamentary majority elected an ethnic-Albanian as a spokesperson on 27 April 2017: 16 people were found guilty and charged with 211 years in total for “terrorist threat to the constitutional order and security” (Stojančova, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> More in Neofotistos (2019).

In 2017, the state revisited its agenda on C/PVE and sought to catch up with the regional statepolicies in these regards. This initiative culminated with forming a special body and two strategic documents, which will be thoroughly discussed below. In other words, the last three years, or the period from 2017 and the government change in North Macedonia up until now, are central for the implementation of a new, redesigned policy towards C/PVE and the reforms in the security sector. The new state approach had the so-called “soft measures” of C/PVE – which involve a wider social engagement and non-traditional security actors – high on the policy-agenda, aligned with the so-called “hard measures” of C/PVE – which in theory refer to a set of coercive actions (Huq, 2016).<sup>3</sup> The state’s **Police Strategy for Development 2016-2020** is a neat illustration in these regards as it clearly denotes the main agent in the fight against terrorism – the intelligence institutions – a prevailing approach in the 2010s. The key institution-building events are the formation of the **National Committee for Prevention of Violent and Counter-Terrorism (NCCVECT)** and the **Office of the National Coordinator for CVE and CT (NCoCVECT)** in 2017, as well as the subsequent **National Strategies for Counter-Terrorism (2018-2022; NSCT)** and **Countering Violent Extremism (2018-2022, NSCVE)**.

<sup>3</sup> A recent report by Horizon Civitas provides a brief history of the state-institutional approach towards radicalisation and joining ISIS in the mid-2010s as a “series of repressive measures”: herein, the authors list the change of the Criminal Code in 2014 towards criminalisation of direct or indirect involvement in foreign battlefields, the enlistment of North Macedonia in the US-led Global Coalition against ISIS, and a series of arrests known under the codenames Cell 1, Cell 2 and Cell 3. The authors also list several “institutional irregularities” alongside the aforementioned “repressive measures,” which took place in the mid-2010s (Shabani et al., 2019: 8).

## DRIVERS

### TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

The role of the strategic partners of North Macedonia was crucial, both in the facilitation of the aforementioned reforms in the security sector and the subsequent capacity-building processes, and in the preparation of the non-governmental actors and their involvement in the new platform for C/PVE.<sup>4</sup> However, it is commonplace that North Macedonia had successfully cooperated with its transatlantic partners in the global fight against terrorism before 2017<sup>5</sup>. This cooperation also extends to North Macedonia's membership in **MONEYVAL**, a Financial Action Task Force (FATF)-style regional body, North Macedonia's Financial Intelligence Office's membership in the **Egmont Group**, and the state's approval to join the **G-7 24/7 Network**. One of the civic sector experts interviewed for the purposes of this paper reaffirmed the agency of the international partners in the change of financial flows monitoring related to sponsoring radicalisation.<sup>6</sup> The **NCCVECT** had heretofore organised several workshops, meetings and twinning activities with the state's strategic partners.<sup>7</sup> Its work has so far been praised in foreign outlets: Just Security, New York University School of Law's outlet, endorsed the Committee's "whole of society rehabilitation and reintegration plan" – an initiative hinted at as "a model for other Western countries" (Rosand et al., 2020).

Moreover, the international partners are also significant as they provide financial means for implementing various C/PVE-related projects in the civic sector and facilitate the regional cross-national cooperation in C/PVE. According to Besa Arifi (2019), professor of criminal law at the South East European University and an expert in violent extremism, the **OSCE Mission to Skopje**, the **USAID** and the **American and British Embassies in Skopje** were instrumental agencies in these regards. They helped not only with financial support but also in terms of logistics by bringing the "local institutions, civil society organizations (CSOs), religious communities and academia" into the institution-building process (Arifi, 2019: 29). As for the latter, several of the interviewed experts – from different sectors – noted a relatively developed regional cooperation, both on state and non-governmental levels.<sup>8</sup> NCCVECT's role, as well as the two National Strategies, is rather descriptive and does not clearly call for an action regarding the institutional work, inter-institutional work, and the work on the C/PVE in the civic sector, which was highlighted as one of the major shortcomings by several informants active in the non-governmental sphere.<sup>9</sup> Besides, it was also stressed that the increased donor's attention to

<sup>4</sup> A brief contextual note: the policy change came after the demise of the ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq and the decline of foreign fighters from North Macedonia from 2017 onwards. As of 2019, 11 citizens of North Macedonia were charged for their military activities abroad with a total of 33 years of imprisonment.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview, see the most recent US Bureau on Counterterrorism published in October 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Online interview with female representative from university, Skopje, 4 November 2020.

<sup>7</sup> In-person interview with male representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Skopje, 17 December 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Online questionnaire filled in by a male representative from civil society, 21 December 2020; Online interview with female representative from a civil society organization, Skopje, 30 October 2020; Online interview with female representative from a civil society organization, Skopje, 3 November 2020; Online questionnaire filled in by male representative from the Ministry of Defence, Skopje, 18 December 2020; and online interview with female representative from a university, 29 October 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Online questionnaire filled in by male representative from a civil society organisation, Skopje, 21 December 2020; Online interview with female representative from a civil society organization, Skopje, 30 October 2020; and online interview with female representative from a civil society organization, Skopje, 3 November 2020.

radicalisation – especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disinformation narratives that followed, and which will be covered in the section on digital literacy in the text – the topics of C/PVE are being picked up by an ever-growing number of CSOs, which do not always have the proper expertise to work in the sector.<sup>10</sup>

## RELIGION

As per its biannual Strategic Plan (2020-2022), the **Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Groups' affiliates (CRRCG)** participated in the formation of NSCT and NSCVE in 2018. Even though the notion of "radicalisation" is mentioned only once in the document – in the section of future "Possibilities" for the CRRCG (2019: 5) –, the work of the Committee has had a broader scope ever since 2019. Here, besides the role of a facilitator of the dialogue between the various religious communities in North Macedonia, CRRCG also aims to gather information from the religious communities on eventual radicalisations of individuals or groups and follow the work of the officially registered religious communities and cooperates with the state's security forces.<sup>11</sup>

The situation on the ground reveals that, on the one hand, the major religious institutions are working in the direction of C/PVE, while, on the other, religious-based violence and "radical interpretations" (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012)<sup>12</sup> of certain denominations are present. These two tendencies were linked in several reports: the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation in the course of early 2010s, as well as, more recently, the Association for Democratic Advancement Democracy Lab, in cooperation with the Berlin-based Berghof Foundation, noted that the **Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia (ICM)** is losing support among its constituencies, which in turn paved the way for "non-traditional" interpretations of the traditional-in-North-Macedonia Hanafi school of Islam (Morina et al., 2019).

To illustrate the first point, one can refer to the 2017 US country report on terrorism (2018:100), which highlights that the ICM "incorporated counter-narratives into Friday sermons with Muslim worshipers" and "conducted one CVE training session for approximately 12 imams". ICM, in cooperation with the Al-Hilal charity foundation, launched a project which had a goal of countering the narrative of "a distorted version of Islam preached by the radicals" (Selimi & Stojkovski, 2016: 28). Most recently, though, several organisations noted a dozen religiously-motivated incidents in the course of 2019<sup>13</sup>, while the 2019 US annual International Religious Freedom Report on North Macedonia showcases several other religiously-biased incidents. The Islamic fundamentalist religious interpretations in North Macedonia are well covered in the literature, both everyday functioning, role in radicalisation, and transnational ties<sup>14</sup>, while the Christian radical interpretations are yet to be researched.

<sup>10</sup> Online interview with female representative from a university, Skopje, 29 October 2020.

<sup>11</sup> According to a questionnaire filled in by a male representative from the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups, Skopje, 6 November 2020.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview, see Qehaja & Perteshi (2018).

<sup>13</sup> See Helsinki Committee's 2019 Annual Report on Hate Crimes in North Macedonia and the Annual Report for Human Rights in North Macedonia.

<sup>14</sup> See also Stojkovski & Kalajdziovski (2018); and Azinović (2018).



Our interviews showed that North Macedonia's experts do not have a uniform opinion on the religious interpretations, which eventually leads to radicalisation. Interestingly enough, we noticed that a significant group of experts related to state institutions overlook this phenomenon. In contrast, the experts with a working experience in the civic sector and academia have been clearer in identifying the nuances within these communities. However, this was not a clear-cut pattern: the major institutional bodies, as per our informants, are well aware of these groups and their teachings and cooperate with the other relevant institutions, such as the officially-registered religious communities and detention centres in North Macedonia, by sharing know-how and practices.<sup>15</sup> On a different note, the civic sector experts stressed that the NGOs' work generally focuses on prevention rather than reintegration of the detained foreign fighters. Moreover, experts from the civic sector claimed that the work with the detained foreign fighters in North Macedonia should be done in cooperation with the relevant NGOs, as an already established practice in the region, to avoid recidivism issues.<sup>16</sup> In these regards, an individualised programme for violent extremist prisoners is already underway, which also comprises an option for including representatives of the officially registered religious communities in North Macedonia in the programme, while North Macedonia's **Ministry of Justice** is currently implementing a regional project – funded by the EU and the Council of Europe – which focuses on enhancing the penitentiary capacities in addressing radicalisation in prison. In addition, the **Macedonian Society of Penology**, a non-governmental group of experts dealing with the topic of penology, is teaming up to implement a programme on reintegration of the detained foreign fighters and their families in the state.<sup>17</sup>

## CULTURAL FACTORS

For the purposes of this paper, we draw upon a broader understanding of the cultural drivers of radicalisation, not only as a "cultural marginalisation"<sup>18</sup>, but as a "pull factor" (Nanes & Lau, 2018) over identity-related issues. We identified two parallel processes from the interviews we have conducted: (i) one based on the aforementioned inclusivist political platform, prevailing political paradigm as of the late 2010s, as well as the subsequent developments emanating from it, and (ii) the other which has the ethno-nationalist political mobilisation against a governmental change in 2017 as its main trigger.

The platform "One Society for All" emerged in the long episodes of campaigning in 2016 and 2017, and had a goal of breaking with the "divisive policies, policies that stirred conflicts and split people along binary lines" and enshrining North Macedonia "as a civic state of all its citizens" (Vlada, 2017). Even though the initial documents of this strategic platform do not refer to the radicalisation processes in the state, Robert Alagjovovski, one of the architects behind the strategy and, as of 2020, a National Coordinator for Development of Culture and Inter-sector Cooperation, claimed that the "de-stimulation of hate speech and violent extremism" was among the rationales behind it (Civil Media, 2020). Besides the rationale, Alagjovovski, in late 2020, announced a stronger inter-institutional trust in the fight against

<sup>15</sup> Online interview with male representative from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Skopje, 17 November 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Online interview with female representative from a civil society organization, Skopje, 30 October 2020; and online interview with female representative from a civil society organization, Skopje, 3 November 2020.

<sup>17</sup> As per the questionnaire filled in by a female representative from a civil society organisation, Skopje, 21 December 2020.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Al Raffie (2013).

extremism and the creation of a special police unit for primary and secondary prevention of extremism. This claim came after the set of strategic priorities of the new government in North Macedonia for 2020, with the state's "active involvement in the international fight against security threats" and C/PVE high on the agenda (Ibid.). The experts we interviewed reaffirmed these strategic goals from various perspectives: the so-called multi-ethnic police units, for instance, formed in the aftermath of 2001, ceased to exist in the 2010s, and, according to an interviewed expert in the relevant sphere, it is high time to re-establish them.<sup>19</sup> On a different note, the strategy was criticised by emphasising its main shortcoming from a C/PVE perspective – the lack of expertise, human capital and funding in this sector.<sup>20</sup>

The strategy as such was also identified as contrapuntal to the events from 27 April 2017 by the interlocutors, or the so-called "Bloody Thursday" – the infamous storming of North Macedonia's Parliament by Macedonian radicals.<sup>21</sup> As a result, 16 people were found guilty and charged with 211 years in total for a "terrorist threat to the constitutional order and security" (Stojančova, 2019). Moreover, 95 people asked for medical help after the storming, including 22 police officers and 3 MPs. This event was a turning point for the social and political developments in North Macedonia and a trigger for a particular paradigm shift in the public perception over radicalisation and violent extremism in North Macedonia. All the interviewees dwelled upon this event and its aftermath, without a clear consensus on the means for the radical mobilisation: one group would claim that the political ideology of nationalism was instrumental in the violent outcome of the storming, while the other group did not link the national feelings and the violent behaviour; rather, it turned to the political context of the event. This form of radicalisation was, in addition, picked up by the civic sector<sup>22</sup>, while, in practice, this paradigm shift is visible in the C/PVE work in the territorial regions of North Macedonia, which will be touched upon in the next section.

## TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

In terms of the territorial inequalities and their links with radicalisation, we mapped three tendencies: (i) a prevailing societal, political and media focus on several Skopje-based municipalities and Macedonian towns; (ii) a wider approach by the state-institutions and the civic sector; and (iii) an anticipation of a critical shift in these regards. However, the lack of a population census is a serious shortcoming in terms of a proper territorial, regional and cross-regional mapping of various socio-economic, developmental and educational phenomena in North Macedonia.

The first tendency is linked with a relatively older scholarly mapping of the major points of mobilisation and recruitment of foreign fighters for ISIS and Al-Nursa (early 2010s), as well as a series of relatively recent events which re-legitimised the same municipalities as certain hotspots of violent extremism in the state. The municipalities in the foci are thus located in the capital city of Skopje (Čair, Gazi Baba,

<sup>19</sup> Online interview with male representative from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Skopje, 17 November 2020.

<sup>20</sup> A recently published report by NEXUS Civil Concept, for instance, provided a number of nine women within the 22 members of the NCCVECT (Pecova-Ilieska & Musliu, 2020: 8).

<sup>21</sup> Online questionnaire filled in by male representative from a civil society organisation, Skopje, 21 December 2020; Online interview with female representative from a civil society organisation, Skopje, 30 October 2020; and online interview with female representative from a civil society organisation, Skopje, 16 November 2020.

<sup>22</sup> As an example, see Mojanchevska et al., 2020.

Saraj and Aračinovo), as well as the towns of Kumanovo and Gostivar. Several studies identified these locations as the main recruitment centres for foreign fighters. However, the scholarly literature does not provide a link between the territorial features of these locations and the process of radicalisation. For instance, as noted by Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, the profiles of individuals arrested as part of the so-called Cells operations ranged “from a cab driver to a doctor, a goldsmith to a governmental employee,” which the authors interpret as a suggestion that “the threat from violent extremism in the Macedonian context does not necessarily fit one singular socio-economic background” (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski 2018: 12).<sup>23</sup> These municipalities are thus subjected to a closer observation by the state institutions and the civic sector, while the municipality governments’ themselves are also working in the direction of C/PVE. As an illustration, as per the official websites, the municipalities of Aračinovo, Čair, Gostivar, Kičevo, Kumanovo, Ohrid, Struga and Tetovo are part of the **Strong Cities Network** – which provides a platform for a knowledge transfer and sharing of experiences with C/PVE.

The major institutional body, **NCCVECT**, aims to cover the whole territory of North Macedonia and now works in 14 municipalities – mostly with a higher multiethnic proportion and the municipalities with a dominant ethnic group. Following the latest change of the number of municipalities in 2013, North Macedonia has 80. A mere proportion is not a good pointer in these regards: for the majority of experts, the territorial dispersion is well covered in the state and the civic sector’s work on C/PVE.

On a different note, municipalities other than the aforementioned have recently been gaining traction through the media and the civic sector. On the one hand, several experts pointed out that radical interpretations of Islam appeared in the non-Albanian-dominated municipalities in the eastern parts of North Macedonia, mostly among the Roma and Turkish communities. Further work in this regard is yet to be conducted. On the other hand, after the 2017 storming of North Macedonia’s Parliament, many experts identified the cities of Prilep and Bitola, again dominated by Orthodox Christian Macedonian population, as places which are to be closely watched and approached with a relevant C/PVE methodology.

## POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

Political grievances are to be approached as a lack of political representation and, more specifically, as a trigger of individual or groupist radicalisation “in response to political trends or events” (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008: 419)<sup>24</sup>.

To commence with the former, post-Yugoslav Macedonia did not ban any political party, even though the state has a legal mechanism for banning antidemocratic ideologies and political platforms that promote violence. As mentioned, after 2017, several fringe organisations appeared in North

<sup>23</sup> Moreover, a series of events re-legitimised several municipalities as certain hotspots of violent extremism in the state. In 2015, a shootout between the state forces and Albanian radicals (self-proclaimed National Liberation Army) resulted in 28 arrests and terrorism-related charges by the North Macedonia authorities. In February 2019, North Macedonia’s Ministry of Interior issued an official statement claiming that “the police stopped an attack by ISIS supporters, planned to occur in the Republic of North Macedonia” (Radio Free Europe, 2019). After the initial media attention, no other information followed, stressing only that further information might be sensitive. Several embassies in Skopje warned their citizens of the risk of a terrorist attack in the country. Finally, in April 2019, the State Counter-Terrorism Agency suppressed a group of nine who led illegal workshops and sold illegal weapons in Skopje, Tetovo, and Kumanovo (Stankovikj, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> For an overview, see Simmons (2014).

Macedonia, oftentimes evoking symbols of violence and hate speech. Moreover, in the aftermath of the storming of the Macedonian Parliament, several incidents appeared in the Macedonian media, which can be seen in light of radical nationalist interpretations: in January 2019, two brothers, famous rappers, attacked a police officer and were immediately arrested. The brothers, also famous for their nationalistic political activism, attacked the officer after a political protest (Radio MOF, 2019). In March 2019, the leader of the Macedonian Christian Brotherhood, a far-right formation, was arrested after his public threats to the erstwhile Prime Minister of North Macedonia (Mkd.mk, 2019). On a different note, several recent reports on radicalisation and violent extremism in North Macedonia stress that Islamic radicals do not show an ambition to make political claims on the state (Saveski and Sadiku, 2012).

However, the issue of the political grievance does have a longer history in North Macedonia. One can stress that after the 2001 conflict, the OFA and, especially, after the so-called 2007 May Agreement, the Albanian minority secured a stable political representation in the state system. The Democratic Union for Integration, an Albanian political party in North Macedonia, formed in 2002, largely comprised former National Liberation Army members and has been part of almost all the ruling coalitions over the post-conflict period. What remains a serious problem, though, is the weaponisation of the public discourse across ethnic, national and cultural lines, which, in turn, contributes to a multilayered process of radicalisation. A recently-published volume on the symbolic divisions in North Macedonia after 2017 showcases that these divisions are present as interethnic and intra-ethnic contestations (Todorov and Bliznakovski, 2020). All the interviewed experts agreed that there are many dividing lines in contemporary Macedonian society, yet they claimed that serious work by state institutions and the civic sector is being conducted in these regards.

## DIGITAL LITERACY

To better understand the state of the art in North Macedonia's institutional work on digital literacy, one should briefly consider media literacy development in the Macedonian public, institutional and legal infrastructures. As a general remark, media literacy in North Macedonia started gaining traction in the late 2000s after an impetus from the civic sector, yet "the interest of the institutions in media literacy remained marginal, while the citizens have a very low level of understanding of the meaning of the concept and its significance for democracy" (Nikodinoska et al., 2018). Digital literacy in the state follows a similar pattern of underdevelopment.

The 2010s are a crucial decade as they witnessed the creation of media literacy legal and institutional frameworks and its operationalisation in practice in North Macedonia. To commence with the former: the key state institution responsible for developing and promoting media literacy is the **Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services**, a non-profit regulatory body established in 2013. The Agency was envisioned with the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, in force as of early 2014, which vests the Agency with a "direct obligation to promote media literacy, cooperating with all the relevant stakeholders." It developed a **Programme for Promoting Media Literacy in the Republic of Macedonia 2016-2018** in 2015. In March 2019, the Agency published a Media Literacy Policy and the new **Regulatory Strategy for the Development of Audio and Audiovisual Media Activity 2019-2023**. Both the documents aim to build up the Programme and have a goal to continue undertaking activities to "raise media literacy among different target groups." As of 2017, the Agency initiated the **Media**

**Literacy Network of the Republic of North Macedonia**, an open platform of 35 entities: six state institutions, two private higher education institutions, 18 civil associations, and nine media outlets.

Macedonian legislation, however, does not clearly define the notion of media literacy. The 2014 Law does not define it at all; it just delegates the role of “promoting the media literacy” to the Agency and the role of “creating and emitting programmes related to the encouragement of media literacy” to the public broadcaster. Nikodinoska et al. (2018) also note that this vague depiction led North Macedonia’s Ministries for Education and Information Society to focus on IT skills training and prequalification, rather than the digital, or as frequently depicted in the Macedonian legislation, “the media and information literacy”.

The situation on the ground mirrors this institutional approach: the media, information and digital literacy indexes are at the bottom at regional level. According to the Media Literacy Index 2019, published by the European Policies Initiative of the Open Society Institute – Sofia, North Macedonia holds the last place among 35 European states, or the lowest resilience potential to deal with disinformation and its effects (Lessenski, 2019). The direct consequences of this low resilience potential could be observed during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in North Macedonia, when various disinformation narratives started circulating in social media. The Skopje-based research institute found out that this “infodemics” regarding the pandemic has reached up to 84% of the Macedonian population. At the same time, nine out of ten informants believed a piece of fake news, even though the government issued its first “anti-infodemic measures” in mid-March 2020. Sanda Svetoka, a Senior Expert at NATO StratCom COE, reaffirmed the low level of media literacy in the state, stating that this vacuum is used by many foreign “malign actors” (Gjorgjievska, 2020).

Besides the low index rates of digital literacy, it is worth mentioning that North Macedonia is frequently tagged the “land of fake news” after it gained global attention for the clickbait industry located in the state and its interference, among others, in US elections (Cvetkovska, 2020). However, the clickbait phenomenon has a much wider set of consequences for Macedonian society. For instance, only in the course of 2020, as noted in the series of monthly reports by the NGO NEXUS Civil Concept, the media sensationalism was present in recidivism cases.

Several authors, organisations, and all the experts we interviewed for the purposes of this paper mapped the linkages between various radicalisation processes and low digital literacy indexes in the state. Qehaja and Perteshi (2018), for instance, in a 2018 report on extremism in North Macedonia, stressed that the spread of “fundamentalist ideology through online content” remains one of the major challenges for the state. In the last few years – parallel to the launch of the EU Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans – one can note a clear intensification in work on digital literacy and its role in the radicalisation processes by state-institutions, such as the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (which organised training on media literacy, oftentimes in cooperation with international organisations such as UNESCO), but also in the non-governmental sector. For instance, NEXUS Civil Concept organised an online workshop for sharing best practices on reporting of violent extremism and terrorism, returnees, and their family members in November 2020. The **Fighting Fake News Narratives** platform, developed by the **Citizens Association Most**, is frequently debunking radicalisation and

violent extremism related disinformation narratives from the traditional and new media, while the **Centre for Social Innovations "Blink 42-21"** published a video game that aims to strengthen the community resilience.

As for the major challenges in the digital literacy area, our informants stressed the lack of experience in work with C/PVE and the lack of proper audience targeting in the media and digital literacy projects.<sup>25</sup>

### ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

The economic drivers towards radicalisation were discussed in several reports published in North Macedonia. A recent report published by the NEXUS Civil Concept showcased that, in most cases, the families of the convicted foreign fighters in North Macedonia "were receiving or at some point in their lives received some kind of financial assistance such as welfare assistance, child allowance, etc." (Vanchoski et al., 2020: 33). On a different note, one recent event, revealed by the local media, was a reference point for countering the assumption that radicalisation goes hand in hand with economic deprivation. Namely, in September 2020, the German police prosecuted and charged three people with terrorism. The leader was a Macedonian-born son of a prominent doctor in North Macedonia, owner of one of the largest private hospitals. However, this incident did not alter the work of the relevant institutional bodies: the major focus of the new set of "soft measures" is now placed on capacity-building, raising awareness and involvement of a broader network of stakeholders and local actors. NCCVECT, for instance, coordinates this process as of 2018.

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The economic deprivation was frequently brought in line with the issues of re-integration and resocialisation of the foreign fighters. **NCCVECT**, again, approaches the re-integration and resocialisation as tertiary prevention (with raising awareness as a primary prevention and identification of first signals of radicalisation as secondary) and coordinates an inter-sectoral working group, which is to deliver a more detailed plan for a reintegration of the foreign fighters from North Macedonia. The plan would also envision cooperation with an interdisciplinary group of experts – including social workers, psychologists, doctors, and members of the local governing bodies. In the meantime, the civic sector has conducted several research reports consisting of interviews with foreign fighters and their family members in North Macedonia and a set of positive practices of re-integration and resocialisation from EU member states opens up various sets of questions in these regards.

<sup>25</sup> Online interview with male representative from a civil society organisation, Skopje, 15 December 2020; Online interview with female representative from a civil society organisation, Skopje, 3 November 2020; Online questionnaire filled in by male representative from a civil society organisation, 21 December 2020; Online interview with female representative from a university, Skopje, 29 October 2020; Online questionnaire filled in by male representative from a university, Skopje, 4 November 2020; Online questionnaire filled in by male representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Skopje, 17 December 2020; Online questionnaire filled in by male representative from the Ministry of Defence, Skopje, 18 December 2020; and online questionnaire filled in by female representative from the Ministry of Justice, Skopje, 17 December 2020.

## CONCLUSION

With the establishment of NCCVECT, as well as the subsequent NSCT and NSCVE, North Macedonia is unarguably catching up with the C/PVE agenda of the regional states, predominantly from the Western Balkans. From a state-institutional perspective, this setting paves the way for a regional C/PVE action plan, among other initiatives, as well as better cooperation, knowledge-transfers and sharing of know-how and positive practices. From a civic sector perspective, the present network of experts and institutions provides a good platform for cross-national and transnational work on C/PVE. The establishment of NCCVECT, its short-lived functioning, and major institutional challenges can be read in light of the organisational theories of isomorphism. Herein, we locate North Macedonia's latest C/PVE policing as a hybrid model of a normative and coercive isomorphism, as it builds upon the professional knowledge of a wider set of stakeholders but also emanates from the aforementioned international support. From the expert interviews, we conclude that this model suffers – at the present stage – from (i) a different understanding of the operational categories in the new C/PVE strategy (which in turn results in a weak inter-sectoral coordination and communication between the state and the civic sectors) and (ii) a weak efficiency and implementation of the national strategy and the relevant action plans. As per a recent comparative report on regional C/PVE policing, a similar lack of concrete measures was identified in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>26</sup>, even though the state established these institutions and plans several years earlier than North Macedonia. The aforementioned set of recent events contributed to a certain shift in the experts' and, not entirely, institutional work on C/PVE. Here, the major tendency is the shift from the set of more "traditional" drivers – such as the religious factors – towards the "newer" ones for the Macedonian context – such as cultural factors. However, we also observed that there is an insufficient targeting of digital literacy as a driver of radicalisation. In general, what was referred to as a paradigm shift in the work on C/PVE in North Macedonia – the new focus on radical right and ethno-nationalist provoked political violence – was clearly delineated as such by the experts active in the civic sector, while it was also mentioned as such by the other experts. What is to be expected is broader work in these directions by both civic and state sectors.

<sup>26</sup> For a comparative overview, see Morina et al. (2019).



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## INTERVIEWS

### Representatives of state institutions

Online questionnaire filled in by a male representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 December 2021.

In-person interview with male representative from the Agency of National Security, Skopje, 10 December 2021.

Online interview with a male representative from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 17 November 2020.

Online questionnaire filled in by a male representative from the Ministry of Defence of North Macedonia, 18 December 2020.

Online questionnaire filled in by a female representative from the Ministry of Justice, 17 December 2020.

Online interview with a female representative from the Agency of National Security, 22 December 2020.

Online interview with a male representative from the Protection and Rescue Directorate, 19 November 2020.

Online interview with a female representative from the Office for Public Security-Ministry of Internal Affairs, 20 November 2020.

Online questionnaire filled in by a male representative from the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups, 6 November 2020.

Online questionnaire filled in by a male representative from the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, 6 November 2020.

Online questionnaire filled in by a male representative from a state institution, 11 December 2020.

### Representatives of civil society organisations

Online interview with a male representative from a civil society organisation, 15 December 2020.

Online questionnaire filled in by a male representative from a civil society organisation, 21 December 2020.

Online questionnaire filled in by a female representative from a civil society organisation, 21 December 2020.

Online interview with a female representative from a civil society organisation, 30 October 2020.

Online interview with a female representative from a civil society organisation, 3 November 2020.

Online interview with a female representative from a civil society organisation, 16 November 2020.

#### Representatives of academic and research-oriented institutions

Online interview with a female representative from a university, 29 October 2020.

Online questionnaire filled in by a male representative from a university, 4 November 2020.

Online interview with a female representative from a university, 4 November 2020.

\*All interviewees were based in Skopje.

# BULGARIA

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## INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria's approach to countering and preventing radicalisation has been influenced by the European Union (EU)'s evolving understanding of radicalisation as a home-grown problem that also requires soft measures. This understanding was adopted as the basis for the Bulgarian Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020). However, the country was unprepared to ensure the Strategy's implementation. Prevention measures were insufficiently applied and the approach continues to be dominated by law enforcement. The focus on Islamist radicalisation was also adopted even though Bulgaria's Muslim community has shown resilience towards strict interpretations of Islam. This focus has been most pronounced with regard to marginalised Roma Muslim communities, which have shown some indications of religious radicalisation. This has contributed to further encapsulation and stigmatisation of these minorities. On the other hand, the far right has received less attention from institutions despite civil society being very vocal about this more established threat. The understanding of macro factors among institutional and civil society actors revolves around how they view the influence of certain drivers, such as economic deprivation, as contributing to vulnerability to radicalisation and territorial inequalities, translated in the absence of state institutions, and social and educational exclusion. Additionally, there is disagreement between institutional stakeholders and civil society on the influence of religion and political grievances on radicalisation processes.

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Perceptions of institutions and non-governmental stakeholders about drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) in Bulgaria can be analysed along several lines. First, contextually, radicalisation and VE as potential threats to society entered the Bulgarian political agenda in 2015, mainly in the light of global and European Union (EU)-wide responses to so-called home-grown Islamist radicalisation, the activities of terrorist organisations such as Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda and the issue of foreign fighters for whom Bulgaria has become a transit zone. Thus, Bulgarian law enforcement and intelligence institutions started to develop more systematic counter-radicalisation mechanisms. Second, the institutional response has focused on reactive and repressive measures. It has been dominated by the law enforcement and security agencies, despite the development of a 2015 counter-radicalisation strategy based on a whole-of-society approach also envisaging a clear role for "soft" institutions and actors in the sphere of prevention. Third, there seems to be a clear distinction between governmental and non-governmental perceptions, as the former place excessive focus on the perceived threat from Islamist radicalisation, and the latter underline the oversight of far-right and nationalist threats of VE. The institutional focus on Islamist radicalisation has had an important side effect: prejudice against the Roma community as a group to be considered at risk by default. On the other hand, far-right discourse has silently become the new normal in societal life, a process also facilitated by the participation of nationalist and populist parties in the ruling coalition since 2017, and in Parliament since 2005.

This paper first takes a look at the main institutional stakeholders (both state and non-state) in Bulgaria linked to preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE), then offers a country-specific analysis of processes and issues deemed pertinent to the country, before analysing the institutional perceptions of the seven drivers set as the basis of the macro analysis. Out of these drivers, those perceived as the

most relevant by actors seem to be religion, political grievances (far-right ideology), poverty, inequality and an additional factor appearing horizontally in most stakeholders' accounts: education. These macro perceptions can serve as a starting point for the subsequent analysis of the meso- (community-level) and micro- (individual-level) drivers of radicalisation and VE in the country.

The report is based on a literature review and 26 in-depth interviews with 18 representatives of state institutions, five civil society actors and three academics (see Interviews). The interviews were conducted in the period January-March 2021 face to face (17 interviews) and online (9 interviews). The respondents include representatives nominated by the key state institutions involved in the development and implementation of P/CVE policies in Bulgaria directly or having an indirect role in prevention: security and law enforcement officers, prosecutors, experts from the Ministry of Education, juvenile delinquency bodies, and social and child protection services. Experts from academia and civil society were selected based on their expertise and activities in the area of P/CVE specifically, as well as on related issues such as child policies, human rights, crime prevention, Roma issues, religious matters, hate crime, and discrimination.

## INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

This section provides a brief overview of the key Bulgarian stakeholders on P/CVE as outlined in the CONNEKT Country Report on national approaches to extremism in Bulgaria (Dzhekova, 2020).

### STATE INSTITUTIONS

The main actors active in the field of P/CVE so far have been mainly from the public security sector. Prevention of radicalisation is not sufficiently recognised as part of the mandate of frontline practitioners (such as education and social services) and is not well integrated into their work. One factor having a role in this respect is that the drafting of the P/CVE policy framework did not ensure to a sufficient degree cross-integration and harmonisation with other policy areas such as crime prevention, child and education policies or minority integration strategies. Non-state actors are yet to become more involved in implementation of state policies and programmes (Dzhekova et al., 2016). There is no specialised stand-alone coordination body in charge of P/CVE development of specific programmes and overseeing their implementation. The **Security Council at the Council of Ministers** is responsible for strategic decision-making related to P/CVE and provides overall assessment of security threats, proposes measures, and coordinates and guides the work of security agencies. The coordination of the Strategy and Action Plan implementation monitoring is designated within the **Ministry of the Interior** (Mol). In the *2018 Report on the implementation of the Annual Plan for 2018*, the bulk of the activities were carried out by the Mol as a leading institution, followed by the **State Agency for National Security** (SANS) (Министерски Съвет, 2018).

SANS monitors radicalisation and VE using overt and covert means (use of agents and informants, surveillance, etc.) and on the basis of information received from foreign intelligence services. SANS also monitors the activities of high-risk extremist groups and organisations operating in the country. Law enforcement bodies such as the **Border Police** and the **Directorate General for Combating Organised Crime** at the Mol are responsible for monitoring and countering risks related to VE and terrorism.

### CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

The role of civil society in P/CVE initiatives is spelled out in the National Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020) (Министерски Съвет, 2015). Representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were also included in the drafting of the Strategy. In pursuit of the development of a multi-agency approach to tackling radicalisation, NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) are to take part and contribute towards:

- The development of indicators for early identification, monitoring and risk assessment and early warning system by first line practitioners as well as citizens.
- The development and implementation of prevention, as well as deradicalisation programmes.
- The development of sustainable channels of cooperation, information exchange and coordination of activities at both national and local level through multi-agency consultation mechanisms for early detection and prevention.



However, despite the active role afforded to NGOs and civil society in the Strategy, its implementation has experienced significant lag. The few measures implemented in which NGOs/CSOs were involved were actually related to EU-funded research, seminars or training projects (Министерски Съвет, 2017). Their envisioned engagement in key actions such as the development of prevention programmes and multi-agency cooperation mechanisms at local level has not taken place. Outside the scope of the Strategy and Action Plans, NGOs independently implement a number of EU-funded actions (not reported in the government's implementation reports) focused on research, community engagement and capacity-building in the field of prevention of radicalisation as part of broader European partnerships across different member states.

### RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Similar to civil society, religious and ethnic communities are afforded a role in the multi-institutional approach towards preventing and tackling radicalisation envisioned by the Strategy. Religious communities are to participate and contribute towards the same objectives as civil society by implementing means and strategies suited to their own competences and resources.

However, according to the implementation plans and reports, engagement of religious communities is envisioned in only one specific activity, which has not been implemented – the development of a cooperation mechanism between central and local authorities and religious and ethnic communities to prevent terrorist recruitment in Bulgaria (Министерски Съвет, 2017). Due to past and recent political events, the Muslim denomination in Bulgaria has been fractioned and the institution's authority as a spiritual leader diminished (Mancheva, 2019).

## MACRO-LEVEL CONTEXT IN BULGARIA

In Bulgaria, the terrorist attacks in New York on 11 September 2011 and in Europe in the early 2000s increased awareness of Jihadist terrorism and led to actions by security services in addressing foreign vectors of potential Islamist radicalisation in the country (Kerem, 2010). The 2012 Sarafovo bus bombing on the airport in Burgas, the only terrorist attack in Bulgaria's recent history, led to a strengthening of the counter-terrorism framework. Radicalisation and VE as potential threats to society entered the Bulgarian political agenda in 2015, mainly in the light of global and EU-wide responses to so-called home-grown Islamist radicalisation, the activities of terrorist organisations such as IS and Al Qaeda, and the issue of foreign fighters for whom Bulgaria has become a transit zone, both to and from conflict zones in the Middle East. Bulgarian law enforcement and intelligence institutions started developing more systematic counter-radicalisation mechanisms. These include relevant amendments to the Bulgarian Criminal Code adopted in June 2015 as well as the adoption of the Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020). Considering the evolving understanding of radicalisation in the EU, the Bulgarian Strategy envisions a broad approach in countering radicalisation, including the establishment of prevention measures and the involvement of a wide array of institutions. However, these policy developments were driven mainly by external factors, which led to the issue not being fully internalised as a priority for institutions.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in the process of drafting of the Strategy, there was no sufficient harmonisation and cross-integration between P/CVE priorities and measures with other related key policy areas such as child and education policies, crime prevention, and minority integration strategies.

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The measures enforced so far by intelligence, law enforcement and prosecution services have been directed at countering external Islamist threats and potential home-grown risks. The focus of the security agencies is mainly on detecting early on and countering "the supply side" of VE in terms of extremist actors and ideologies. Reducing the demand for such ideologies among society through prevention and resilience-building falls outside their mandate.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, other relevant institutions that can have a more proactive role in prevention are lacking the knowledge and training on the matter, as well as to some extent the normative integration of P/CVE tasks in their mandates.

### FACTORS FRAMING RESPONSES TO ISLAMIST RADICALISATION

The prioritisation of Islamist radicalisation in Europe has also been reflected in the national approach despite the country-specific risk dynamics. Islamist radicalisation in Bulgaria is often viewed through the prism of the entry of Salafist interpretations of Islam and their taking root in some Muslim communities in the country. Such strict interpretations of Islam are not typical for Bulgaria (Zhelyazkova, 2014) and are often considered at odds with the traditional Hanafi Sunni Islam professed by the majority of Muslim communities in the country. The adoption of Salafism is far from widespread, being mostly limited to some Pomak villages and to some of the most marginalised Roma communities in Bulgaria. Thus, the

<sup>1</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>2</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the security services conducted on 25 February 2021.

prioritisation of Islamist radicalisation can be contrasted with the resilience of Bulgarian Muslims to the strictest interpretations of Islam (Dzhekova et al., 2015).

This focus is mainly due to the fact that it was members of a Roma Salafi community who in 2014 exhibited signs of Islamist radicalisation<sup>3</sup> and prompted highly publicised trials against an informal Roma Salafi preacher (Ahmed Mussa) and some of his followers (Mancheva & Dzhekova, 2017; Dzhekova, 2020). Mussa and 12 others were charged with incitement of discrimination and hatred on religious grounds and for propagation of war, including by: displaying and spreading Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) propaganda materials offline and on social media; glorifying ISIS/Jihad; integrating Jihadist ideas and appeals in support for ISIS in sermons; and providing logistical support to transiting transnational fighters on their way to Syria. Previously, in 2004 and 2012 Mussa was prosecuted on similar charges (preaching antidemocratic ideology, forcible change of the social and state order, and incitement of interethnic and religious enmity).

The focus on Islamist radicalisation has been further shaped by national factors, most prominently deeply-rooted widespread prejudice against the Roma community (Danova-Roussinova, 2002). Recent analysis has shown that anti-Roma prejudice is also widely observed in the criminal justice system in Bulgaria (Fair Trials, 2020). The handling of the Ahmed Mussa case was criticised for further encapsulating the Pazardzhik Roma community and for stigmatising the Roma as a potential threat to national security (Ivanova, 2020).<sup>4</sup> A number of interviewees focused on the importance of the social marginalisation of the Roma community in increasing susceptibility to radical religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Respondents from academia point out that the religious ideas propagated in this case were adopted by the community because they spoke to the deeply-rooted need for belonging, purpose and economic prospects,<sup>6</sup> which had been painfully absent from the lived reality of the local Roma people. One of the interviewed experts<sup>7</sup> suggested that in the Pazardzhik case even Muslim religious institutions recognised that the infiltration of more radical interpretations of Islam could be associated with financial reasons. Poverty and exclusion of the Roma community in Pazardzhik has led some experts<sup>8</sup> to the conclusion that “social radicalisation” can be more accurate in explaining developments in this particular neighbourhood. As one respondent from academia noted, except for the charismatic informal preacher Ahmed Mussa, the rest of his close circle of followers did not have a deep understanding of the religious doctrine of Salafism.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, there have been very few cases of Bulgarian nationals being arrested in the country for offences related to Islamist radicalisation. One man of Syrian descent with a Bulgarian passport was

<sup>3</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

<sup>4</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

<sup>5</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

<sup>6</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; online interview with female representative of the academia conducted online on 15 February 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted online on 15 February 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

apprehended on suspicion of being a high-ranking member of IS and of financing its activities through trade in illegal tobacco products (Georgieva, 2017). In 2019, a 16-year-old boy from Plovdiv was detained after police found handmade bomb components in his home (Bnt.bg, 2019). He had reportedly fallen under the influence of IS online.

## FACTORS FRAMING RESPONSES OF FAR-RIGHT RADICALISATION

In contrast to the relatively circumscribed threat of Islamist radicalisation, far-right extremism in Bulgaria has become increasingly dynamic in recent years. Diverse actors engage in far-right rhetoric or acts, including political parties, non-partisan organisations and informal groups such as skinheads and football hooligans (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Far-right extremists have inflicted injuries and even death on members of minorities (Legalworld.bg, 2018). Civil society has been particularly vocal in emphasising the threat of far-right radicalisation.<sup>10</sup> While a number of respondents from law enforcement and the judiciary recognise the threat of far-right radicalisation,<sup>11</sup> few measures targeted towards primary prevention or more systematic sanctioning of far-right violence such as hate crimes have been undertaken (Stoyanova & Dzhekova, 2019). One reason for this is the notion among representatives of institutions that the far-right lacks mobilisation potential towards violence.<sup>12</sup> Problems in the registration, classification and investigation of potential crimes with discriminatory motives greatly complicate accurate assessment of the scope of the phenomenon (Dzhekova et al., 2017). At the same time several respondents agreed that there is widespread normalisation of far-right rhetoric in Bulgarian society: “While religious radicalisation is something that many people fear without clear reason, far-right radicalisation is part of everyday life and people get used to it as something normal. Children also get used to that.”<sup>13</sup>

A change in government also resulted in lack of political will to systematically assess and tackle far-right radicalisation.<sup>14</sup> The last parliamentary elections of 2017 resulted in the entry of the far-right coalition Patriotic Front (PF) in the governing coalition, which marked the first time the far right became a decisive factor in government. The PF has attempted and partially succeeded in the introduction of a number of legislative proposals targeting religious and ethnic minorities, which have been condemned by experts and minority communities as discriminatory and populist (Paunova, 2019). These include since 2016 a ban on public wearing of niqabs, proposals for a legal definition of “radical Islam” in the Criminal Code (Offnews.bg, 2017) and the draft Strategy for Roma Integration.<sup>15</sup> A respondent

<sup>10</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 8 February 2021.

<sup>11</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security on 25 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>12</sup> In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>13</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Project Concept for Changes in the Policy for Integration of the Gipsy (Roma) Ethnicity in the Republic of Bulgaria. Available at: <https://www.strategy.bg/PublicConsultations/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=4289> [Accessed July 2021].

from law enforcement commented that the Strategy “except for purely populist is also dangerous.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, while the Islamist radicalisation threat has stagnated,<sup>17</sup> the far right is particularly dynamic, with the rhetoric and tactics used by far-right actors evolving considerably and moving away from violence and towards more veiled influence tactics, especially with the proliferation of online disinformation in recent years. As a respondent from the security services noted:

“For sure there is no longer a hard core of far-right extremists focused on and gravitating towards the football fan clubs. This thing does not exist anymore for maybe four years. There is a significant change in the profile of members, and the characteristics which are cited in different research differ substantially. There are almost no members with educational deficits or even criminal past.”<sup>18</sup>

Illustrative of this shift is the vocal presence since 2018 of conservative Christian actors, supported by far-right and ultra-nationalist actors, who have successfully spread misinformation online, gathering enough support to influence policy-making. The debates around the so-called Istanbul Convention and the proposed Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 showcased how the instrumentalisation of Russian propaganda and fake news by the emerging nexus of conservative Christian organisations, far-right political parties and non-partisan organisations can gather momentum online, resulting in protests and ultimately achieving the goal of derailing policy reforms (Leshtarska, 2019; Karaboev & Angelov, 2018).

### **Box 1. Opposition to the Istanbul Convention and the Strategy for the Child 2019-2030**

2018 saw fierce debates and protests against Bulgaria’s ratification of the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the so-called “Istanbul Convention”). The translation of the original text of the document brought about the lack of a specific equivalent for “gender” in the Bulgarian language, which was ultimately translated as “social sex” (Darakchi, 2019). This translation was taken by critics to mean that the Convention is trying to undermine biological sex through the introduction of a third sex and ultimately is promoting transgenderism (Ibid.). A number of organisations and experts have disputed these claims (For Our Children Foundation, 2018).

A year later in 2019, the Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 sparked a similar negative reaction. The main argument of opponents was that the Strategy allows for much easier extraction of children from their homes by social services, supported by Western-funded NGOs. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and other experts, including a former head of the State Agency for Child Protection, have disputed these claims, noting that as in the previous Strategy extraction of children from their home is only possible after a court decision

<sup>16</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>17</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security on 25 February 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

(Svobodnaevropa.bg, 2019). The misinformation further alleged that children would be sent to live in Norway in the homes of gay couples. This resulted in unrest and children being withdrawn from school by concerned parents, mainly in Roma settlements in the district of Sliven (Milcheva, 2019). The rumours were spread by protestant and evangelical churches (Valkov, 2020).<sup>19</sup> As an investigation by the *Capital* newspaper showed, very similar arguments were used in opposition to initiatives for children's rights in Russia and Ukraine (Milcheva, 2019).

A key factor in the activities against both documents was the Society and Values Association (SVA) (Karaboev & Angelov, 2018; Darakchi, 2019), which has ties to conservative international Christian organisations like the World Congress of Families, which lobbies against legal abortion and LGBTQI rights. In Bulgaria, the organisation is associated with the Apostolic Prelom Church. On the issue of the Convention and the Strategy for the Child, the SVA received support from the following actors (Leshtarska, 2019):

- Protestant denominations, the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and the Christian Reformist Party as well as informal Christian pastors.
- Far-right politicians in and outside the government, including Angel Dzhambazki, a member of the European Parliament from the far-right governing party IMRO and that of the infamous "migrant hunters", Petar Nizamov.
- Far-right activists like the organiser of the "March for the Family" – an opposition to the annual Sofia Pride.
- An advisor to the President and a member of the Strategic Council of the President.<sup>20</sup>
- PR of the Ministry of Defence, close to Defence Minister and Vice Premier Krassimir Karakachanov (Vaksberg, 2019).

The nexus between conservative Christian organisations and far-right actors, as well as their use of misleading information to spread panic, is considered a radicalising dynamic, albeit of a more subtle nature, by civil society representatives in Bulgaria<sup>21</sup> as well as some government officials.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, official measures to tackle the misinformation around the policy documents have been circumscribed to official positions in defence of the documents. Ultimately, the proposed Strategy for the Child was withdrawn by the Prime Minister and the Istanbul Convention was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court (Boyadzhiev, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>20</sup> The President of Bulgaria is generally considered as having pro-Russian sympathies. See Bedrov (2018).

<sup>21</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>22</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR P/CVE PROGRAMMING

A key contextual factor shaping P/CVE responses is the way institutions perceive the role of primary and secondary prevention of radicalisation and whose responsibility it is. While purely operational and technical measures foreseen in the Strategy on Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism 2015-2020 that facilitate the work of law enforcement such as the creation of video surveillance registry have been mostly completed,<sup>23</sup> prevention remains insufficiently updated despite being an important component in the Strategy and subsequent Action Plans<sup>24</sup> and largely recognised by interviewees:

"No, there is no development, which is concerning, as 'softer' ministries like the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour and Social Policy are more in the side-lines compared to law enforcement bodies. When it comes time to account for [measures taken as part of] the Action Plan we toss it around like a hot potato as we are uncomfortable with it."<sup>25</sup>

Where prevention activities have been undertaken, they have usually been aimed at awareness-raising and capacity-building of practitioners, mostly from law enforcement. Training has also been provided for juvenile delinquency services<sup>26</sup> and the prison administration.<sup>27</sup> However, the heavier focus on Islamist radicalisation and more specifically on Roma is evident in at least one such initiative aimed at training law enforcement (see Box 2). There is also a lack of dedicated deradicalisation, rehabilitation and resocialisation programmes for (former) offenders,<sup>28</sup> mainly due to the low number of convicted extremist offenders.

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One important problem hindering more comprehensive implementation of the Strategy is the fact that no specific funding has been allocated.<sup>29</sup> Activities on countering and prevention of radicalisation are usually carried out in the context of projects supported by foreign donors, most notably the European Commission (EC). However, even donor funding can be used in a potentially controversial way as the case of the Mol project has demonstrated. Even more broad initiatives that can still be considered as general prevention of radicalisation have suffered from poorly targeted funding. As a representative of civil society has noted, EU money for Roma integration in Bulgaria is spent inappropriately and inefficiently.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>24</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 17 February 2021.

<sup>25</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of Education and Science conducted on 29 January 2021.

<sup>26</sup> In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Within several EU-funded projects, for example: <https://www.integra-project.org> [Accessed July 2021].

<sup>28</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security on 25 February 2021.

<sup>29</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 15 January 2021.

<sup>30</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia on 11 February 2021.

### Box 2. EU-funded project on prevention of radicalisation among law enforcement

An example of institutional PVE responses that target the Roma population is a project implemented by the Ministry of Interior and specifically the MoI Institute of Psychology. In 2020 the Institute realised an EU-funded project focusing on expanding the expert capacity of members of the Ministry charged with the prevention of aggression, corruption and radicalisation.

One component of this initiative was strengthening early identification and prevention of radicalisation. Research was conducted among nearly 1,000 institutional stakeholders, including experts from the Ministry, along with members of Roma communities in several Bulgarian cities. A major aspect of this research was the identification of factors that could lead to religious radicalisation, particularly among Roma. On the basis of the research results, the Ministry conducted a series of trainings among police officers who work directly with Roma in the field. Based on the results of this research, the Ministry tailored the trainings in such a way that the trainees could more easily grasp the importance of the multidimensionality and interplay of radicalisation drivers.<sup>1 31</sup>

This component of the project was very strongly criticised by Roma CSOs. The Citizens for Rule of Law and Democracy Coalition addressed an open letter to the EU Commission claiming that EU funds have been used in discriminatory ways and have resulted in further stigmatisation of the Roma community in Bulgaria by treating the community as a potential extremist threat (Bnr.bg, 2020).

Related phenomena such as hate crime, football hooliganism, racism, discrimination and xenophobia have not been in the focus of the dedicated P/CVE strategy, but are approached within a broader scope of policy themes such as crime, education, protection of human rights, diversity, social policy, and integration. Tackling football hooliganism, for example, has been mainly geared towards preventing violence between rival football clubs (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Some representatives of law enforcement, juvenile delinquency services and the judiciary acknowledge the connections between football hooliganism and far-right extremism.<sup>32</sup> However, other police representatives consider far-right extremism and football hooliganism to be separate issues despite significant overlap identified in studies and numerous attacks against different minorities, including LGBTQI people (Btvnovinite.bg, 2013): “The aggression of the football hooligans is aimed at supporters of rival football clubs, not against [people with] different sexual orientation.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021.

<sup>32</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor’s Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>33</sup> In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.



This separation of the issues is also obvious in cases where institutions different from law enforcement work with football hooligans, such as juvenile delinquency services. Despite the consensus that youths are a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to radicalisation, there are no avenues for an approach not dominated by law enforcement or correctional approaches.<sup>34</sup> As long as the issue is seen as related only to sports, the local juvenile delinquency bodies can work on such cases. Once there are indications of radicalisation, the case moves to the purview of law enforcement or security services: "We work with cases of football hooliganism for example. The Law on Countering Juvenile Delinquency foresees the administration of a correctional measure. In terms of radicalisation, however, we have no course of action since it happens in a completely different way – its surveillance can only be carried out by SANS and the Juvenile Crime sector of Mol."<sup>35</sup>

The poor implementation of the P/CVE Strategy and the lack of its renewal after 2020 is generally seen to reflect the lack of political priority given to radicalisation in the country, while key institutional actors continue to see P/CVE as the main prerogative of the security actors. At the same time, respondents were generally positive about cooperation between CSOs and institutions<sup>36</sup> and among institutions themselves.<sup>37</sup> Such cooperation is said to take place: 1) when dealing with related (and less sensitive) topics where the relevant stakeholders have more expertise; 2) with regards to security and criminal justice responses;<sup>38</sup> or 3) within project activities.<sup>39</sup> More active implementation of the strategic framework can lead to a strengthening of cooperation between institutions in all aspects of countering and preventing radicalisation.

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A central factor shaping current institutional responses to radicalisation is the fact that the understanding and framing of what radicalisation is or is not differs among the stakeholders interviewed, and the boundaries are often blurred. A policy-maker at national level argued that any rejection of official rules should be seen as radicalisation, such as violence on the part of members of the Roma community against state employees or doctors or, more generally, law-breaking behaviour by certain ethnic groups.<sup>40</sup> Violent antigovernment protests have also been mentioned as a form of radicalisation, along with the rejection of vaccination and the spread of conspiracy narratives in relation to child and gender policies that prompted parents to withdraw their children from school.<sup>41</sup> Disinformation campaigns, hate speech and conspiracy narratives affecting societal behaviour as described above (albeit not violent) coming from the far-right spectre have been framed as

<sup>34</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 19 February 2021; In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

<sup>35</sup> In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021.

<sup>37</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the State Agency for Child Protection conducted on 15 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for Child Protection conducted on 22 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 19 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>38</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>39</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for Child Protection conducted on 22 January 2021.

<sup>40</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

radicalisation by most civil society actors. At the same time, the ideological underpinning of some far-right actions (e.g., by football hooligans) is not being recognised as such by some institutional actors. Some civil society stakeholders used the term “social radicalisation” as opposed to religious radicalisation to stress that religion is not the main driver and that domestic radicalisation differs significantly from the “Western” concept of Jihadist recruitment. Meanwhile, religious resurgence among some minority communities has often been conflated with radicalisation, especially among law enforcement institutions. All this raises an important question as to whether the concept of radicalisation, violent or not, a contested term in academic debates as well, is helpful in the Bulgarian context for setting clear priorities for policy and facilitating a common understanding of what phenomena are to be tackled, by whom, and with what measures. A more holistic understanding of prevention among practitioners is also needed, which puts at the centre resilience-building at an early stage, instead of preventing violent attacks.

## DRIVERS

### RELIGION

Government representatives stressed that religion often acts in combination with other drivers, especially lack of education, sense of isolation and search for identity.<sup>42</sup> "For sure, [religious] factors do push towards such processes, but are they the sole factors?... It is much easier to recruit a supporter if the person in question is uneducated, does not have a perspective and is frustrated by [the presence or lack thereof of] statehood and the attitude towards them."<sup>43</sup>

Institutional responses vis-à-vis religion as a driver of radicalisation have predominantly addressed radicalisation among Muslims, especially in segregated Roma communities. At the same time, the role and meaning of religion and religious resurgence as part of broader and more complex identity dynamics is little understood (such as trends of religious conversion of some Roma communities towards Evangelism or towards Islam – and Salafism more specifically) (see Mancheva & Dzhekova, 2017).<sup>44</sup>

Representatives of CSOs and academia believe that radicalisation among Roma Muslims is overstated, and that religiosity is often wrongly conflated with radicalisation: "What I've seen in Pazardzhik are religiously deeply confused people. I have interviews with tens of people in the villages around Stolipinovo and Pazardzhik who are Muslims and believe in saints, light candles, eat pork, drink alcohol, and, you see, we say that they are radicalising. It simply isn't true. We as state and society are absolutely incapable of identifying this [...] These are not Jihadists."<sup>45</sup>

There is recognition among both state bodies and non-governmental actors that Muslim communities in Bulgaria are not homogeneous and some communities are more susceptible to risk than others:<sup>46</sup> "Bulgarian Muslims are not a base for radicalisation; rather, there is a renouncing of such ideas. But the Muslim community is not homogeneous and there are groups that are more prone to such influences, which live in more isolated regions and whose self-perception is in contradiction with the societal perception of their ethnic identity."<sup>47</sup>

Religiosity and low level of education are often discussed together by institutional representatives as factors of vulnerability among the Roma community: "Especially in Roma ghettos, people are quite uneducated and this contributes to their being easily manipulated on religious grounds. This should

<sup>42</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 19 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

<sup>43</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>44</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 15 January 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021; Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

<sup>47</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

not be ignored.”<sup>48</sup> According to a representative of a Roma CSO, however, “in the Roma community religiousness has always been strong. Everyone needs to identify with something bigger and that’s a fact.”<sup>49</sup>

Respondents noted that religion as a driver for radicalisation could be enabled or disabled by three other contextual elements: Islamic education abroad;<sup>50</sup> the role of the Chief Muftiate as important and positive;<sup>51</sup> and the monitoring of Muslim gatherings at risky places by the security services.<sup>52</sup>

A consistent point among representatives of the civil society, but also emphasised by two respondents from the judiciary, is that religious “radicalisation” can happen not only among Muslim groups but also along Christian religious lines; examples were given of the detrimental influence of some protestant denominations among the Roma but also on society as a whole by way of misinformation campaigns and narratives in relation to children’s rights (“the new child strategy will have your children taken from you”), domestic violence (“the Istanbul Convention will allow gay marriages”), etc. This has reportedly caused “radical” behaviour among members of society (e.g., Roma parents rushing to take their children from school after rumours they would be taken from them and given for adoption or even trafficked to Norway).<sup>53</sup> This is to be seen not in the classic sense of violent radicalisation, but as fuelling a social polarisation process that can seriously undermine trust and have a corrosive effect on democratic institutions.

## ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

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Interviewees primarily perceive poverty in terms of being a factor that could possibly lead to radicalisation, but not specifically as a driver of certain institutional responses in and of itself. This general tendency aligns with the emphasis of stakeholders on whether poverty is a cause for radicalisation or not. In this sense, although stakeholders agree that poverty and economic deprivation are contextually important for radicalisation trends in different parts of the country, not all stakeholders consider this factor to be decisive in one’s commitment to radical views and/or violent actions. On the one hand, some institutional representatives are reluctant to support the asserted importance of poverty as a driver of radicalisation, mostly citing examples of poor communities across the country that have demonstrated as negligible to no tendencies for radicalisation and violent actions.<sup>54</sup> Along these lines, stakeholders working with children prone to radicalisation attest that “poverty is not a criterion” and that “more and more children with a stable financial status” are susceptible to the influences of radical ideas (including from the far-right

<sup>48</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor’s Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Online interview with female representative of the social services conducted on 19 January 2021.

<sup>51</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021; Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

<sup>52</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

<sup>53</sup> In-person interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 17 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor’s Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>54</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

spectrum).<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, different experts highlight that economic deprivations are a key component underpinning marginalisation, which is more of a primary risk factor for potential radicalisation and as such should be properly addressed and incorporated into the institutional approaches to tackling VE.<sup>56</sup>

Experts link poverty to radicalisation in the context of its interdependence with social marginalisation, ethnicity and undereducation. Institutional representatives and academics identify such factors as a multi-dimensional driving force of marginalisation and exclusion, which in turn create vulnerabilities towards radical ideologies. Of key importance in the interpretation of poverty as a factor for radicalisation is ethnicity. The data reveals that the interviewed institutional representatives and academic experts associate poverty with radicalisation almost exclusively when it concerns members of the Roma communities in Bulgaria. These communities supposedly become religiously radicalised in their search for financial/material support and as a way to acquire a sense of belonging in a generally alienating social environment. Thus, when analysing the impacts of poverty on institutional responses to radicalisation, one cannot treat it separately from ethnic vulnerabilities.

### TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

Territorial and social inequalities are generally recognised by the interviewees as contributing and/or enabling factors of radicalisation rather than as drivers or direct causal factors. Their impact may vary with respect to the different manifestations of radicalisation – adding to the risk of some forms of radicalisation, while having less significant implications for others. Territorial and socio-economic inequalities, as contributors to radicalisation, form a complexity of factors, which are not only intertwined with one another, but are also in an interplay with other drivers such as poverty, religion and political discontent. There are three main territorial and social factors that emerge as having a considerable potential to play a part in radicalisation processes: diminished state presence in certain areas and territories, social marginalisation/exclusion, and low educational status (discussed separately as a recurring theme across drivers below), including educational segregation along ethnic lines. The impact of these three factors on institutional approaches and responses to radicalisation may be inferred from the data that states withdrawal and social marginalisation could have significant and far-reaching implications for institutional responses to radicalisation with respect to the territories and groups they affect.

The withdrawal of state institutions from certain areas, coupled with their “ghettoisation”, emerges as a factor of radicalisation. The areas in question are primarily isolated neighbourhoods and territories that are predominantly inhabited by members of the Roma minority. Such territories can be found in various parts of the country, but the majority seem to be located in Southern Bulgaria, particularly in the provinces of Plovdiv (including the town of Asenovgrad), Pazardzhik, Stara Zagora, and Sliven (including the town of Nova Zagora).<sup>57</sup> With respect to Northern Bulgaria, the province of Pleven has been cited as a prominent

<sup>55</sup> In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021.

<sup>56</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 11 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

example.<sup>58</sup> The degree of state withdrawal varies and may include, but is not limited to, a lack or diminished presence of police authorities, medical services, educational infrastructure, social services, as well as road and communal infrastructure.<sup>59</sup> This diminished state presence could be understood as a form of territorial inequality. It increases the risk of radicalisation by exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and search for alternative “systems” to regulate social relationships. It engenders distrust in state institutions, which leads to an alienation of the inhabitants of these territories from state institutions and official norms, rendering the former more vulnerable to succumbing to alternative structures, including radical religious structures.<sup>60</sup> In this respect, one institutional representative contended: “In fact, one of the causes of radicalisation and this alienation is the fact that state institutions have left these territories.”<sup>61</sup>

Several stakeholders also noted that, even within the same Roma “quarters”, internal social inequalities and processes of segregation are deepening and becoming more visible.<sup>62</sup> While recent research shows that the overall educational status of the Roma population is increasing along several key indicators, the inequality gap between different Roma communities is widening.<sup>63</sup> When asked which Roma “quarters” are more resilient, an academic expert noted: 1) smaller quarters; 2) more people have secondary, vocational or high education; 3) the state has not abandoned them; 4) there is no ghettoisation. Educational segregation was also mentioned as an important factor to be considered when grasping the overall context and vulnerabilities of these localities.<sup>64</sup>

State withdrawal appears to have far-reaching consequences for institutional responses to radicalisation with respect to these isolated territories, as prevention measures may not sufficiently capture the areas where there is diminished presence of state institutions.<sup>65</sup> For example, initiatives implemented by the Ministry of Education aimed at enhancing digital literacy and critical thinking skills that contribute to individual resilience do not reach the vast majority of children and young people in these territories, although they are the main target group.<sup>66</sup>

Stakeholders maintain that in many territories where state institutions are barely present there is a “rupture” between the inhabitants of these areas and the established socio-political order.<sup>67</sup> This generates uncertainties, which reinforce existing stereotypes and prejudices against the members of this marginalised group, including on the part of state officials (Ibid.). It is these prejudices that could be the underlying

<sup>58</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>59</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 11 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>61</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

<sup>62</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 15 February 2021.

<sup>63</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021.

<sup>64</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021.

reason why, as one institutional representative points out, in responding to (perceived) threats of radicalisation in territories and areas where historically there has been diminished institutional presence, the state tends to prioritise the establishment of structures of the internal security apparatus.<sup>68</sup> The cases of the towns of Asenovgrad and Nova Zagora are examples of this securitised state response: with a view to countering the spread of religious and political far-right radicalisation among the members of the Roma communities in these towns, the presence of police officials was intensified. However, even at the time there were government representatives who recognised that this approach was ineffective and that what was needed in reality was increased institutional presence, in particular of offices of the social services.<sup>69</sup>

Social marginalisation and social exclusion also emerge as factors that may play a part in radicalisation processes. The experience of social marginalisation/exclusion produces certain psychological effects, such as feelings of underprivilege, rejection by the larger society, and lack of development opportunities. This leads to an increased susceptibility to the messages of those that propagate radical ideas, but seemingly offer a recourse where the psychosocial needs of marginalised/excluded individuals (for a sense of belonging, recognition and respect) can be met.<sup>70</sup>

It has been noted that marginalisation influences state responses to radicalisation and VE through the stereotypes it engenders and perpetuates; namely, it has the effect of limiting the focus of counter- and prevention measures to marginalised groups in a stigmatising way.<sup>71</sup> For example, a CSO representative emphasised that marginalised groups were more readily perceived as being at a higher risk of radicalisation: “We more easily ‘spot’ radicalisation in groups, such as Bulgarian Muslims and the Turkish and Roma minorities, than we recognise radicalisation that is taking place in [majority groups, such as adherents of] Protestantism, Orthodoxy.”<sup>72</sup>

## DIGITAL LITERACY AND THE INTERNET

The Internet and social networks have been pointed out by government stakeholders as a key channel for radicalisation of youth in Bulgaria.<sup>73</sup> However, there is little academic or practical knowledge on how digitalisation affects youth radicalisation. Non-governmental actors especially stress the role of the Internet in spreading far-right ideologies and misinformation campaigns about children’s rights by protestant organisations.<sup>74</sup> Bulgarian Roma working in Western Europe and returning home are considered more exposed to online propaganda when abroad.<sup>75</sup> According to a civil servant in a child protection agency, the Internet is a factor for more intelligent youths with more opportunities, as they usually are children

<sup>68</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021; Online interview with female representative of academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 17 February 2021.



whose other more basic needs have been met.<sup>76</sup> Representatives of the national police gave an example of a youth in Plovdiv who allegedly was assembling an improvised bomb in 2019 and was radicalised via the Internet.<sup>77</sup> A key actor with a role in this respect identified by both social workers and law enforcement is the Chief Directorate for Combating Organised Crime under the Mol,<sup>78</sup> as it is in charge of monitoring dangerous online content.

As regards digital literacy, most civil society stakeholders agree that these skills are lacking among youths: "Attracting the interest of the youngsters happens through social networks and if they are unable to recognise such behaviour, there is danger. They do not have such skills."<sup>79</sup>

A government official noted that the Ministry of Education's programmes on digital literacy and critical thinking had to a great extent failed to reach vulnerable communities, while inequalities related to digital literacy were to become insurmountable.<sup>80</sup> CSO representatives also stressed the issue of digital literacy and critical thinking deficits and the lack of prevention and resilience-building approaches in schools, not only vis-à-vis vulnerable communities such as the Roma, but in the general youth population.<sup>81</sup> A Roma civil society activist mentioned a pilot programme focusing on "digital intercultural lessons" involving youths, social mediators and parents as a step in the right direction.<sup>82</sup> An education ministry official said that the shift to online classes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic may have actually increased the level of information among parents and youths.<sup>83</sup>

A recent study by the Centre for the Study of Democracy, funded by the EC Internal Security Fund Police (ISFP) programme project YouthRightOn,<sup>84</sup> focused specifically on youths (aged 14-19) and their vulnerabilities towards far-right narratives online and shed light on the opportunities to effect positive change through a combination of digital and offline engagement and communication campaigns (CSD, 2021). The analysis shows that factors influencing the receptiveness of young people towards far-right ideas and the acceptance of violence include: exposure to hostile online content combined with its uncritical "consumption", lower level of trust in family and negative self-image, previous exposure to violence (in school or neighbourhood), political discontent and disenfranchisement, need for social belonging through civic activism for some, and lack of knowledge of any positive social engagement channels, among others. Anti-minority narratives are accepted by the majority of young people, especially anti-Roma narratives. While approval of violence is relatively low, it is mainly associated with "vigilantism" against migrants or actions against Roma.

<sup>76</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the State Agency for Child Protection conducted on 15 January 2021.

<sup>77</sup> In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

<sup>78</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for Child Protection conducted on 22 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 8 February 2021.

<sup>80</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 17 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>82</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>83</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of Education and Science conducted on 29 January 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Available at: <https://youthrighton.com/> [Accessed on July 2021].



The data served as a baseline for designing a social media campaign “Find Another Way”<sup>85</sup> engaging young people around positive/alternative messages and building core social and emotional skills in school in order to render youngsters more resilient to manipulation and hostility and empower them to take constructive action. The results of the campaign are largely positive, yet such efforts remain isolated and unsustainable if not integrated within a systematic multi-agency approach to resilience-building (CSD, 2021).

### POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

Political grievances and religion are the two groups of drivers of radicalisation that best illustrate the distinction between institutional perceptions and attitudes of civil society and academia. According to most stakeholders, including representatives of the Mol, a problem in Bulgaria is that far-right ideologies have been quietly mainstreamed in institutional behaviour:<sup>86</sup>

“With the entry of patriotic formations into government these things occurred normally. Society no longer perceives this as radical behaviour and for them it is rather normal. And this is very frightening. It is real radicalisation and it is a quiet and dangerous form. This is not a terrorist act, a military coup – it is something much more frightening and subtle.”<sup>87</sup>

In the words of a civil servant from the Mol, the far right is present in the rhetoric of some political parties, which in turn reflects upon law enforcement.<sup>88</sup> The affinity for a “hard approach” expressed in the rhetoric of some political parties is linked to nostalgia for old Communist times and may in fact be linked to a renouncement of the current model as too liberal. A representative from academia agreed: “This is [the former] State Security, these are no ‘patriots’. The ‘patriots’ have one mask for the crowd and an entirely different mask for behind the scene.”<sup>89</sup>

In Bulgaria, as in many other European countries, far-right radicalisation is often linked to football hooligans. But one specific feature of football hooliganism in Bulgaria is that hooligans are often used by political parties for political goals (paid involvement in protests, sabotaging antigovernment protests, sparking ethnic conflict) (Dzhekova et al., 2016). This suggests that institutional responses to far-right radicalisation expressed in football hooliganism may be reluctant. A law enforcement representative argued that during the COVID-19 crisis, football fans participated in protests because they honestly wanted to be allowed to attend football games, while dismissing any linkage with fans of a recent attack on LGBTI people in Plovdiv, which was reported by the media to have been organised by supporters of a local football team: “Football hooligans’ aggression is directed at supporters of other teams, not at those with different sexual orientation... Rather, what we see is a conservation of these groups, they are in stagnation.”<sup>90</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Available at: <https://anotherway.bg/> [Accessed on July 2021].

<sup>86</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 8 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 8 February 2021.

<sup>88</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

<sup>89</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

<sup>90</sup> In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

In a similar vein, a security expert claimed that potentially vulnerable communities did not feel oppressed vis-à-vis their political rights, and this is one reason why they do not go on the radicalisation path.<sup>91</sup> This line is challenged by interviewees from CSOs active in Roma matters:

“Of course, the lack of political representation is a factor [for radicalisation]. If there was such a mechanism, when confronted with a problem to seek a solution via representation in the institutions it would be considerably safer. This is well observed in the Turkish community. The fact that it has its representation in the MRF party turns out to be extremely significant. For the ordinary Turk it is much more achievable, when there is a problem in the community, to join the political life because he has a party and representation, rather than to seek participation in extreme religious movements.”<sup>92</sup>

### CULTURAL FACTORS

According to institutional representatives, Bulgarian society is traditionally very tolerant and peaceful – hence resilient to radicalisation –, which is exemplified by the century-long peaceful coexistence of different religious groups in the country.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, the majority of interviewed state representatives shared that in their opinion the Roma people have a “different way of life” which can be a factor, though some insisted that Roma communities are not homogeneous or that culture interplays with other factors as well.<sup>94</sup> Civil society and academia representatives argued that VE has no direct link to the cultural characteristics of a group: radicalisation manifests itself in minority groups as well as in the majority; in the majority it is far more widely expressed, yet society sees it much more easily in minorities due to prejudice.<sup>95</sup> An example was given with the non-payment of monthly electricity bills in the largest Roma neighbourhood in Plovdiv, Stolipinovo, which is often considered behaviour typical of the Roma communities. When the local grid operator invested in personalised meters, the percentage of bills paid rose sharply, and currently the regular payment rate is higher than in many Bulgarian neighbourhoods.<sup>96</sup> Experts agreed that the cultural and identitarian complexities of minority communities are not well understood or accepted among state institutions or society at large, and this is reflected at multiple levels, including, for example, in the national census, which does not provide flexibility for multiple self-identifications along lines of nationality, ethnicity and religion.<sup>97</sup> According to academic experts, these perceptions of the majority, also seen in present-day institutions, can be traced historically:

“The fear of the complex identity dates far back. If we turn back to Ferdinand I [of Bulgaria, reign 1908-18] and the laws he adopted then – repressive laws against Roma and Muslims. Actually most Roma neighbourhoods in the cities were destroyed. The fear of Roma radicalisation dates back to these times,

<sup>91</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

<sup>92</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>93</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor’s Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>94</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021.

<sup>95</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021.

<sup>96</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 8 February 2021.

<sup>97</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

when suffrage was taken from these people, and orders were issued for de-concentration of their neighbourhoods.”<sup>98</sup> “The Roma people were discriminated against by the Ottoman Empire. They didn’t have the millet status, as Orthodox people in the Balkans did – they were in between, even if they did adopt Islam, Muslim Roma did not have equal rights with other Muslims. This is a practical cultural policy that is not linked to Islam... This, in my opinion, continues today, it’s a continuity of the last centuries.”<sup>99</sup>

Culture as a factor for perceptions of radicalism is not only attributed to local minority groups. A representative of the judiciary gave an example of how, following the crisis with mixed migration flows from the Middle East and Africa towards Western Europe in 2015 and onwards, perception of migrant groups as having a different culture may have led to radicalisation among nationalist and far-right groups in Europe.<sup>100</sup>

## TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

Institutional and organisational perceptions of transnational dynamics as drivers of radicalisation go along several main lines: the rise of IS and the movement through Bulgaria of foreign terrorist fighters returning to Europe; the 2012 Sarajevo terrorist attack as an example of an actual foreign involvement in a terrorist act; conservative disinformation campaigns coming from Russia and protestant factors in the United States; Salafist influences over Bulgarian Roma working in Western Europe and the influence of Turkey on Bulgarian Muslims. Some stakeholders stress that Bulgarian Muslims are generally not vulnerable to detrimental international influences; there is no risk for Bulgaria from returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and from Russian misinformation campaigns. Government stakeholders generally recognise the impact IS has had internationally, including potential influences in Bulgaria:

“With all these processes happening around us, we cannot be isolated. Many of those preachers who come here actually come from Western Europe, they are recruited in Austria, France, Belgium, and there they provide refuge to [Bulgarian] Roma who go for work there and include them in some groups. They give them shelter, food, find jobs for them with the idea that these people will have some commitments.”<sup>101</sup> “The conflicts in the Middle East [are a factor]. While some years ago there were foreign fighters’ movements towards the conflict zones, now the problem comes from their return and interaction with local vulnerable communities.”<sup>102</sup>

Representatives of the Prosecutor’s Office noted that global terrorism trends are inevitably echoed in Bulgaria: the migration wave that passed through Bulgaria after 2015 and the movement of FTFs through our territory has led to a rise in the religiously-motivated crimes linked to terrorism.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

<sup>100</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor’s Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

<sup>101</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor’s Office of Bulgaria conducted on 19 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor’s Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

The role of Turkey for the Bulgarian Muslim communities has also been discussed by respondents:

"The MRF [Movement for Rights and Freedoms, the ethnic Turkish party in Bulgaria] and the Chief Mufti Office has been linked to Sunni Islam and the official policies of Turkey [...] that is since 1908 when Bulgaria declared its independence... All Islamic communities in the country and the Chief Mufti Office are to be subordinate to the supreme Islamic leader... Turkey recognises our independence, but at the expense of these Islamic principles."<sup>104</sup>

Another line of potential impact of transnational dynamics on Bulgaria is the conservative misinformation campaigns about liberal values:

"The lines of influence are two – Russia and America. In the last few years they have worked in sync on a disinformation war that is going on and is not receding in the future. They are linked on the grounds of religion [Christianity]."<sup>105</sup> "Specifically regarding the [campaign against the ratification of the] Istanbul Convention, we had really bad luck. The bad luck was in that the interests of Russia, Trump and Catholicism aligned... and the sabotage [was successful]."<sup>106</sup>

There were government stakeholders with an alternative opinion vis-à-vis the impact of transnational factors in general. They noted Bulgarian Muslims were generally immune to harmful (extremist) influences, there was no risk from foreign fighters passing through Bulgaria on their return to Western Europe and that there was no proven role of Russia in antiliberal campaign.<sup>107</sup>

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## EDUCATION AS A RECURRING THEME ACROSS DRIVERS

There is widespread consensus among the interviewees that a low level of education is an important vulnerability factor when it comes to potential radicalisation.<sup>108</sup> This has two dimensions that respondents emphasised to a varying degree – the low level of education among marginalised minority groups but also the overall low quality of education and its effect on society as a whole. More specifically, it is seen as an enabling factor of radicalisation – correlating with a diminished ability to think critically, thus rendering an individual more easily manipulated and making it easier for radical ideas to take hold.<sup>109</sup> Institutional stakeholders perceive the low level of education as the main source of vulnerability related to education, including illiteracy and an inability to speak Bulgarian, among the Roma population.<sup>110</sup> At the same time,

<sup>104</sup> Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

<sup>105</sup> Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021.

<sup>106</sup> Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

<sup>107</sup> In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security conducted on 25 February 2021.

<sup>108</sup> Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the State Agency for National Security conducted on 25 February 2021.

<sup>109</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.; Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021; Online interview with female representative of the social services conducted on 19 January 2021.

<sup>110</sup> Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021; In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021; Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

experts from academia and civil society critiqued as a major vulnerability the systematic and long-standing inability of an unreformed educational system to develop the cognitive abilities and independent thinking of society at large, which fuels polarisation and susceptibility to simplistic narrative frames and worldviews.<sup>111</sup>

An interesting example demonstrates how the increased vulnerability to misinformation of a Roma community in the town of Blagoevgrad, brought about by the low level of education of its members, led local institutions to step up inter-institutional cooperation. A health mediator working with local Roma communities pointed out that it was only the inhabitants of the most marginalised of the three Roma neighbourhoods in Blagoevgrad that were influenced by narratives disseminated by radical opponents of the draft National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030, arguing that children would be taken away from families for arbitrary reasons.<sup>112</sup> The average level of education in the so-called “Predel mahala” (or “End Quarter”) is very low, which the interviewee believed was a critical factor increasing vulnerability to such messages. If left unaddressed, this could have led to parents to withdraw children from school. In seeking to prevent this outcome, the health mediator’s institution utilised and built upon existing mechanisms of cooperation with educational mediators. Furthermore, it successfully employed techniques for bolstering counter-propaganda narratives, thus reassuring the parents of their children’s safety in educational institutions and assuaging their fears.<sup>113</sup>

Education, or lack thereof, was mentioned as a factor in far-right radicalisation, too: “I see the low level of education as leading to participation in such [far-right] groups... To me, education is the number one factor [...] Over the years, the figure of the teacher started to fade, because of low pay.”<sup>114</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021; Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021; In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of Education and Science conducted on 29 January 2021; In-person interview with four male police representatives conducted on 12 February 2021.

<sup>112</sup> Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of Education and Science conducted on 29 January 2021.

## CONCLUSION

Bulgaria's response to countering and preventing radicalisation has been influenced by both international and domestic factors, as well as the interplay between them. Strengthening of counter-terrorism focusing mostly on the neutralisation of security threats emanating from abroad was prompted by the terrorist attacks in New York on 11 September 2001 and subsequent attacks in Europe. The 2012 Sarafovo bus bombing, the only terrorist attack in recent Bulgarian history, also resulted in strengthening of the counter-terrorism framework. Subsequent intensification of terrorist acts in Europe in the 2010s and especially in 2014-2016, coupled with the emergence of IS and the foreign fighter phenomenon, brought the issues of radicalisation and VE centre stage. As the understanding of radicalisation in the EU evolved in response to these events and the need for a wider, whole-of-society approach including prevention was recognised, this expanded the scope of the Bulgarian Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020). However, while the Strategy establishes a comprehensive whole-of-society approach to countering and preventing radicalisation, its prevention pillar in particular has not been updated in practice.

Bulgaria's Muslims have been largely resilient to the entry of more conservative representations of Islam, with only isolated instances of Islamist radicalisation emerging in the most marginalised Muslim Roma communities. The fact that Roma communities have exhibited the most publicised case of Islamist radicalisation has led to an undue focus on this community as a potential breeding ground for extremism. Importantly, deep-rooted prejudice among the majority Bulgarian population against the Roma community has coloured the institutional response to potential radicalisation. On the other hand, the far right has been more dynamic, including a variety of actors espousing far-right rhetoric (including as part of the government since 2017) online and offline. Since 2018, a tendency towards more covert means of influence, mainly over social media campaigns and disinformation, has been observed in the far right. While some institutional representatives recognise far-right radicalisation as a risk, the general tendency is to consider it a less pressing threat, having limited potential to trigger violence. In contrast, civil society has warned that the mainstreaming and normalisation of far-right narratives and more decisive action against hate speech and hate crimes need urgent attention, while considering Islamist radicalisation as driven by factors such as poverty and social exclusion. The presence of far-right parties in government has meant that there is no political will to focus on far-right extremism.

The understanding of macro factors among institutional and civil society actors differs along key aspects, while aligning along others. The Internet is considered by all stakeholders as an important medium for radicalisation, which is very potent considering the lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills among significant portions of Bulgarian youths. Poverty and social exclusion are accepted by different stakeholders as background factors contributing to vulnerability, especially to Islamist radicalisation. On the other hand, some respondents have also underscored that poverty is not a necessary pre-condition, emphasising that far-right radicalisation is often displayed by youths who are not disadvantaged and many other marginalised communities have not shown any tendencies towards extremism. Territorial inequalities, translated in the absence of state institutions, social exclusion and educational underachievement, are considered as important factors behind potential radicalisation in

disadvantaged communities. In addition, the encapsulation of these communities and the absence of state institutions can make it particularly difficult for targeted prevention efforts to reach them. Transnational dynamics are considered to have the potential to affect radicalisation trends in Bulgaria.

When it comes to religion, institutional representatives tend to more often emphasise it as a driving factor behind radicalisation, although religious resurgence is often conflated with radicalisation. In contrast, respondents among civil society consider it as a secondary factor, while emphasising the more central role of far-right ideology and populism, marginalisation and social exclusion. Another dividing line is the political grievances factor, which is largely discounted by institutional interviewees. In contrast, civil society considers that addressing political grievances, lack of political representation and supporting informal authoritative figures in marginalised communities can be important to preventing the spread of extreme narratives.

More importantly, there are varying and sometimes conflicting norms on what radicalisation is. One of the key findings of this research is that a shared, evidence-based understanding of the concept of radicalisation, how it is manifested and what drives it is yet to be developed among state and societal institutions. Academic research on the issue is scarce, while there is practically no expert-led public or academic debate. This is also reflected in the way different stakeholders interpret the role of different macro factors as drivers of potential radicalisation and violent extremism. This is a major obstacle for setting clear priorities for policy and facilitating a common understanding of what phenomena should be subject to intervention, by whom and to what end. There is a strong need for a wide and evidence-based stakeholder debate on this issue in order to develop a common and more holistic understanding of radicalisation and the role of society as a whole in prevention to avoid the implementation of P/CVE measures that will only fuel societal polarisation.

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## INTERVIEWS

### State institutions

Online interview with female representative of the social services conducted on 11 January 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 13 January 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the Ministry of the Interior conducted on 14 January 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the Council of Ministers conducted on 15 January 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of the child protection services conducted on 15 January 2021.

Online interview with female representative of the social services conducted on 19 January 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the child protection services conducted on 22 January 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of the Ministry of Education and Science conducted on 29 January 2021.

In-person interview with four police representatives (all males) from Ministry of the Interior, conducted on 12 February 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of a national body dealing with juvenile delinquency conducted on 17 February 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the security services conducted on 25 February 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 19 February 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

In-person interview with female representative of the Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria conducted on 22 February 2021.

**Civil society organisations**

Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 21 January 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 8 February 2021.

Online interview with female representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 12 February 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 17 February 2021.

Online interview with male representative of a civil society organisation conducted on 22 February 2021.

In-person interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

Online interview with male representative of the academia conducted on 11 February 2021.

Online interview with female representative of the academia conducted on 15 February 2021.

# ANNEX





## ANNEX

### DRAFT QUESTIONNAIRE FOR WP4 REPORT: GENERAL QUESTIONS TO BE ADAPTED TO INDIVIDUAL COUNTRY CONTEXT

#### I. SET OF INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

1. Describe the work you do in your institution.

*Note: this is an introductory question for personal interviews and can be shortened for focus groups as a way for participants to introduce themselves.*

2. What are some ways in which your institution works on countering VE?

*Note: this question introduces the topic of VE and sets the frame for the rest of the interview/focus group.*

3. Thinking about the development of your institution OR institutions in your country, are there any changes in patterns of dealing with VE over the past decade OR over a period of time?

*Note: introduction to the country context and other institutions working on VE. Most of this can be found through desk research as well.*

4. Can you give a recent example of how you and your institution dealt with VE through your daily work?

*Note: this question makes the interviewee think about recent examples and institutional practices and applied norms from his/her daily work. Take note of the verbs used to describe institutional action.*

#### II. SET OF QUESTIONS RELATED TO INSTITUTIONAL INTERACTIONS

5. Does your institution get more support from the government OR from donors OR from i  
international partners by emphasizing VE in its work? What kind of programmes, supported by  
international organisations OR foreign governments OR international donors, do you work on?

*Note: this question emphasizes the importance VE in an institution's work, its cooperation networks, and also serves as an introduction to set of questions related to institutional interactions. The second part of the question aims to map interactions with international institutions (it does not apply to all stakeholders).*

6. How often do you interact with people from other institutions, who are involved in actions related to C/PVE? Can you describe one of these interactions.

*Note: this question looks into power relations within institutions related to C/PVE. It also assesses institutional networks that deal with the issue.*

7. What institutions in your country are most likely to unofficially sympathize with proponents  
OR ideas of VE? Can you think of any examples of institutional practices?

*Note: this is a tricky question, but we think it is worth asking, as some stakeholders who are more open might mention institutions that undermine efforts at C/PVE in their countries. Please adopt to your situation and security concerns for the researchers. Do not press anyone to answer this question.*

### III. SET OF QUESTIONS TO ASSESS THE MACRO-DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION

*NOTE: please include at least one question for each driver of VE at the macro-level. If you wish you can include several questions, or sub-questions for each driver.*

8. In your work on VE, are you more active in certain parts of your country? What makes these territories distinctive? Is it possibly some form of inequality (socio-economic, political, other)? How do you interact with individuals from this part of your country in your daily work?

*Note: territorial inequalities driver. Adopt this question to your individual country context.*

9. Does your institution consider poverty and under development to be an entry-point OR driver of VE? Can your institutions help address this? Are some institutions OR actors (in your country or from abroad) the cause of economic deprivation?

*Note: economic deprivation driver. Adopt this question to your individual country context, especially the part about institutional causes of economic deprivation.*

10. Can you think of examples of political ideologies that oppose your societies core principles and values, and that are relevant in your country? Are they directed towards your institution, the government, or other institutions you are familiar with? Do they result in VE as a form of protest, a way to disseminate messages and sway public opinion? Can such political ideologies be described as political opportunity structures that rely on VE? If such political ideologies OR political grievances exist, how do they affect the behaviour of your institution towards VE?

*Note: political grievances driver. There is a lot to unpack in this question, but the focus is on political ideologies as the basis for political grievances and VE, not so much on religion. It is necessarily different in each country so try to adopt it as best as you can.*

11. Does your institution consider that norms and behaviours particular to a specific culture can become a driver of VE?

*Note: cultural factors driver. Adopt this question to your individual country context, taking note of potential securitisation of cultural differences.*

12. Do you think that violent interpretation of religion exists in your country? Are there certain institutions that emphasize radical interpretation of religion? How does your institution interact with these "radical" institutions? What practices OR procedures does your institution adopt in dealing with radical interpretation of religion in general?

*Note: religion driver. This question address is a large and significant driver; therefore, it might be necessary to expand it to a given country context. Be sure to include views on radicalised institutions and on radical interpretations of religion in general. Ask about practices, norms and procedures.*

13. Is a lack of digital literacy potentially a threat to the rise of VE in your country? Does your institution include digital literacy in its programs AND initiatives as a measure to counter VE?

*Note: digital literacy driver. Adopt this question to your individual country context.*

14. Do you consider threats and challenges of VE to be transnational? From where do transnational threats come from and by which process? Describe the ways you interact OR cooperate with institutions from countries in your region OR from abroad. Are norms and values an obstacle to transnational cooperation on C/PVE?

*Note: transnational dynamics driver. This question is very specific to each individual country and international context, so it is necessary to adopt it a lot. The proposed question serves only as an introduction.*





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.



The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, under Grant Agreement no. 870772