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ON MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS

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

KOSOVO

Lulzim Peci, Agon Demjaha

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Lulzim Peci, Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development
Agon Demjaha, Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development

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CONTENTS

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[1]. 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.

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[1] 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[2].

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[3].

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[4].

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[5].

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

[3] In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

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

[5] 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[6].

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[7].

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[8]. 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[9]. 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"[10].

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

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

[8] 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.

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

[10] 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)[11].

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[12], 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[13]. 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[14]. 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[15].

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[11] In-person interview with a male Senior Police Official, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

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

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

[14] 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.

[15] 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[16], particularly among certain segments of the Serb community in Kosovo, is no less a threat[17].

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)[18]; in programmes of deradicalisation in prisons[19]; 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[20]. 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[21].

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[16] In-person interview with a male Senior Police Official, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

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

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

[19] In-person interview with a male Senior Official, Ministry of Justice, Pristina, 31 March 2021.

[20] 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[22].

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[23]. 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.

[21] 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.

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

[23] 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).

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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[24]. 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[25].

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[26]. 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[27].

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[28].

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

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

[25] In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

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

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

[28] 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[29].

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[30]. 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[31]. 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[32]. 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[33].

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[34]. 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[35]. Instead, their approach was holistic and covered all municipalities (Ibid.). At the local level, the efforts of municipal authorities

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[29] Online interview with a female Civil Society Representative, Pristina, 21 April 2021.

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

[31] 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.

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

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

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

[35] 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[36]. On the other hand, the leadership of BIK has been rather focused on the areas most affected by VE[37].

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[38]. 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[39]. Certain websites/networks still transmit lectures with extremist content of the same imams imprisoned for extremist activities[40]. Information technologies are increasingly being used for propaganda, which has clearly served as an amplifier for dissemination of radical extremist messages[41].

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[42]).

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

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[36] 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.

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

[38] In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

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

[40] In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Gjilan, 29 March 2021.

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

[42] In-person interview with a male Senior Municipal Official, Gjilan, 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[43]. 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[44].

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[45]. 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[46]. 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.).

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

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[43] Online interview with a female Civil Society Representative, Pristina, 21 April 2021.

[44] In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

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

[46] 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[47]. 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[48].

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[49]. 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[50].

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[51].

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[52]. Various religious organisations, often with a humanitarian veil, primarily from the Middle East and Turkey, have invested

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[47] In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

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

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

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

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

[52] 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[53]. Initially, the biggest number of recruiters and propagandists was not from Kosovo but from North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Sandzak of Serbia[54].

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[55]. 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[56].

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

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[53] 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.

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

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

[56] 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[57].

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[58].

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[59]. 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[60]. The MIA has created different online programmes to raise the awareness of citizens, especially of secondary and high school students[61].

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

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

[58] 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.

[59] 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.

[60] In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

[61] 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[62]. 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[63]. 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[64].

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

[63] In-person interview with a male Senior Police Officer, Pristina, 23 March 2021.

[64] 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

Online interview with a female representative, Pristina, 21 April 2021.

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.

CONNEKT

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.