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COUNTRY PAPER
ON MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS

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

NORTH MACEDONIA

Vlado Kambovski, Lidija Georgieva, Naum Trajanovski



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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 2001.¹ 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.

3 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.

¹ 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 Thursday². 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).

² More in Neofotistos (2019).

In 2017, the state revisited its agenda on C/PVE and sought to catch up with the regional state policies 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).³ 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)**.

³ 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.⁴ However, it is commonplace that North Macedonia had successfully cooperated with its transatlantic partners in the global fight against terrorism before 2017⁵. 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.⁶ The **NCCVECT** had heretofore organised several workshops, meetings and twinning activities with the state's strategic partners.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ Besides, it was also stressed that the increased donor's attention to

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⁴ 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.

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

⁶ Online interview with female representative from university, Skopje, 4 November 2020.

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

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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)¹² 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 worshippers” 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 2019¹³, 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 ties¹⁴, while the Christian radical interpretations are yet to be researched.

¹⁰ Online interview with female representative from a university, Skopje, 29 October 2020.

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

¹² For an overview, see Qehaja & Perteshi (2018).

¹³ See Helsinki Committee’s 2019 Annual Report on Hate Crimes in North Macedonia and the Annual Report for Human Rights in North Macedonia.

¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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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”¹⁸, 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 through 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

¹⁵ Online interview with male representative from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Skopje, 17 November 2020.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ As per the questionnaire filled in by a female representative from a civil society organisation, Skopje, 21 December 2020.

¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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 sector²², 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,

¹⁹ Online interview with male representative from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Skopje, 17 November 2020.

²⁰ 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).

²¹ 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.

²² 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).²³ 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.

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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)²⁴.

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

²³ 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).

²⁴ 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.

11

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).

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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.²⁵

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.

²⁵ 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 Herzegovina²⁶, 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.

²⁶ 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.



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

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

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

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



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