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Macro approaches to the study of radicalisation and violent extremism in MENA and the Balkans

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This publication includes two comparative studies of the Balkans (Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia) and the MENA region (Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia). The comparative studies are based on the country reports[1] findings on the macro level factors influencing violent extremism, radicalisation and the institutional approaches addressing them.

The CONNEKT research framework orients the studies towards the investigation of seven drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in each region: religion, territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political grievances, cultural factors and leisure opportunities, digital literacy and transnational dynamics. These drivers thus cover diverse areas of influence including religious, social, economic and political. However, the studies also explored other factors, depending on the findings of the field, such as education, which is developed as a potential driver at this level. The reports were informed on data provided by a review of policies in each country, as well as interviews conducted with state actors, civil society representatives, academia and representatives of international organizations.

The findings of the two regional reports are divided into the seven drivers and also reflect wider trends and differences in defining and addressing violent extremism and radicalisation in each region. At the macro level of analysis there is important diversity in regard to the influence of the drivers, as well as synergies. In terms of synergies, both regions share the reliance on security structures in order to tackle violent extremism and radicalisation and are insufficiently focused on softer measures and on expanding cooperation with civil society and academic institutions. The securitisation of the issues has led to stricter policies which particularly effect youth and the social media in the MENA region, and it has contributed towards considerable difficulties in the understanding of the phenomena and their prevention.

In terms of the drivers of violent extremism and radicalisation, there are several important differences, such as the significance of territorial inequalities particularly noted in the MENA region, while economic deprivation is a driver in both regions. The Balkan region also displays forms of radicalisation that are not shaped by religion, but also by political ideologies. A key conclusion of the reports at this stage of the research is the interconnectedness of the drivers, namely some drivers become influential at the presence of another driver, for instance religion and territorial inequality, or economic deprivation and territorial inequality. This already highlights the complexity of the phenomena and the need to research further into the effect that these drivers have among the communities themselves, which the CONNEKT project will develop as part of its meso and micro level research.

The two regional reports also seek to draw larger lessons in terms of the regional significance and role of violent extremism and radicalisation. First to note is how both regions are effected by shared events, such as the wars in Syria and Iraq and other global trends and developments. This has led to the second shared development which is the influence of international bodies on both the approaches the countries take and the

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[1] Kapidzic, D. (ed)l. 2021. Drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in light of state dynamics in MENA and the Balkans. *CONNEKT*. https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/D4.1-COUNTRY-PAPERS-ON-MACRO-DRIVERS.pdf

understanding that they have of the issues. In the Balkans, a shift towards softer measures of P/CVE was noted, particularly in regard to the work of CSOs which could also be noted in the MENA region. This includes approaches that also aim to shift the words and the contexts that are used in preventing radicalisation particularly when working with youth.

Lastly, as part of the CONNEKT project Work Package 7 (WP7) the regional reports aim to ultimately contribute towards the creation of informed policy recommendations which take into account macro, meso and micro level factors which can aid in addressing the challenges posed by violent extremism and radicalisation. The recommendations emanating from the two regional reports highlight the need for the inclusion of other actors into the fold; localized approaches to the needs of the context where they are applied; the use of innovative and soft measures towards prevention including cultural programs and the use of digital tools and a 'whole of society' approach; the development of more informed and concise definitions of violent extremism and radicalisation in the creation of policies and laws; and the need to tackle different drivers in prevention, including economic and political grievances.

MACRO APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM: A VIEW FROM THE MENA REGION

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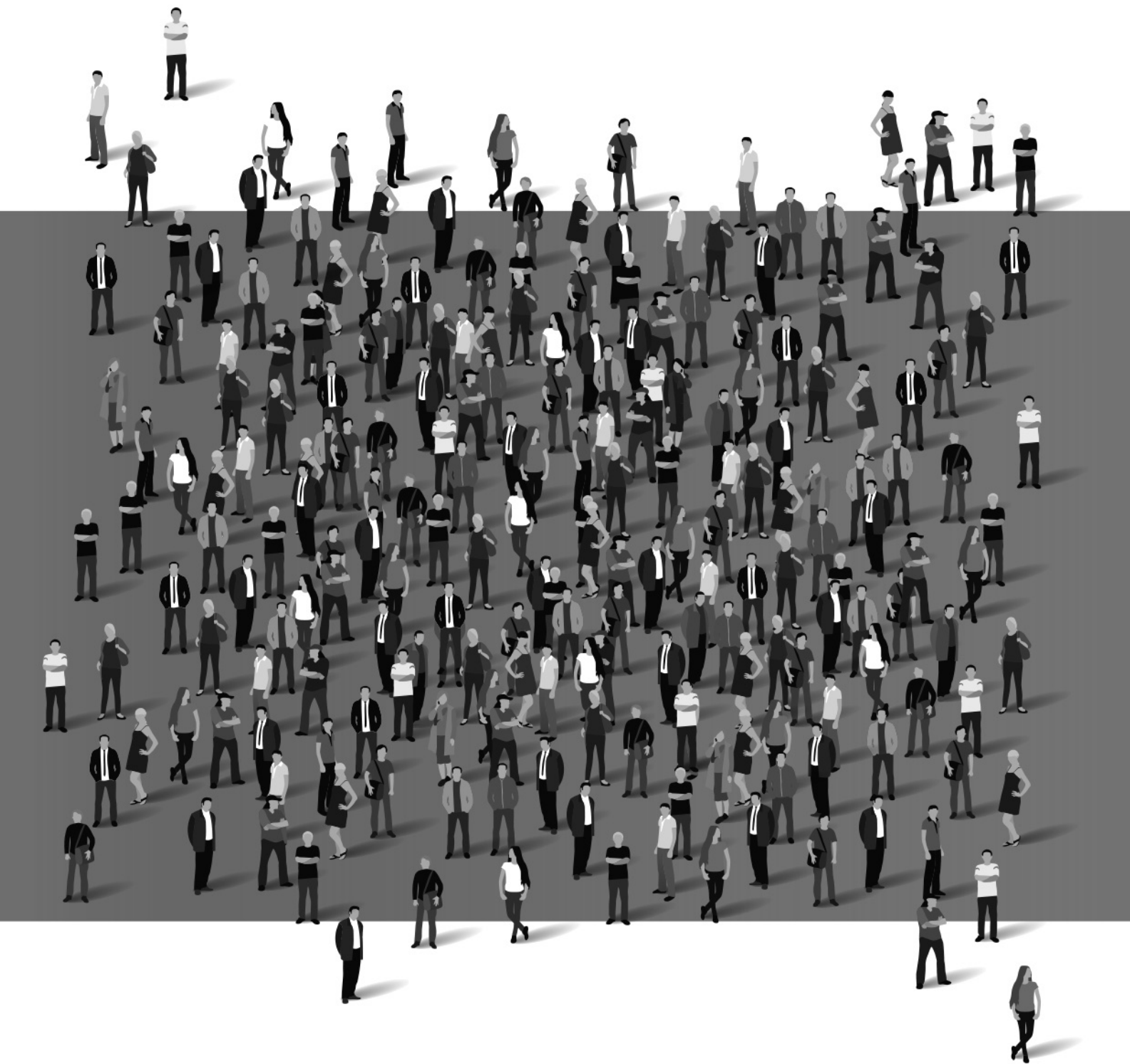
INTRODUCTION

This regional report is the summarised comparative result of research work on the phenomenon of violent extremism (VE) at the macro level. This empirical work has been carried out in three Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, which are part of the CONNEKT project –Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan– with the aim of understanding the context of the emergence of radicalisation and VE in relation to the seven pre-identified drivers: religion, economic deprivation, political grievances, culture and leisure opportunities, digital literacy, territorial inequalities, and transnational dynamics. The objective is to make a comparison between the three countries of the study in order to note the differences in terms of the actors, such as: state institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs), academics involved in the process of combating radicalisation and VE, as well as the different state and non-state strategies adopted by them.

The importance of the comparison between these three countries and the drivers is to find similarities and differences between them and to place them within a broader context that goes beyond the official state discourse. The comparative method provides a general overview of the MENA region, how states deal with the issue of radicalisation, and how other non-state actors integrate the process of combating radicalisation and VE. The study compares the context of VE in societies ruled by different political regimes: the two monarchies where parliament has an important place (Morocco and Jordan), and the democratic system of Tunisia, taking into account that each political model has its own approach to dealing with radicalisation and VE, and may thus reveal different nuances in the approach and the phenomena itself. In addition, this comparative study aims to capture the different elements of radicalisation at the regional level in order to extract potential policy recommendations with both national and regional implications on the prevention of radicalisation and VE.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research is a qualitative approach involving interviews with stakeholders that affect the macro level, namely the institutional and state-level actors affecting the prevention and management of radicalisation and VE. Researchers in the three countries under analysis interviewed three types of actors: state institutions, CSOs, and academics. We have outlined all the interviews conducted and the implementation techniques in the following table:

Country	Interviewee	Number of interviews conducted	Method of interview
Tunisia	• State institutions • Academia • Civil society	9 6 5	In-person: 9 In-person: 5 / Online: 1 In-person: 4 / Online: 1
Morocco	• State institutions • Civil society	12 9	In-person: 11 / Phone: 1 In-person: 6 / Phone: 2 / Online: 1
Jordan	• State institutions • Local non-governmental institutions • International non-governmental institutions	8 9 4	Online: 7 / In-person: 1 Online: 9 Online: 4

INSTITUTIONAL AND CIVIL SOCIETY UNDERSTANDING OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE MENA REGION

Depending on the fieldwork in each country, stakeholders are similar in the selection of participants involved in the process of dealing with VE, but each institution deals with the issue according to its ideological or political orientations, including religious ideology in the case of Jordan. This section highlights the differences and similarities in the approaches and understandings of radicalisation and VE by state institutions, on the one hand, and CSOs, on the other. The analysis shows significant divergences between the countries but more particularly between state institutions and civil society actors in the three countries.

STATE INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR OFFICIAL STRATEGIES

The responses of governmental institutions presented in each section related to the issue of radicalisation show that the political system of each state greatly influences the adoption of strategies, especially in relation to issues linked to security and stability of the territory. In the three countries studied, the dominant approach to countering VE is a strict security approach, which primarily impacts the nature of state strategies at the macro level, and which prioritises the development of power centres such as the police and the military.

The strategies pursued by state institutions focus on amending laws, as in the case of Tunisia, and reforming religious laws like in Morocco. The experience of Jordan shows that religion is also involved in a global strategy to fight terrorism. State actions conducted by institutions include the creation of the Research and Studies Department, such as "Tarabott: Cohesion to Prevent Violence", in Tunisia, and the piloting by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in both Morocco and Jordan of a series of seminars, forums and school days on the issue of preventing violent extremism.[1]

As for the official governmental actors, we can identify two main categories in the three contexts:

THE SECURITY STRUCTURES

A security structure is a major actor in each state, creating policies and strategies to counter VE. However, it should be noted that the different security strategies in all three countries are inaccessible to other non-governmental actors such as CSOs.

The formulation of political strategies to combat VE in the three countries studied has two dimensions: the internal political circumstances of the country, and the conflicts in neighbouring countries that impact the phenomenon at the national level, requiring states to double the efforts in dealing with VE.

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[1] Programmes adopted to combat VE in Morocco and Tunisia

The Jordanian state endeavours to find a position in the region in an attempt to combat VE and continues to be challenged by the footprint left by the continuity of regional instability on the country's internal security. Looking back on its conflictive neighbourhood with Syria and Iraq, Jordan has embarked on a strategy that seeks to address these challenges through international cooperation and its intervention in the fight against terrorism. In the Moroccan case, the state has taken several decisions regarding the policy of fighting and preventing VE, in line with a perceivable policy shift after the Casablanca bombings[2] in 2003, considered by most Moroccans as an alarm signal at the risks posed by VE. What sets the strategy of the Moroccan state apart from other countries is its international scope: both its participation in the management of conflicts and security risks, as in the case of Mali and Libya, and the openness to international organisations and its assistance in the construction of international policies to fight VE. As a result, Morocco has become an international leader in all institutional efforts in the process of establishing peace in the Sahel region. Tunisia, on the other hand, is currently isolated within the strategy of conflict resolution in the region, as its situation regarding political instability and governmental change in the last decade has "negatively" influenced the accomplishment of an approach to countering violent extremism (CVE). The position of Tunisia in terms of combating VE is thus largely affected by its internal political instability and its failure to build a strong strategy in the process of fighting VE.

All three states have the same obstacles in terms of policy practices in the fight against VE. They have a problem of communication with civil society actors, especially when it comes to security policies. Civil society actors argue that their initiatives cannot be accomplished without the participation of the state, and without openness towards different actors. The communication problem has several causes. In the Jordanian case, the state does not have the ability to define and conceptualise the phenomenon of VE, which leads to weak inter-institutional collaboration. The Moroccan state, on the other hand, considers the phenomenon as a problem related to its territorial security, which results in the state not providing CSOs with enough freedom as to work on the issue of radicalisation. With regard to civil society actors in Morocco, the state collaborates with international programmes and projects supported by international organisations, through the creation of partnerships between ministries, national, and international organisations - an example of this type of bilateralism is the programme *Moussalaha*. (Mouna, Er-Rifaiy and Fadil, 2021), but cooperates less with national civil society actors. In the Tunisian case, it is worth highlighting the complexity of creating a clear institutional scheme because of its internal instability, which again, raises obstacles in inter-institutional communication that further generate a problem of information exchange between actors within and between institutions.

STATE INSTITUTIONS DEALING WITH RELIGION

As indicated in the three studies, religion takes a primary place for state institutions, particularly in the cases of Jordan and Morocco. Religion has become a major factor of each state strategy because the religious framework influences most state actions, especially in the treatment of VE. The state is the primary administrator of any issue related to VE; respectively led by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in both

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[2] The attack on the Moroccan city Casablanca in 2003. For more details:
https://www.jeuneafrique.com/137508/politique/attentats-de-casablanca-le-16-mai-2003-un-11-septembre-marocain/

Jordan and Tunisia. However, in Morocco, there are several state agencies under the direction of the ministry that deal with radicalism because of the opening to national and international non-governmental actors.

The strategies applied by these actors vary in the three cases. The state is taking Islam as a way of solving the phenomenon of VE in the whole MENA region but with some distinctions. Firstly, regarding the organisational framework, the Tunisian state, with every change of political leadership, is unable to maintain the sustainability of its programmes to fight against and prevent VE. These challenges add to internal organisational conflicts, such as internal communication and traditional institutional practice. Tunisian CSOs are funded by donors and not supported by the state, while the latter applies a securitised approach. Moreover, as previously mentioned, Jordan and Morocco consider the phenomenon of VE a problem that should remain a state secret and thus, such information should not be transferred to other national or international non-governmental institutions. The Moroccan state has made its fight against VE its trademark to show the place it occupies in the global scene.

The issue of radicalisation is mainly processed in the three countries by state structures such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This institution attaches great importance to the phenomenon of religion in terms of mobilising a tolerant approach against the extremist speech (Mouna, Er-rifaiy and Fadil, 2021). Their work consists of organising forums and seminars with young people to find out what are the current problems related to VE, and to create a space for exchange around cultural, religious, and educational matters.

The Moroccan state, for example, has founded religious institutions to deal with the issue of radicalism and VE through training, counselling and digital monitoring, with the aim of spreading "a moderate and tolerant Islam", as in the case of the Rabita Mohammadia of Ulemas initiative. Jordan has adopted a path that has followed a similar pattern but always from a religious ideology and through structures that aim to promote tolerance against the radicalisation (Mhadeen, Feisal and Stikovac, 2021).The three experiences show that Islamic religion is paramount in all states strategic plans but the clearest difference lies in the duration and continuity of each programme, related once more to the political conjuncture of each country, and also to the functioning of each political system since political instability affects the sustainability of programmes.

CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGIES FOR P/CVE IN THE MENA REGION

Non-state organisations claim that their presence in the overall strategy to combat VE remains narrow. Their representatives argue that they see their intervention limited to counselling or to cultural training of youths as the state does not give opportunities to access information nor to openly discuss issues related to VE.

The support offered by international donors in the framework of the programmes in the three countries does not lie in the implementation of the action plans but in the weakness of some institutions. In the Tunisian case, for instance, the implementation of programmes bring about political clashes because international organisations such as "Search for Common Ground" that fund international programmes reduces local organisations autonomy in deciding whether to apply a locally-driven or the donors imported model of action.

The three countries analysed face the same situation in terms of lack of communication and known challenges to unify strong strategies, as well as the development of institutional practices. They also face challenges in the implementation of associative projects in the field of P/CVE. All programmes are marked by internationally driven approaches that aim to keep peace on a regional scale. On the other hand, Morocco is challenged by a total absence of inter-institutional communication between the state and civil society, thus NGOs have taken the initiative to work on the issue from many angles: legal, social, and cultural training, and through motivating young people towards political participation, which is also practised in Tunisia.

In the three countries similarities exist at several levels. Firstly, they all show a lack of cooperation between state and CSOs due to the securitisation of the issue, which places it within the state's mandate on territorial security. We also find a differentiation of each actor's vision, as there are divergences between the state actors (political and security vision) and non-state actors (socio-cultural vision), which has become an obstacle to cooperation and exchange. In addition, another similarity is the lack of human and financial resources, which gives great leverage to donors who aim to achieve their own objectives and agendas, that not taking into consideration the opinion or needs of beneficiaries. The three countries are also part of international programmes and seek to become key players in the so-called "War on Terror". They also cooperate with each other, as in the case of Jordan and Morocco, which worked together to set up a training programme for imams on CVE.

TREATMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The study on radicalisation within CONNEKT focuses on young people and their presence in the set of strategies carried out in each context. This requires the phenomenon to be examined in relation to the different contexts of youths in each country.

Young people have become a category that takes a major place in state and non-state programmes, but it should be noted that this priority does not necessarily represent the effectiveness of the strategies adopted. In the three countries, we have noticed that some programmes target youth in the process of training on the issue of violence: they seek to analyse the phenomenon and allow the expression of young voices in the struggle against violence and VE. However, there is a difference in terms of the types of programmes and their sustainability. In Tunisia and Morocco, some institutions have carried out initiatives where young people are present, such as the national survey on youths in Tunisia, and have also invested on the training led by religious institutions in Morocco. In addition, there have been opportunities for young people's expressions and proposals on recommendations to fight against the phenomenon of VE.

The states have tried to address the issue of VE but in a different way from civil society. Before presenting the institutional treatment of youths in relation to VE, we will critically deal with the following questions:

- How does the state choose the target youths for its violence-related programmes? Is the youth category present in all programmes? And how does civil society interact with them?

a. Criteria for selecting youth beneficiaries of violence-related programmes

From institutional responses on the treatment of youths, we observe that state strategies implement programmes directly related to them, although youth ministries in the three countries address the issue in relation to violence in an analogous manner. The strategies in the three countries are focused on the causes of violence and the identification of its roots within the framework of common international programmes, in the Tunisian case, as well as the identification of the typology of this violence in Jordan, which deal with domestic violence. In Morocco, youth-related projects also deal with family relationships, which have been used to develop training programmes specifically for youths, led by CSOs, organisations such as the Ombudsman for Democracy and Human Rights, focusing mainly on the field of human rights.

The obstacles to achieve positive results respond to a lack of continuity of these programmes. Non-governmental actors have noted that they do not manage to follow their programmes and the full implementation of their ideas because of the limited resources and the lack of state motivation in pursuing the programmes further. The choice of stakeholders is also a challenge because international organisations choose geographic areas that are marginalised and excluded from public policy, which does not necessarily meet the specific needs of youths in the MENA region. These unmet demands include lack of opportunities to integrate them into the labour market, the absence of a strategy to fight the high school dropout level, and the need for more leisure and cultural activities. In addition, social inequality and injustice increase the risk of youth involvement in violent organisations, particularly among youths who come from disadvantaged socio-economic contexts in some underdeveloped regions.
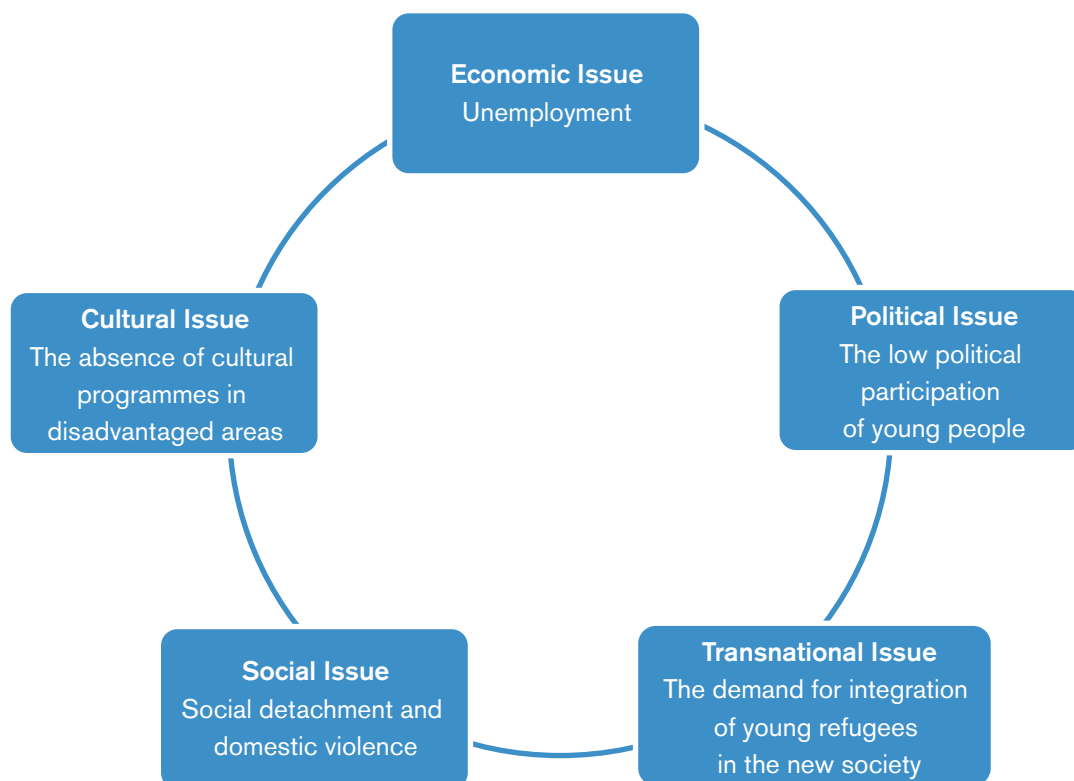
The Moroccan civil society approach involves training on human rights and the participation of some organisations in the state deradicalisation strategies, such as the partnership between the delegation of prisons and non-state social organisations. In the case of Jordan, the state has worked on the same model as Morocco in terms of training imams as active actors in the process of countering VE. On the other hand, in Tunisia, its programmes take the form of forums and meetings, in addition to a single study conducted on young people related to VE. As far as crime resulting from VE is concerned, the only actors integrated in this approach are the official institutions that represent units for the reintegration of young prisoners. The challenge shared by the three countries studied in dealing with VE is the delay or absence of institutional communication, which has a direct impact on the monitoring and implementation of activities to combat the phenomenon.

To this we can add the absence of joint actions between programmes targeting youth and other social categories, such as women, which leads to an absence of social cohesion in each country. This poses the question about the future of youths in the MENA region; especially when considering the increased unemployment rates among young people, as indicated in all national reports. The gender issue is also almost ignored, except for some activities carried out within the framework of religious training that deal with the role of women in the emergence and orientation of religion.

The problems that arise from the different approaches involve the absence of identification of youth needs within the local context as opposed to imposed programmes, which reflect more generic strategies. In addition, cultural and educational diversity, which has an impact on the life paths of youths, require programmes to take into consideration territorial specificity in their formulation and also fail to take into account the economic stakes of social exclusion.

The following graph presents the major issues known in the MENA region in relation to youths:

FIGURE 1.   Youth Issues in the MENA Region

Economic Issue
Unemployment

Cultural Issue
The absence of cultural programmes in disadvantaged areas

Political Issue
The low political participation of young people

Social Issue
Social detachment and domestic violence

Transnational Issue
The demand for integration of young refugees in the new society

Own production

DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION AT THE MACRO LEVEL IN THE MENA REGION

Following the approach of the CONNEKT project, this section compares the seven drivers of radicalisation: religion, political grievances, territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, digitalisation, transnational dynamics, and education, cultural and leisure opportunities within each of the three case studies, namely Morocco, Jordan, and Tunisia.

1. RELIGION

Religion is a primary driver when dealing with radicalisation and young people in three countries. What distinguishes the religious strategy in Morocco and Jordan is the history of counter-terrorism. Morocco began by reforming the religious field through the establishment of religious institutions (Mouna, Er-Rifaiy and Fadil, 2021). This approach has several dimensions: educational, ideological, and digital.

The researchers of Tunisia explained the process of radicalisation through religion as "the absence of clear religious references and the collapse of young people's trust in the religious establishment, which was co-opted by the regime" (Chirchi, Ghrib, Kherigi and Aloui, 2021). Several interviewees noted that VE is the result of the misinterpretation of Islam, and the spiritual vacuum in the absence of religious practice among youths. This situation is a consequence of the change of young people's representations to religious institutions through the offering of discourses of tolerant Islam.

The marked transformation is that states try to attract the attention of young people in terms of religion by intervening in religious activities, including the sessions of preaching in the mosques and the institutions of religious higher education, as in the cases of *Al-Zaytounah* Mosque in Tunisia and *Jamia Al Quaraouyine* in Morocco, institutions sharing a similar approach of a moderate and tolerant Islam. A strategy that all three countries have adopted is the dissemination of an antiextremist religious discourse, through discussions with takfirists in Jordan (Mhadeen, Feisal and Stikovac, 2021), or the publication of the works questioning and re-framing extremist discourse in Morocco issued by the Rabita Mohammadia of the Ulemas.

2. ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION AND TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

Actors in the MENA region described the economic situation in relation to the territorial division and inequalities within the countries. The typology of economic deprivation is different from one context to another. Firstly, economic deprivation in Tunisia is the result of unequal investment plans applied in some regions of the country without involving the regions considered as marginalised spaces, such as rural areas. Tunisian CSOs interviewees said that economic deprivation plays a major role in the strengthening

of extremist paths. They further noted that violent acts resulted from an interaction with a case of marginality and exclusion, due to the lack of a balanced development model and the centralisation of investments in a few selected regions.

The high rate of unemployment is a common element in the three countries. The three states have yet to solve this problem in a definitive way, especially with the absence of state control in religious activities, such as preaching sessions in Jordan. On states' approach to economic deprivation problems in the three countries, we can highlight three main issues that lead to the same result:

- In Tunisia, socio-economic marginality and the failure of the development model are major factors that reinforce the individual and collective process of VE.

- In Morocco, the "Initiative National pour le Development Humain" started several years ago but remains very limited in terms of regional development and the nature of projects that it conducts and funds. The state actors argue that this type of initiative does not envision a solution to the problem of radicalisation, which arises because of economic inequalities. However, the programme aims to minimise economic inequalities and fight unemployment among young people, especially those in disadvantaged areas such as the rural ones. The presence of several development institutions does not necessarily solve the economic issues of the country.

- There is a degradation of economic investment plans, which reflects the lack of social responsibility of investors. This degradation leads to the socio-economic exclusion of individuals. In this case, radical discourses are, more or less, a response to social exclusion.

3. THE CULTURAL FACTOR

This factor is not identified as an individual driver in the two country reports from Tunisia and Jordan. In Jordan, institutions are unable to change their traditional practices, which block any initiative for change in the educational and cultural field. In the Moroccan context, the cultural factor appears to be one driver among others in the radicalisation process. Young people become radicalised because they have a sense of inferiority within their communities and because of conflict and daily violence. This manifestation is the effect of the ideology of radical groups, which is passed on to youths through speeches, and takes its legitimacy from the devaluation of young people's role within the various structures, social, economic, political and family, which reinforces their feeling of non-belonging.

- This observation has pushed Moroccan civil society to work with youths and strengthen their capacity, particularly in human rights culture, advocacy techniques, awareness workshops on violence and cultural exchanges. Political parties prioritise the motivation of young people to make them more involved in local politics and the decision-making process.

4. POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

The political aspect is also a major factor in the treatment of VE in the MENA region. Two points must be highlighted: the political systems of Jordan and Morocco represent two monarchies that operate differently.

Jordan tries to solve the problem of radicalism through security and political control at two levels: at the level of the security of the local territory, and the prevention of external risks. What is striking about the process is that the implementation of youth empowerment programmes in the political scenario is far from the general policy on PVE. On the other hand, the Moroccan state is politically present in the management of Islamic affairs, which means there is a strong relationship between politics and religion in order to apply a "Moroccan Islam". This presence is built on security and scholarly foundations that seek to deconstruct the radical discourse and build one new narrative based on the main foundations of the state.

In a different political context, Tunisia has experienced moments of political rupture for several reasons: the change of political leaders and the inability of institutions to renew their practices and strategies. The strategy of fighting extremism has not been established because of the corruption within institutions. In general, the weak construction of a local counterradicalism policy is the effect of several obstacles created by political actors and decision-makers in each country. At the territorial level, young people see themselves excluded from participating in the local political sphere. Additionally, regional disparities impact local political decisions that are not based on individual needs and major socio-economic problems suffered by different social strata.
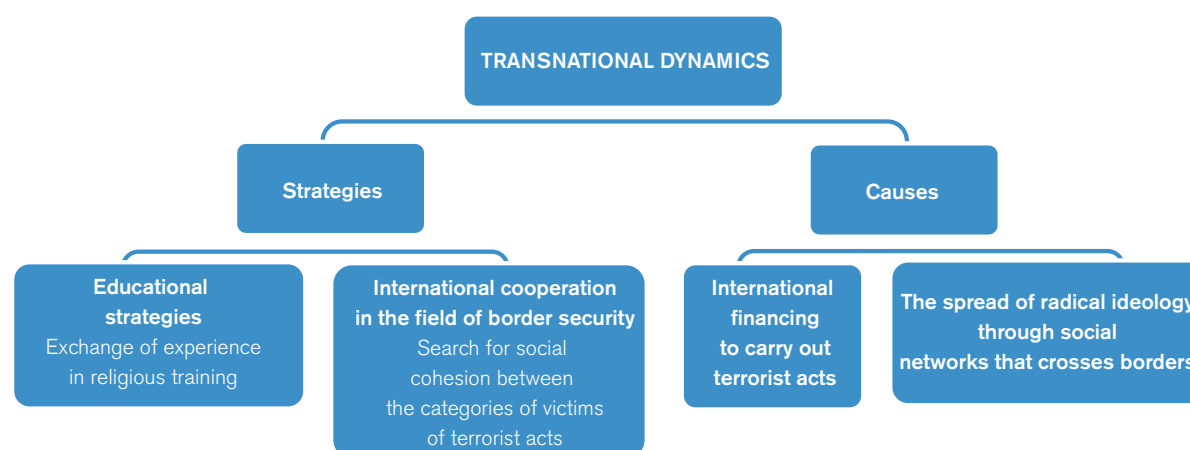
5. DIGITAL CULTURE

The Tunisian researchers confirmed that the radicalisation process is also linked to digital drivers but at an individual level. This reflects the importance of communication within the family. The Jordanian on the other hand, consider that within the lack of digital culture, young people can be radicalised as radical groups develop their tools to attract youths through the instrumentalization of digital platforms. Digitalisation makes it easier for extremists to reach all social groups and motivate young people to join them (Chirchi, Ghribi, Kherigi and Aloui, 2021).

In Morocco, access to digital platforms is not always a factor in radicalisation. In fact, openness on different social networks plays an important role in the accession of young people to radical groups, with the latter developing new techniques to attract members from different social strata. The absence of a digital culture, according to social actors in Morocco, can protect young people from joining radical groups. On the other hand, the permanent use of media by the young potentially increases the risk of becoming a radical individual. It should be noted that the state has not yet created a programme to fight against radicalisation in digital media.

6. TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

This aspect is very important in the analysis of radicalisation. The states from the MENA region attach great importance to transnational relations and dynamics, considering that VE is an international challenge and not a local one. Such understanding is reflected in the combination of efforts brought together by members from the International Community to combat terrorism, which is defined as a security issue in the first place. We have summarised the levels of these dynamics in the following diagram:

Own production

The issue of transnational dynamics is also a point of strength for states to position themselves, as shown by Jordan which, impacted by surrounding conflicts, doubles security efforts outside to prevent the occurrence of terrorist acts inside the country, or Morocco, who participates in the management of conflicts in Africa and supports international security structures after being considered a successful experience in the fight against terrorism. The emergence of radicalism in the region is linked to every crisis, which can hinder the endorsement of collaborative affiliations between MENA countries (Chirchi, Ghribi, Kherigi and Aloui, 2021). At the same time, opening up to successful experiences around the VE strategy can motivate local actors in each country to intervene and build a solid strategy.

7. EDUCATION

This driver is present in countries in different ways, depending on the strategies applied in each context. In the Tunisian case, education is led by religious structures, such as the higher institution of Sharia, which aims to offer religious courses and meetings in the form of forums for the prevention of VE. In the case of Morocco, the state has tried to change educational programmes in its "curriculum reform" plans, a result of criticism from some non-state actors. The reform has targeted Arabic language textbooks and Islamic studies, as well as religious institutions, such as Dar El Hadith Alhassanya, and the curricula of Quranic schools, through:

- The integration of modern programmes such as foreign languages and digital communication tools;
- The exchange with other programmes of seminars and conferences addressing the issue of radicalisation;
- The insertion of specific media programmes, such as the Mohammed VI channel, to broadcast moderate religious discourse and answer citizens' questions;
- The presence of religious institutions in the media through religious education platforms. The presence of education in the fight against VE is scarcely present in Jordan, except for the family environment of "radicalised members" who participate in the process of deradicalisation, which somehow shows that the state does not give priority to radicalisation in its educational programmes outside mosques and institutions of a religious nature.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL COMPLEXITIES

The MENA region has experienced structural transformations, particularly at the political level, such as the "Arab Spring" protests, and the change of political leadership in Tunisia. This situation has had an impact on the sustainability of strategies of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in the region. The obstacles recognised in each country under study that block the process of fighting extremism are mainly internal. In the Tunisian case, the problem of hierarchy within institutions, and the lack of communication explain the inability of actors to develop a unified approach to fighting VE. The problem of institutions is also present in the case of Jordan. An important obstacle is the lack of resources to carry out a strategy to fight against extremism, adding the lack of communication with local actors to properly define the specific problems related to each territory. In Morocco, for instance, state institutions are working on the phenomenon of radicalisation without setting up a participatory approach with the rest of non-state organisations, which limits the state approach to a closed security framework.

Political instability in the region is a consequence of the emergence of some terrorist groups before the emergence of ISIS, which has developed its domination capacities and adhesion techniques, and motivates young people and women to commit terrorist acts within their territory (example of attacks or attempts to carry out terrorist actions in Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco). The participants interviewed were unable to see an approach that can solve the different problems of individuals, such as the improvement of their living conditions.

The void in the policy approach has strengthened foreign donors that are selective in the choice of beneficiaries for their programmes, which discourages participants in these types of programmes. This also gives international organisations and donors the opportunity to develop their own agenda, which may be as limited in its approach as the state intervention and far from the expectations or needs of the beneficiaries. We can also point out that their interest may be more focused on methods that work on VE prevention in their country of origin than on the specific MENA country.

The VE phenomenon has become an exogenous risk, linked to the global development and responses to political crises. In this respect, it should be noted that the work on the macro-level is not enough to fight against a global phenomenon. This complexity is also an obstacle to international cooperation. There are attempts to find a way of cooperating but the state and institutional structures do not allow the success of an international strategic plan to be guaranteed because each society presents its own social, cultural and economic transformations; and a different political functioning, including the lack of resources to establish major programmes.

According to the interlocutors from CSOs, local challenges are indirect factors of radicalisation, especially when it comes to the mismatch between regions, as in the case of Tunisia and Morocco, particularly due to the lack of an active participation of young people in social and political life, as well as the strengthening of the feeling of injustice in the existence of territorial and socio-economic inequalities According to the interviewees, the feeling of exclusion among young people reinforces their capacity to produce a violent act.

We can present two possibilities for successful regional cooperation:

FIGURE 3.   Successful regional cooperation

> **Unifying the anti-extremism discourse in the MENA region**

> **Think about an effective development strategy based on the specific criteria of each territory**

Own production

The major obstacle observed in the three reports is local specificity, i.e., local culture is also a tool for strategic valorisation. Cultural diversity poses a difficulty for strategic actors. On the other hand, they can take it as an added value to adapt equivalent programmes according to the needs of each social category.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON MACRO DRIVERS

Based on the criticisms and weaknesses cited in the three reports, we can outline a set of recommendations that can address all the issues presented. To overcome the obstacles in the strategy of fighting VE in the MENA region, we propose the following recommendations:

- Identify the drivers of radicalisation and analyse them to understand the phenomenon in the local context in order to build good prevention practices;
- State institutions should adopt new perspectives in the field of VE prevention to meet the local and international context and to develop an interactive strategy with different actors;
- Implement strategies based on the specific conditions of each social category, especially youths;
- Consider and encourage the strong presence of women in decision-making through the adoption of a gender perspective;
- The planning of cultural programmes and a space for activities to motivate the participation of young people in social life and leisure activities;
- Communication with different actors to find points of cooperation in the fight against VE at the local and international level;
- Create a digital platform for young people for interactive communication, which will serve as a more open public space for free and creative expression;
- Prioritise economic development plans and motivate economic investments at the local level.

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MACRO APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM: A VIEW FROM THE BALKANS REGION

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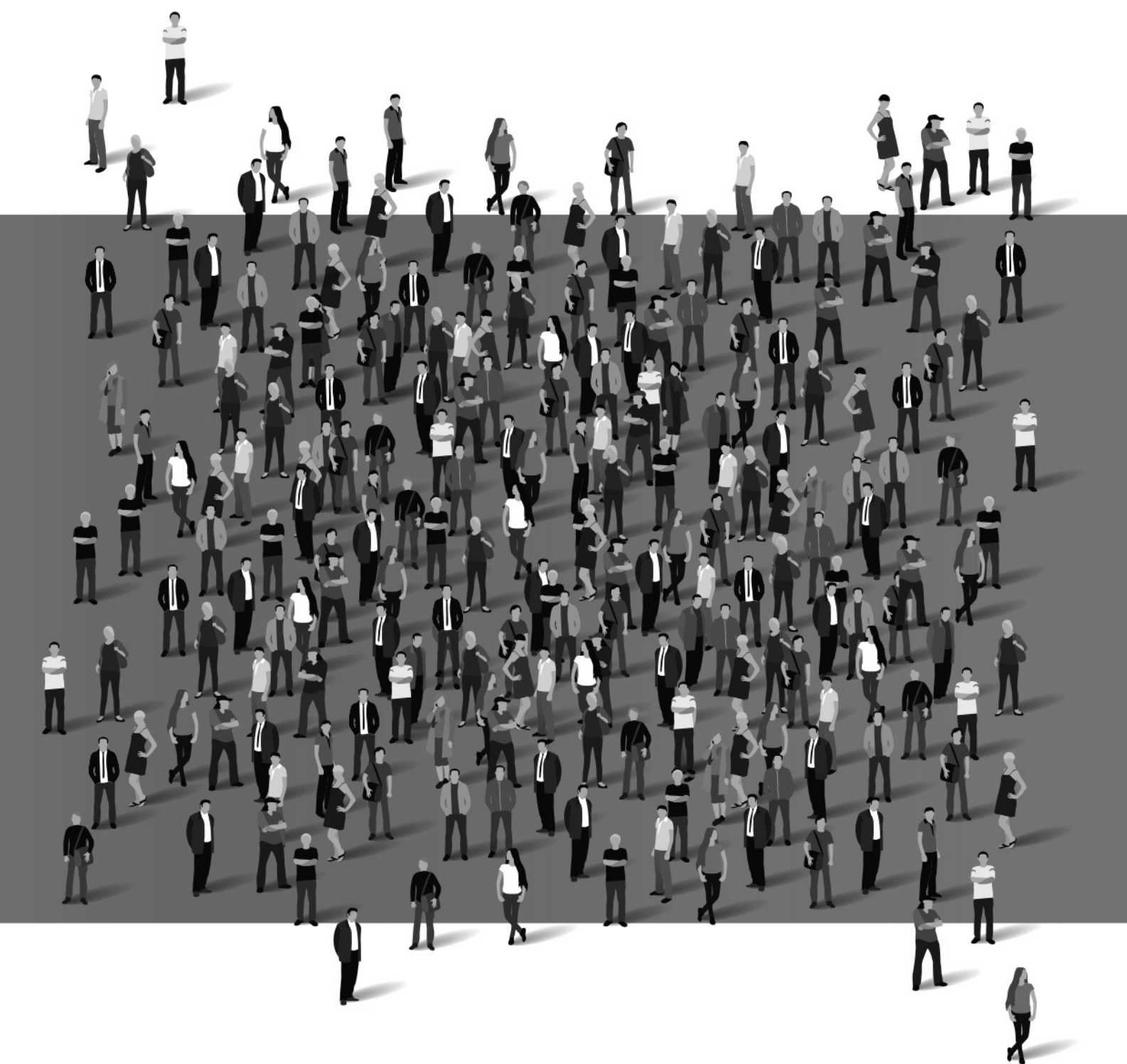
INTRODUCTION

The aim of this report is to present an overview of the regional dynamics and patterns of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) in four Balkan states: Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The focus of the analysis is on the institutional, or macro, drivers of VE, as well as the complexity of cooperation on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) between various stakeholders: different types of institutions, patterns of support from domestic and foreign actors, and the dynamics of establishing formal and informal communication channels. The goal of this study is to identify the similarities or divergences that shaped the regional dynamics and contributed to the drivers of VE. The seven drivers of radicalisation that were identified in the preliminary stage of the CONNEKT project, and that form the basis of analysis are: territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political grievances, cultural factors, religion, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics. The four country studies showed that there is a regional framework in the national P/CVE agendas which is mostly informed by the European Union (EU) and other international agencies. On the other hand, the institutional approaches, as well as the civil society organisations (CSOs) work and scholarly discourses revealed that the issue remains largely context based. The regional report draws from other four separate country reports drafted by national experts in each state.

The comparison is primarily focused on two aspects: the cooperation between different institutions, and the macro-level perception of the drivers of radicalisation. The country studies primarily explored the institutional norms and practices in the P/CVE work by focusing on practical examples, institutional perception of P/CVE, as well as the major shifts in the P/CVE agendas in past years, the cooperation between relevant domestic and foreign actors, and the cross-institutional communications. We depart from a regional perspective on P/CVE in our take on the four country studies and explore the other levels of transnationalism and local engagement on P/CVE. Lastly, we conclude that the contextual features are immensely significant for such a comparative study as they both inform the sub-regional (Western Balkans) and the regional (Southeastern Europe) contexts, and thus allow a cross-regional reading of the drivers of radicalisation at the macro level across regional borders.

METHODOLOGY

The four country studies are the basis for this sub-regional analysis, since the aim is to identify similarities and differences, i.e. specifics presented in the studies themselves and to further determine whether the perceptions of drivers indicate conclusions that can be generalised to the regional level. These studies included interviews and focus group discussions with representatives of government institutions related to P/CVE, representatives of CSOs, religious leaders, experts, and the like. Their perceptions of the drivers were analysed by CONNEKT national researchers and then formed the basis of the regional analysis. In this regard, this research employs a qualitative analysis of the reports, i.e., the institutional context and especially the drivers that affect the context and can be identified as more or less relevant to the intensification of radicalisation and VE.

Country	Interviewee	Number of interviews conducted	Method of interview
Bosnia and Herzegovina	• State institutions • International organisations • CSOs • Media • Religious institutions	4 4 4 3 1	2: in-person / 2: online 4: online 4: online 1: in-person / 2: online 1: in-person
Bulgaria	• State institutions • CSOs • Academia	15 5 3	13: in-person / 2: online 5: online 1: in-person / 2: online
Kosovo	• State institutions • CSOs • Religious institutions	8 1 2	8: in-person 1: online 2: in-person
North Macedonia	• State institutions • CSOs • Academia	11 6 3	4: online / 1: in-person / 6: online questionnaire 5: online / 1: online questionnaire 2: online / 1: online questionnaire

INSTITUTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF RADICALISATION & VIOLENT EXTREMISM

A general trend in the four states is that the major actors active in the field of P/CVE fall within the domain of the executive branch and, especially, the public security sector. However, the extent of domestic inter-institutional cooperation on governmental levels varies. In Kosovo and North Macedonia, for instance, institutional infrastructures include mediating and coordination agencies −or delegate such functions to other state bodies− while, in Bulgaria and Bosnia and Herzegovina, inter-institutional communication over P/CVE is not structured and lacks coordinating mechanisms. More precisely, in Bulgaria there is no specialised stand-alone coordination body in charge of P/CVE programme development and implementation, and this responsibility is being shared by three separate state entities: the Bulgarian Security Council at the Council of Ministers is responsible for the strategic decision-making related to P/CVE, provides overall assessment of security threats, and coordinates the work of security agencies; the Ministry of Interior is responsible for coordinating the relevant Strategy and Action Plan on P/CVE; while the State Agency for National Security monitors radicalisation and VE using overt and covert means (Dzhekova, Ralchev and Stoynova, 2021). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the pivotal institution for P/CVE is the Ministry of Security, with the other institutions of the state-run P/CVE nexus being the Intelligence and Security Agency, State Investigation and Protection Agency, ministries of interior at entity levels, as well as the non-security-related organs of the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ministries of education and the centres for social work −with the last two institutions being active in the domain of prevention and repatriation processes. It should be noted here that complexity of state and entity institutions appears particularly difficult and affects not only policy and decision-making processes but also the implementation of the strategy and its activites.[1] (Kapidzic *et al.,* 2021).

Similar to Bosnia and Herzegovina's state approach, in Kosovo, P/CVE policing is shared between several state institutions −the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Kosovar Intelligence Agency, the Security Council of Kosovo, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. However, the Kosovo Security Council (KSC) and its Secretariat are charged with the role of harmonising all the state institutions' activities related to P/CVE and the implementation of the Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalism Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020. The KSC is the key authority for policy making and advising on security issues according to the Kosovo Constitution. Pursuant to the Law establishing the KSC, its role shall be an advisory, debating, assessing, and recommending nature with regards to security issues in Kosovo, except in emergency situations, when it assumes an executive role. Besides, the Kosovar government appointed a formal function of a National Coordinator for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism, a position which is currently held by the incumbent Minister of Interior after the latest governmental elections from April 2021 (Peci and Demjaha, 2021). North Macedonia's legal and political system also envisions such an institutional role: as of 2017, the two new bodies of the National Committee for Prevention of Violent

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[1] More in Damir Kapidzic et al. (IEMed, 2021c). CONNEKT *Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers: Bosnia and Herzegovina.* Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

Extremism and Counter-Terrorism, and the Office of the National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism and Combating Terrorism are fully operational and in charge of coordinating the governmental efforts regarding P/CVE. The two bodies are also responsible for the implementation of the three strategic documents for P/CVE, all of them dating back to 2018: the National Strategy for Counter-Terrorism, and the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism, as well as the National Plan for Returned Foreign Fighters and their Family Members (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021).

The institutional frameworks for P/CVE in all the four states are informed by the existing EU policies and strategic documents comprising EU interventions in countering terrorism, including P/CVE (Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans and its five objectives in 2018), which goes beyond security-centric measures by introducing systemic, multi-tiered and synchronised steps to pre-emptively address conditions precipitating radicalisation and VE: the knowledge-transfers, financial support and the support in institution-building by the EU and the other international organisations, which will be also discussed in the section devoted to the drivers. Countering violent extremism (CVE) or preventing violent extremism (PVE) refers to the "soft" side of counter-terrorism (CT) strategies that tackle the drivers that lead people to engage in politically –or ideologically-motivated violence. In Bulgaria, which is the only EU member state from the four cases, the state approach to P/CVE – adopted in the Bulgarian Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020)–is also influenced by the EU's recent shift towards "soft" measures of P/CVE and the understanding of radicalisation as a home-grown issue. The "soft" measures approach to P/CVE is also paradigmatic for North Macedonia and is reflected as such in the state's two strategic documents for P/CVE. In general, North Macedonia's, Bosnia and Herzegovina's, and Kosovo's current P/CVE strategies are part of the joint EU framework for countering terrorism: with the security domain being one of the six flagship initiatives in the Commission's Strategy for the Western Balkans; also drawing upon the 2018 Sofia Declaration for increased cooperation on countering terrorism and extremism; and, finally, projected by the EU's Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans. The Action Plan also enhanced regional and international cooperation by stressing that each Western Balkan state should seek to align its legal CT framework with the relevant legal instruments of the EU and the other international bodies: the UN Security Council Resolutions, the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism, and its Additional Protocol, and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

A common similarity in the four states' strategic documents dealing with P/CVE is the shift towards the "soft" P/CVE approach, as they all call for an inclusive governmental approach on prevention, addressing youth radicalisation and empowering CSOs or Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) to help prevent the spread of VE. However, the major differences lie in the legislative infrastructures supporting those documents, as well as the inter-institutional cooperation, and the (lack of) resources and coordination with other relevant stakeholders. This, in turn, opens a gap in the work on P/CVE which is often filled in by CSOs activities. Notwithstanding, the levels of CSOs engagements in the field of P/CVE also differ in each of the four cases. In North Macedonia and Kosovo, CSOs, as well as other actors (such as the officially recognised religious communities, which will be discussed below), were included in the development and the day-to-day work of the states P/CVE strategies. In North Macedonia, it was international organisations and donors, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Skopje, USAID and the American and British Embassies in Skopje, which facilitated CSO integration in the decision-making processes. A similar tendency was identified in Kosovo, where the international community was also essential in the capacity-building of the CSOs. This, in turn, not only contributed to integrating CSOs in the novel platforms for P/CVE, but also towards a shift in their understanding and work in the context of VE: from PVE and foreign fighters to rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees and other individuals prone to VE.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the work of CSOs is significant in filling in the vacuum generated by the work of the state institutions, which will be further discussed in the sections devoted to specific drivers. It is expected, however, that CSOs will have a greater role in the drafting and the adoption of the new strategy on P/CVE, which will occur in 2021. At the present point, several CSOs and think tanks are actively working in the field of P/CVE in the state and are cooperating on this with all the major international programmes.[2] In Bulgaria, the role of CSOs is spelled out in the National Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism 2015-2020 –with CSOs representatives being included in the drafting of the Strategy– as part of the multi-agency approach to tackling radicalisation: among others, development of indicators for early identification, monitoring and risk assessment; and implementation of prevention and deradicalisation programmes. Although CSOs are strongly recognised as an important partner by governments in implementing the National Action Plan (NAP) and preventing radicalisation and VE, government support is often insufficient or unsystematic. In this constellation, the majority of local CSOs are dependent on donor support from international organisations. It is worth mentioning that the donor and governmental priorities are not always compatible and coordinated. This tension can also put more pressure on the CSOs' work and call into question their independence.

Religious organisations are also active in the P/CVE work in the region. Their activities will be discussed in the section devoted to religion as a driver of radicalisation.

Concerning the approach to youth, countries under study revealed that youth are differently targeted by state P/CVE strategies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, youth radicalisation was identified as a result of a complex interplay of various factors. The local CSOs are the most active in the P/CVE work with youth, primarily in terms of prevention. This came after the recent shift in the international donors' agendas over P/CVE work. Similar patterns were identified in North Macedonia and Kosovo, where local CSOs are also shifting their work towards P/CVE and youths because of donors' programmes. The issue of youth radicalisation was covered the most in the country report on Bulgaria. Here, the report revealed that although the soft approach to P/CVE is being promoted by major stakeholders, youth radicalisation is still dominated by law enforcement and correctional approaches. Similar to the other three case studies, various CSOs are filling the gap left by state actors and target various aspects related to youth radicalisation such as digital illiteracy and their vulnerability towards far-right narratives. In general, there is a lack of research and literature on youth radicalisation and the institutional approach towards this phenomenon.

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[2] The Atlantic Initiative is one such case which coordinates several initiatives in the P/CVE sector, as well as acting as the key agency of mapping the factors and actors of vulnerability and resilience to VE in several communities.

REGIONAL APPROACHES TO THE SEVEN CONNEKT DRIVERS

1. RELIGION

The recent treatment of religion as a driver of VE and radicalisation in the Balkans is neatly illustrating the shift in the institutional, popular, and expert opinions over the very process of radicalisation itself. Namely, although Islam and, especially, radical interpretations of Islam had been seen as dominant factors of radicalisation as of 9/11, the new research and informants' opinions showcase that this is being challenged, in multiple fashions, over the last few years. The two major shifts, in this regard, has been the increased agency of the regional religious institutions in P/CVE agendas, as well as the emerging tendency to view non-Islamic denominations as drivers of radicalisation and VE.

The recent developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina are especially illustrative of the first point. The state has already established networks of cooperation between the different religious communities: the institutionally-recognised religious communities —the Islamic Community in B&H, the Bishops' Conference of B&H, the Serbian Orthodox Church in B&H, and the Jewish Community of B&H — are thus officially cooperating via the mechanisms of the so-called Interreligious Council (established in 1997). The institutionally-recognised religious communities are also endorsed as significant actors in combating various forms of VE in the state Strategy for Prevention and Combating Terrorism from 2015. However, the scope and scale of these P/CVE-related activities vary in the country: the Islamic Community, for instance, adopted a P/CVE strategy in 2016 and has organised numerous related events and activities ever since, while the Bishops' Conference conducts humanitarian activities without a clear articulation of P/CVE (Kapidzic *et al.,* 2021: 6).

In North Macedonia, there is a similar institutional infrastructure that allows better cross-institutional cooperation between the institutionally-recognised religious communities. This infrastructure is also utilised in terms of the state P/CVE agenda: the state Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Groups —the key intermediary institution— was actively participating in drafting the two strategic P/CVE documents in the country. Similar to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the major issue concerning religion as a driver of radicalisation and VE is its radical or non-institutionalised interpretations. The country report revealed that there is a significant gap in the understanding of these very radical or non-institutionalised religious interpretations, especially after the infamous storming of the Macedonian parliament in 2017. The interviewees affiliated with state institutions are by and large overlooking the question of religion as a driver of the violent escalation, while a group of experts from civil society and academia are more aware of the nuances of religious interpretations and are able to point out the radical interpretations of the Orthodox Christianity as drivers of radicalisation and VE (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021: 7-8).

The country report on Kosovo also showcased that there is a particular tension between the state recognised religious communities and the non-institutionalised interpretations of religious tenets. The case of the Islamic Community of Kosovo is illustrative here, as it provides a spectrum of various activities that the community is undertaking to counter the radical interpretations of Islam: from participating in the drafting of the state

strategies for P/CVE to cooperating in various international P/CVE projects implemented in Kosovo and conducting tailor-made initiatives and projects. The agency of the Islamic Community of Kosovo in combating radicalisation has thus been positively evaluated by EU representatives, yet the general expectations of its role in P/CVE among the state experts in the country vary. Lastly, similarly to both Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, the report revealed that an expert discourse on the religiously-driven radicalisation in non-Islamic contexts more precisely, among segments of the Serbian community in Kosovo is on the rise (Peci and Demjaha, 2021: 8-9).

The religious communities in Bulgaria are also recognised in the state strategies for P/CVE, yet their actual impact is being questioned in the country report as the only activity that involved them is yet to be implemented. The country report also reveals that the widespread prejudice against the Muslim Roma community as prone to radicalisation is also visible in the institutional work. This prevailing understanding of religiously-driven radicalisation is challenged by civil society experts and scholars, as per the country report. The major counter-arguments oppose the general treatment of religiosity as the main factor for radicalisation among Roma Muslims as overstated and as oversimplifying the Muslim communities in Bulgaria. The country report also identified another dominant trajectory in the country: the far-right and conservative discourse on religion has been evolving since 2018 and the formation of the rightist governing coalition. Some of the main discursive struggles, here, unfolded as fierce debates over Bulgaria's ratification of the so-called Istanbul Convention in 2018 and the 2019 Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 (Dzhekova, Ralchev and Stoynova, 2021: 10-11).

An overlapping tendency in the four analysed states are the tensions in the interpretations of religious tenets between officially-recognised religious communities and individual interpretations. The latter were considered to have a greater chance of being radical and leading to radicalisation and VE. The officially-recognised religious communities are also active in state sponsored P/CVE agendas— although the scope and scale of these activities vary in the national contexts and among the various religious communities— and are prone to cooperation with international bodies in this respect. A significant work in broadening the understanding of religion as a driver of radicalisation is carried out by the regional CSOs as they not only contribute the most towards broadening the scope of religiously-driven radicalisation, but also address areas not covered in the work of the official religious communities. Even though the interviewed scholars were also favourable to the wider understanding of religion as a driver of radicalisation, the country reports suggest that there is a lack of scholarly literature on this, and substantial research contributions are yet to be done (except for Bulgaria).

2. ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

Economic deprivation as a driver of radicalisation and VE was interpreted in several ways in the four states. In Bulgaria, the question of economic deprivation was linked to poverty and its connection to broader social marginalisation. Moreover, even though it was considered as an important factor for radicalisation, none of the experts pointed to it as a decisive driver of radicalisation and VE on its own. The experts affiliated with state institutions were generally in favour of this stance, referring to the poor communities in the country that are not showing a tendency to radicalisation. On the other hand, the Bulgarian scholars interviewed for the purposes of the national report offered another opinion: ethnicity in conjunction with social marginalisation and undereducation are of key importance when interpreting poverty as a factor for radicalisation. However, the

object of this scholarly argument is exclusively directed towards the Roma communities in Bulgaria (Dzhekova, Ralchev and Stoynova, 2021: 17-18).

Economic deprivation as a driver of radicalisation is also primarily linked with poverty in the case of North Macedonia. The issue of economic deprivation was mostly highlighted by scholars who drew upon recent data that revealed that, in most cases, the convicted foreign fighters from North Macedonia (or their families) were receiving financial support, social care or child allowances at some point while living in the state. The institutional approach to economic deprivation as a driver, however, is slightly different as most of the experts link it with the issues of reintegration and resocialisation of the foreign fighters. This approach is also promoted with the national P/CVE strategy, where the processes of reintegration and resocialisation of the convicted foreign fighters are projected to be coordinated by an interdisciplinary group of social psychologists, doctors, and members of local governing bodies but without a clear reference on the economic aspect of the process.

It is worth mentioning, though, that the interviews in North Macedonia were conducted in a period of a very visible media event, covering charges of terrorism against a youngster from a prominent Macedonian family. This, in turn, triggered many experts with different affiliations and profiles to dismiss economic deprivation as a means of radicalisation. However, this argument was not backed by research or long-term insight in the case of North Macedonia; as it was, for instance, in Bulgaria, where several experts working with children stressed that "more and more children with a stable financial status" are prone to radicalisation (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021: 13).

The Kosovar report provided several different takes on the relation between economic deprivation and radicalisation: all of them indicating that the former is not a determinant of the latter. Contrary to Bulgaria and North Macedonia, poverty was also not considered a significant driver of radicalisation by the interviewed state representatives. Moreover, two state officials confirmed that most individuals from Kosovo who became radicalised and went to Syria and Iraq were not from economically-deprived backgrounds (Peci and Demjaha, 2021: 11-12).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, most experts emphasised that poverty can be observed as an indirect trigger that operates in combination with other drivers, such as education, as in the case of Bulgaria. Similar to the Bulgarian and Kosovar cases, the experts (mostly the ones affiliated with non-state institutions) pointed out several sub-categories of economic deprivation —such as marginalisation, hopelessness and economic exclusion— as an important individual, rather than group-based, trigger for radicalisation (Kapidzic et al., 2021:13).

The research in the four states reveals that economic deprivation is either neglected as a driver, such as in the Kosovar case and to a certain extent the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina or it is approached in a more nuanced manner, primarily by the Bulgarian scholars and CSOs experts, but also in the three other states as well. Economic deprivation is linked with several other social, economic, and political aspects and thus, it is interpreted as a driver of radicalisation in a much broader sense. The dominant institutional approaches over the link between economic deprivation and radicalisation in the four cases, however, resonate with the general cross-sectoral experts' opinions: economic deprivation does not present a decisive driver of radicalisation.

3. TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

Territorial inequalities were seen as significant drivers of radicalisation in all the four cases, yet they were considered as one of the set of drivers that are mostly dependent on the national contexts of local government,

migration policies, and demography, and demographic trends. In this context, we were able to identify several trends.

The first one is the perception of isolation, an aspect which, as per one state official in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is considered as an individually-perceived deprivation, while in Kosovo and Bulgaria, as a weak state presence in certain areas. Furthermore, several experts (CSOs and state institution affiliates) referred to a process of "ghettoisation" –related to the isolated neighbourhoods inhabited by the Roma community as areas with a weak state presence, where, in turn, a constant danger of establishing alternative systems for providing social services, education, security and medical services persists. The research in Bulgaria also showed that the weak state presence in certain areas undermines the state efforts to combat radicalisation as well, as several programmes –mostly in the field of enhancing digital literacy and critical thinking– failed to reach youngsters in these areas. In addition, the gap between certain communities and the state institutions feeds the stereotypical take on these communities –in the Bulgarian case, Roma, Bulgarian Muslims, and Turks– as groups which are "most prone to radicalisation"; an aspect which was mostly put forward by CSOs experts (Dzhekova, Ralchev and Stoynova, 2021: 18-19).

Another significant aspect of territorial inequalities as a driver is the recent shift in the rural and urban areas as environments for radicalisation. This tendency was marked in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a state institution representative stressed that there is an evident trend of radical imams who are shifting their activities from rural to urban areas. In Kosovo, on the other hand, the rural/urban division is not significant in terms of radicalisation although living conditions in rural areas are disproportionately worse than those in urban areas.

The final division concerns the population structure in the given communities in terms of ethnic and religious identities. Here, we identified two opposing patterns: monoethnic areas were considered to be more susceptible to radicalisation in several cases, while others considered the multiethnic environments as potential hotspots for radicalisation. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a CSO expert marked the "mononational spaces" as more prone to radicalisation, while one state official identified the multiethnic areas as more susceptible to radicalisation due to the ongoing tensions and prejudices in such spaces (Kapidzic *et al.,* 2021: 13).

The case of the foreign fighters from North Macedonia is illustrative of both patterns: part of them were originating from the relatively monoethnic municipalities in Skopje, such as Chair and Arachinovo, while part of them were from the multiethnic towns of Kumanovo and Gostivar, as well as the multiethnic Skopje municipality of Gazi Baba. This factual situation informed the recent state and CSOs P/CVE agendas: although there are activities in all the municipalities in North Macedonia, a special focus has been placed on several areas in the last few years. Most multiethnic municipalities in the states are also cooperating via the Strong Cities Network, which enables a platform for sharing P/CVE experiences and knowledge. The holistic approach and the focus on the whole state territory helped the state institutions and some of the most active CSOs in the field of P/CVE to uncover radical interpretations of Islam within the Turkish and Roma communities in the eastern part of the state an area which was never considered as a potential hotspot for radicalisation in the literature and the public discourse (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021: 9-10).

There is a similar holistic state approach to P/CVE in Kosovo. However, the country report shows a particular rift in the scope of the activities of the state institutions –which are focused on all the municipalities– and the religious institutions which are mostly focused on the areas with higher percentage rates of radicalisation (Peci and Demjaha, 2021: 12-13).

The four states differ in terms of their approach to territorial inequalities as an eventual driver of radicalisation and VE. The key factor here was the weak state presence in certain areas the relation with radicalisation being in inverse proportion while one of the dominant trends was the recent shift from rural to urban environments for radicalisation. The state approaches also differ between holistic, which does not target separate areas, and narrower approaches, where the state efforts to tackle radicalisation are more focused on the areas that are more prone to it. There is no consensus among the regional experts from state institutions, academia and CSOs to whether the areas more prone to radicalisation are monoethnic or multiethnic ones, and this is largely context based.

4. DIGITAL LITERACY

Digital illiteracy is considered a critical driver of radicalisation and VE in all four states. This issue, however, was not evenly researched in the past in the four state contexts and it is differently addressed in their legal systems. Digital literacy, as well as media literacy and media pedagogy, were recognised by various stakeholders across the four states as tools for combating radicalisation via social media and digital content. The major issue related to digital literacy in the four states is the gap in the understanding of the basic notions and the activities performed by the state actors and the CSOs. This gap is the largest among the seven drivers analysed. The work of the CSOs often broadens the scope of digital illiteracy as a driver of radicalisation. In this respect, we identified two prevailing domains on which the state and CSOs activities focus.

The first domain is largely based upon the understanding of social media and the internet as instruments for communicating radical religious messages and interpretations. This was noted in all four states, with several particularities. In Kosovo, for instance, YouTube lectures by radical imams were identified as one of the main channels for indoctrination, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina the researchers identified an online "superstar" *da'is* from Salafi circles who capitalise on his online presence and has a large following (a similar case of spreading fundamentalist ideology online was noted in North Macedonia in a report published in 2018) (Kapidzic et al. 2021: 16-17). The state institutional approaches are in the very first stages of structuring a policy and legal measures and responses. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the state Communications Regulatory Agency raised the issues of communicating violent and terrorism-related content online to the authorities just recently, while the corresponding institution in North Macedonia —the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AVMU)— has also proven to be active in tackling the online spread of radical religious interpretations by organising training in media literacy and even addresses these issues —although not by the names of digital and media illiteracy— in its 2019 Regulatory Strategy.

The issue of online radicalisation in the region also has particular transnational dynamics, both in terms of push and pull factors. The Kosovar case is illustrative of the first point, as the country report reveals that the online infrastructure allows a better connection between the diaspora members and the radical imams (one fifth of Kosovo's foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq were diaspora members) (Peci and Demjaha, 2021: 13). On the other hand, the transnational dimension is visible in the implementation of the international cooperation in digital and media literacy training in the region. The critical event here is the recent EU Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, which was briefly covered only in the case of North Macedonia. The research in North Macedonia also resulted in enlisting several other transnational endeavours for fostering media and digital literacy: starting from state institutions' cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization (UNESCO) (such as the aforementioned Agency), but also CSOs' work within several relevant domains sponsored by international donors.

The other domain in this respect is related to what is recently being depicted as online disinformation campaigns and the vulnerability and resilience in the region. This issue boomed with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020; a period which also overlapped with the research conducted in the four states. As a background, the reports point to other research which reveals that local population, and especially youngsters, are lacking the necessary media and digital skills, thus oftentimes being targeted by these very campaigns. The role of CSOs in the region is immensely important in this context as their activities fill the state institutional gap and contribute to a wider understanding of the rationale behind these disinformation campaigns. In Bulgaria, CSOs experts noted that, although digital literacy remains low among youngsters in the state, in the case of the Bulgarian Roma, the internet is a factor for radicalisation of children who have more opportunities and whose basic needs have been met. Moreover, the research pointed to a particular vulnerability towards far-right narratives among Bulgarian youths, which is a result of the exposure to hostile online content combined with uncritical consumption (Dzhekova, Ralchev and Stoynova, 2021: 20-21). A similar tendency was noted in North Macedonia, where the rates of the "infodemics" or the disinformation campaigns related to the pandemic reached up to and influenced almost three quarters of the population. This, in turn, was interpreted as a potential space for activities by many malign foreign actors. CSOs in North Macedonia, however, appear to be particularly engaged in combating those narratives: for instance, the Fighting Fake News Narratives platform developed by the Citizens Association Most is debunking radicalisation and VE disinformation narratives related to radicalisation and VE in the traditional and new media, while the Center for Social Innovations Blink42-21 published a video game that aims to strengthen the citizens' resilience to disinformation (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021: 11-12).

5. POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

Political grievances are a context-based driver that manifested differently in the four country studies analysed due to their different state socialist experiences, histories of VE and armed conflicts, and political landscapes in post-socialist times. In general, political grievances were understood as lack of political representation on the state institutional level.

The research identified a cross-national tendency of perceiving political grievances as just one in the line of drivers related to the many facets of the weak states, such as lack of political accountability, high levels of corruption and low trust in institutions. At the very centre of this understanding of political grievances lies the political parties. In Kosovo, the tensions between the political parties over issues such as wearing the *hijab* at schools and religious instruction in public schools resulted in protest waves in the last decade. The social mobilisation against these decisions, in turn, was interpreted as a means of formatting extremist discourse in the public space (Peci and Demjaha, 2021: 13-14). In North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, such partisan activities are also taking place within the ethnically exclusive domains of what was depicted as entrepreneurial elites and they often have the ethnic "Other" as a target for scapegoating. As framed by experts not affiliated with state institutions in both the countries, such divisive rhetoric leads to polarisation, political incentives and "weaponisation" of the public discourse (Kapidzic *et al.,* 2021: 14-15).

Moreover, the Bulgarian study showcased one possible scenario of the extent of such rhetoric, namely, the

mainstreaming of far-right ideologies into institutional behaviour once such parties gain power (Dzhekova, Ralchev and Stoynova, 2021: 22-23). From a position of political power, far-right groups are able to coordinate the activities of hooligans for political goals and purposes, such as the case of Bulgaria), but also the activities of the so-called "patriotic organisations", such as in the cases of Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

As a general pattern, we identified a peculiar depiction of far-right ideologies and their public presence as leaning towards wider and more vocal visibility, while the radical religious organisations have a tendency to stay under the public radar. This is not always the case as the instrumentalisation of religious discourses in the four country studies is often a subject of the far-right interpretations, while the tendency to stay under the radar was recently broken, for instance, with the activities of the fringe organisation Christian Brotherhood in North Macedonia (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021: 10-11). On a different note, the existence of ethnic parties/or parties of the ethnic minority groups in Bulgaria and North Macedonia (after the 2001 insurgency) contributed, as per several reports and expert opinions of CSO actors, to channelling a greater political representation of ethnic-minority groups and thus lessening the danger of radicalisation in these communities. (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021; Dzhekova, Ralchev and Stoynova, 2021).

6. CULTURAL FACTORS

Cultural factors are yet another broad term that was interpreted in several ways in the four countries analysed. One pattern was the understanding of cultural factors as cultural marginalisation, or the lack of representation of cultural identity markers by the state institutions. Cultural marginalisation as such was not recognised as a significant driver of radicalisation in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria, where the focus was rather put on the two other expert interpretations of culture as a factor of radicalisation. However, the 2017 storming of the Macedonian parliament is a textbook case, as it shows how a social protest can turn radical by manipulating cultural and identity markers and symbols. This was noted by interviewees affiliated with academia and CSOs in the case of North Macedonia. More precisely, the storming of the parliamentary building on 27 April 2017 was coordinated by a set of patriotic organisations and resulted in 16 criminal charges with 211 years in total for terrorist threat to the constitutional order. It is important to note that members of the dominant ethnic community in the state got radicalised by targeting their ethnic identity markers and symbols (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021: 8-9).

The second interpretative pattern was moulded upon the links between the cultural factors for radicalisation and the prevailing ethnic nationalism and conservatism in the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, the culture of "toxic masculinity" was raised by one interviewee from an international organisation as a significant driver of radicalisation as it feeds the conservative perception of what an individual should stand for and defend in society (Kapidzic et al., 2021:15). As per several Kosovar stakeholders, the dominant cultural feature of not separating individual actions and family responsibility leads to stigmatisation of the families of the fighters who joined the war in Syria and Iraq. This stigmatisation, in turn, elevates the issue of foreign fighters on communal levels and raises the perception of victimisation, which is further exploited by radical imams and Islamic activists as a means of accusing the Kosovar state of oppressing Muslims (Peci and Demjaha, 2021: 14-15).

The third interpretative pattern was related to group-related prejudices over certain communities and their culture of living. As neatly illustrated in the Bulgarian report, such a stereotypical opinion on the Roma

community was expressed by state representatives (a "different way of life" that can be a driver of radicalisation), although other experts who were affiliated with academia and CSOs were more aware of the heterogeneity in the Roma community and do not consider culture as a significant factor for radicalisation. Such stereotypical approaches by state representatives towards communities which have other cultural markers than the dominant ones in Bulgaria were also noted during the 2015 refugee crisis, as their cultural background was emphasised as a potential factor for radicalisation (Dzhekova, Ralchev and Stoynova, 2021: 23-24).

The state institutional affiliates in the four countries are almost exclusively aware of the ethnic identities and religious denominations in their P/CVE work. This awareness, however, is oftentimes fed by the dominant stereotypes over particular ethnic groups in the countries. As a general remark, the cultural factor is neglected as irrelevant in the state agendas for P/CVE, while several recent CSOs initiatives in North Macedonia are —similarly to the case of digital literacy— broadening the understanding of culture as a factor for radicalisation.

7. TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

All the interviewees in the four country studies agreed upon the transnational dimension of radicalisation and VE. We identified several patterns of understanding this driver: i) as a process of penetration of funding and ideologies that promote VE from abroad, ii) the influence of the diaspora, and iii) the impact of the transnational organisation on the domestic P/CVE strategies.

The first point is related both to the radical interpretations of Islam and the far-right narratives. In Kosovo, all the interviewees underlined that the transnational radical readings of Islam are translating into a set of activities in the state: from building religious objects and providing scholarships to diaspora networking and spreading radical content online. The research in Bosnia and Herzegovina revealed that, although the state is exposed to various ISIS-channels of communication, there are also already established regional networks of Chetnik organisations which operate across the Serbian, Russian and Republika Srpska's territories and are recruiting foreign fighters for the battlefields in Ukraine. A similar tendency was identified in Bulgaria, where the conservative disinformation campaigns in the recent period have particularly targeted liberal and democratic values. In addition, the Bulgarian report mapped several critical events related to global terrorism which echoed in the Bulgarian public.

The diaspora influence in Kosovo was discussed in the section devoted to digital literacy. Worth mentioning here is a similar tendency in Bulgaria among the Bulgarian Roma communities working in Western Europe which appeared to be vulnerable to Salafist influences, while Turkey's influence over the Bulgarian Muslims was also identified by the state representatives. The radicalisation within the diaspora communities, however, raises the question of state responsibilities beyond the state borders. Here, cross-national cooperation is needed to tackle the various facets of these phenomena. Finally, the transnational dynamics as a means of shifting the P/CVE agenda in the domestic context was discussed in the case of North Macedonia. The agency of the major international organisation in the state was not only reflected in the novel state P/CVE agendas, but also in the CSO sector (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021: 6-7).

REGIONAL TAKEAWAYS /
NATIONAL AND REGIONAL COMPLEXITIES

As a general overview of the regional developments, it is important to mention that the issues of radicalisation were dominating the public discourses in the four states regarding several critical events: the battlefields in Syria and Iraq, the battlefields in Ukraine, the processes of return of the foreign fighters, the domestic terrorism, and the mainstreaming of far-right narratives. There was a general shift in the institutional work over P/CVE in the four states, which was mostly informed by EU and other relevant international organisations. Another important contextual feature is that the wider region is shaped by extensive the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovenia, and Croatia), all of which are EU members except Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. The wider region also comprises Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which all show EU membership ambitions, yet without clear prospects for NATO membership in the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. This kaleidoscope of security interests is also manifested by the regional networks for cooperation in many domains —such as RAI, the Berlin Process, Mini-Schengen, or the Open Balkans— which are not always sufficient platforms for removing the obstacles in the regional and cross-national institutional cooperation in preventing and tackling radicalisation and VE.

In this constellation, the isomorphism in the recent capacity-and institution-building in the region regarding P/CVE is coercive, rather than mimetic or normative. The key argument in here is the EU's focus on implementing the "soft" approach to P/CVE in the region, on the one hand, and the various challenges within the national contexts in the establishment of the key P/CVE institutions, on the other. In addition to this argument, one can point out the good practice of including a wider set of stakeholders in the drafting of the strategic P/CVE documents in Kosovo and North Macedonia. Yet, the country reports revealed that some of the old institutional attitudes towards radicalisation are still present, which in turn opens a gap in the operationalisation, implementations, and the public policing of the novel P/CVE agendas.

Even though these gaps are filled by activities developed and organised by CSOs —mostly in the domains of digital literacy, prevention, youth, and cultural and political identities—, the four case studies revealed that the civil sector has also recently shifted towards the "soft" P/CVE. Therefore, further work by various stakeholders is needed in terms of understanding, policing, and managing the new P/CVE agendas. In this context, all the regional platforms that can provide knowledge transfers and exchanges of experiences should be stimulated. The ultimate goals of such endeavours would be targeting changes in the traditional understanding of radicalisation and VE which, as we discussed in the report, are still present in the institutional attitudes in the region and are defined by their excessive securitization and providing conditions for rethinking them from a wider perspective.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON MACRO DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION AND VE

Drawing upon the findings of the four country studies, we put forward the thesis that the national particularities —the social and political landscapes, international positioning of the state and its cultural, historical, and demographic characteristics— should be taken into consideration when drafting P/CVE policy recommendations.

Hence, we propose the following recommendations:

1. A common approach in the four states' strategic documents and action plans dealing with P/CVE is the shift towards the "soft" P/CVE approach, as they all call for an inclusive "whole of society" approach on prevention. Nevertheless, it can be noted that the process of securitisation still prevails in terms of prevention. The gap that is observed in the functioning, priorities, and coordination between governmental institutions and CSOs dealing with radicalisation and VE should be bridged so the actors who act preventively, primarily from the civil sector and the Faith-Based organisations, will be able to perform more successfully in addressing youth radicalisation.

2. Differences in the legislative infrastructures supporting strategic documents on P/CVE should be addressed. There are often significant differences in the definitions of radicalisation, VE, and terrorism, as well as the inter-institutional cooperation, the (lack of) resources and coordination with other relevant stakeholders. Therefore, keeping in mind that radicalisation and VE emerges from a combination multiple drivers, it is necessary to distinguish between the types of radicalisation and violent or non-violent extremism. This also applies to the prevailing institutional emphasis on Islamic-driven extremism and/or ignoring far-right extremism.

3. The two major shifts in terms of religion are the increased agency of the regional religious institutions in P/CVE agendas, as well as the emerging tendency of viewing non-Islamic denominations as drivers of radicalisation and VE. Wider understandings of religion, not only as a driver of radicalisation but also as a de-radicalisation tool is thus urgent. This also stems from the recent P/CVE strategic documents as implemented in the region. The whole process should also encompass radical interpretations of Orthodox Christianity and, ultimately, lead to a better distinction between collective and individual agency in radicalisation.

4. Economic deprivation as a driver is linked with several other social, economic, and political aspects; thus it is interpreted as a driver of radicalisation in a much broader sense. The dominant institutional approaches over the link between economic deprivation and radicalisation in the four countries, however, resonate with the general cross-sectoral experts' opinions: economic deprivation does not present a decisive driver of radicalisation but it should not be neglected as a structural factor. The local-level dynamics of social injustice, unemployment, and deprivation from basic services are important for risk identification, which in synergy with other drivers can intensify radicalisation.

5. A weak state presence in certain areas as well as the recent shift from rural to urban environments for radicalisation is a new area in need of more research and engagement. Long-term territorial inequalities prevent the building of resilient communities as an important aspect of the prevention process. Therefore, local strategies are needed to further strengthen the local institutions and their role in preventing radicalisation and VE.

6. The major issue related to digital literacy in the four states is the gap in the understanding of the basic notions and the (lack) of activities performed by the state actors and the CSOs in P/CVE. This gap appeared largest among the seven drivers analysed. Therefore, media and digital literacy education including critical thinking should be considered an integral part of educational programmes.

7. In the analysis we identified a cross-national tendency of perceiving political grievances as just one in the line of drivers related to the many facets of the weak states, such as lack of political accountability, high levels of corruption and low trust in institutions. In the very centre of this understanding of political grievances lies the political parties' possibility for ethno-political mobilisation and future radicalisation of ethnic communities. The complexity of the situation is recognised in all country studies, while corruption is identified as an additional undermining factor that requires a long-term and coordinated strategy in the fight against corruption, hate speech and divisive political rhetoric.

8. As a general remark, the cultural factor is largely considered as irrelevant in the state agendas for P/CVE. The role of culture in terms of de-radicalisation and overcoming stereotypes and prejudices must be emphasised. The cultural policy of states should oppose "cultural violence" and violence as an approach in general. It is therefore necessary to develop programmes to support both traditional culture and local cultural events, as well as local narratives that will argue against the "culture of violence".

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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.