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COUNTRY PAPER
ON MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

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

KOSOVO
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Political Grievances in the Municipality of Mitrovica South

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Introduction

The research findings of the Kosovo Country Paper on Macro Level Drivers have clearly identified the religious (mis)interpretations as the driver with the highest impact on the violent extremism at national level, and, among others, have also indicated that the driver of political grievances has a rather a peripheral impact (Peci and Demjaha, 2021). Nevertheless, for scrutinizing the impact of the driver of political grievances at the meso-level, the Municipality of Mitrovica South has been chosen as a case study, since in the last century it was a symbol of industrialism and traditional multi-ethnic city, while after the war of 1999 it has witnessed a division along ethnic lines and economic impoverishment, and ever since has turned into a neuralgic point of ethno-political tensions in the country.

The data of the last population census conducted in 2011 show that the Municipality of Mitrovica South has had 71,909 inhabitants (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës [Kosovo Agency for Statistics], 2017). According to the ethnic background 96,7% of the inhabitants of the municipality were Albanians, 0.9% were Ashkalis, 0.7% Turks, 0.7% Roma, and 1% belong to other ethnic groups (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2017), whereas in terms of religious background, 99.3% of the population have declared themselves as Muslim, 0.05% were declared as Catholics, 0.015% as Orthodox, and 0.635% were declared without religious affiliation or have preferred not to answer (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2011). The largest number of the young people (63.3%) lives in the urban areas, whereas the other part (36.7%) lives in the rural areas of the municipality (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2011). The Municipality of Mitrovica South has a total of 33 pre-school, elementary, and secondary, educational institutions, as well as the public University "Isa Boletini" and International Business College Mitrovica (KIPRED, 2019).

Against this background, this study initially presents its research methodology, then it analyses the Meso-Level Dynamics that includes the relations of social contexts to the results of Macro-Level Analysis and the workability of Macro-Drivers at the meso-level, as well as the intersections between drivers, and interactions among drivers and social contexts. The concluding analysis represents key findings related to meso-level drivers, prevention indicators from the meso-level analysis, as well as micro-paths reported from meso-level analysis. The general conclusion summarises the main research findings, and presents the answers to the research questions of this research endeavour.

This study is based on qualitative primary sources, such as focus groups with youth of the age 12 to 30 years, and correctional interviews with seasoned civil society activists of the Municipality of Mitrovica South. Representative sample is based on balanced gender, religious and urban – rural representation.

Research Methodology

RECAP OF THE RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The research results from the Macro-Level Analysis indicate that the driver of political grievances in Kosovo has a peripheral impact on radicalism and extremism, when compared with the drivers of religion, social digitalisation and transnational dynamics. However, there is no doubt that this driver represents one of the factors with an impact on violent extremism due to the legacy of armed conflict and Kosovo's post-war transition to an independent state. This transition was accompanied with the identity crisis among a number of individuals, and the reinvention of religion has been initiated and exploited by a number of Muslim clergy to promote and propagate radical Islam. In addition, two conservative religiously affiliated political parties had emerged in Kosovo (the Party of Justice and Fjala), which have requested allowing hijab and religious education in public schools of Kosovo. However, as interviewed stakeholders of Macro-Level Analysis have indicated, the political grievances in Kosovo are primarily ethnically-based and religion is not the major cause of them (Peci and Demjaha, 2021).

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

The meso-level analysis scrutinises the impact of identified drivers at the local context with youth of the age from 12 to 30 years, which is potentially the most vulnerable age group to be affected by radicalism and violent extremism, and this, in itself, represents an important added value. Furthermore, this analysis highlights possible convergence or divergence of the research results of the local social context (Mitrovica South Municipality) with the research results of the macro-level analysis related to the impact of identified drivers of violent extremism.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The key objective of this research is to determine social factors that feed the patterns of violent extremism at the community level, and the relations of these factors with macro-drivers. In this regard, the results of the Macro-Level Analysis and of the workability of drivers will be tested at the meso-level context, including the intersections between drivers and interactions among drivers and social contexts in the Municipality of Mitrovica South. In doing so, this research will try to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of the political context in the process of radicalisation? To what extent do the democracy, good governance, the rule of law and political inclusion have a role in shaping the perceptions and expectations on drivers of radicalisation?
2. How are the different actors of radicalisation framed by the state in each targeted country?
3. What are the dominant narratives on community grievances based on the political claims?

THE DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND THE IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

The meso-level institutions in this research are families, neighbourhoods, schools, universities, religious communities, municipal institutions, and sports and culture associations.

CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The main purpose of this project is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of violent extremism (VE) among youth aged from 12-30 years. At the same time, Kosovo Country Report has shown that most of the foreign terrorist fighters who have travelled to Syria and Iraq from Kosovo were from 20 – 30 years old. On the other hand, the report suggests that youth is evidently especially vulnerable towards radicalisation, both online and through direct contacts.

Against this background, and having in mind the local context in the Municipality of Mitrovica South, the criteria used for sample selection was based on gender, religious, and urban rural balance, as well as coverage of young participants of the age 12 to 30 for focus groups. In addition, there were three interviews conducted with seasoned local civil society activists, with an in-depth knowledge on the evolving social context in the last three decades in the Municipality of Mitrovica South, in order to get a comprehensive picture in relation to this research.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

All participants in this research belonged to the Albanian ethnicity. When it comes to gender, urban-rural representation, and religious affiliation, out of 27 individuals who participated in this research, 15 were male and 12 female, all of them were Muslims, and 18 were from urban and 9 from rural areas.

The focus group of young participants of the age 12 to 15 years consisted of eight individuals, four of whom were female and four were male, all of whom belonged to Muslim religion; three were originating from rural and the other five from urban areas of the Municipality of Mitrovica South.

The focus group of young participants of the age 15 to 18 years consisted of eight individuals, four female and four male, all of whom belonged to Muslim religion, and three were originating from rural and the other five from urban areas of the Municipality of Mitrovica South.

The focus group of the young participants of the age 18 to 30 years consisted of eight individuals of the age from 18 to 27 years old, four female and four male, all of whom belonged to Muslim religion, with five of them originating from urban and the other three from rural areas of the Municipality of Mitrovica South.

The three interviewees were males of the age 35 to 56 years old, all of them from the urban area of Mitrovica South.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

During this research, three focus group discussions took place with youth of the age group from 12 to 30 years, as well as three interviews with seasoned civil society activists.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

Initially this research was planned to cover the entire district of Mitrovica South, which also includes three other municipalities. Nevertheless, due to the fact that Mitrovica South is a part of ethnically divided city of Mitrovica, the political grievances are considerably higher than in other municipalities of this district that are not confronted with such problems that affect lives of people on daily bases. This was the reason why for the purpose of this research, the focus groups and the interviews were limited to the Municipality of Mitrovica South only, since the political grievances we were looking for are the biggest there.

The Meso-Level Dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS: HOW DO MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS WORK AT THE MESO-LEVEL?

The Municipality of Mitrovica South is characterised with varying levels of ethnically based political tensions due to the division of the city, which de-facto occurred immediately after the end of the war in Kosovo, in June 1999. The division of the city was formalised few days after the Declaration of Independence of Kosovo, with the adoption of the Law on Local Self-Government, on February 20th, 2008 (Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2008). Nowadays, both, the Municipality of Mitrovica South and the Municipality of Mitrovica North, are almost entirely mono-ethnic and mono-religious, the South being Albanian and Muslim, and the North being Serbian and Christian Orthodox, respectively.

Against this background, the impact of the driver of (ethnically based) political grievances, intertwined with the driver of economic deprivation, on the social context in the Mitrovica South, is viewed by the vast majority of participants in this research, as cause of a number of grave consequences for the citizens of this municipality. In this regard, the interviewee A1 claims that "Mitrovica is a very sensitive geopolitical and geographical point, and, accordingly, it is additionally impacted by influences that different external actors bring in this context".[1] According to him, due to such a position, Mitrovica is a place of attack of many extremist policies which tend to develop different political processes in the region and beyond. Furthermore, he thinks that local environment does not produce radicalisation; rather, "the radicalisation of situations is a consequence of the influence of other external factors, like the political war between Prishtina – Belgrade, and the struggle for influence among big powers in the region".[2] As a consequence, according to him, the main narratives related to the concerns of the local community are poverty and insecurity, due to the fact that people do not have a clear perspective for a sustainable peace and development. Once the richest city during 1970's and 1980's, Mitrovica has become the poorest city in Kosovo, and consequently in Europe.[3]

Similarly, the interviewee A2 observes that the troubling ethnic division of the city of Mitrovica in two municipalities, also accompanied with the problems of internally displaced people and other related issues, brings with itself the possibility for different forms of radicalisation, including the possibility for different kinds of escalations.[4] In this vein, according to interviewee A3, the local political context has also affected the impoverishment of a large number of families, which represents one of the main problems in the Mitrovica South, that may lead to politicization and eventually to radicalism.[5] Similar views on the impact of the economic impoverishment and high level of unemployment on radicalisation and extremism, also combined with disappointment with politics at the national and local level are shared by some participants of the age groups from 15 to 18 years,[6] and from 18 to 30 years.[7] However,

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[1] Interview with A1, Mitrovica South, April 12, 2022.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Interview with A2, Mitrovica South, May 12, 2022.

[5] Interview with A3, Mitrovica South, May 12, 2022.

some of the participants considered that dissatisfaction and disappointments with political elites does not directly drive people towards extremism.[8]

Nevertheless, a participant of the age group from 12 to 15 years stated that over time, the tolerance between Albanians and Serbs in Mitrovica has started to prevail. According to him, during the period 2000 to 2005 the situation was more critical, whereas nowadays, there is a good tolerance between them.[9] On the other hand, a participant of the age group from 15 to 18 years observes that life in Mitrovica South is a little different and harder than in other cities of Kosovo, first and foremost because citizens do not feel secure to visit Mitrovica North.[10] Similarly, another participant of this age group claims that there is still fear among Albanians who live predominantly in Mitrovica South, and Serbs who live entirely in the Mitrovica North, that impedes psychologically the freedom of movement. She thinks that the legacy of the war should impede them in building their future, and she also blames the political leadership for failing to meet the needs of the new generation in developing the country in all aspects.[11]

In this vein, a participant of the age group from 18 to 30 years thinks that the issue of the North is a problem of the whole of Kosovo, and, consequently, it is a problem of the national government as well. She observes that Serbia controls the North through different parallel mechanisms and criminal groups, projecting this part of the country as its own, regardless of the fact that it should function under the sovereignty of Kosovo. This fact, according to her, affects radicalism, because now the young Serbs who are in the North can be very easily influenced by these structures, and that may lead to physical violence between communities.[12] Similarly, another participant thinks that the political context in the Mitrovica North serves the idea of Greater Serbia, which can produce ethnic radicalism and political militancy that could potentially pose a threat to the security of the city.[13]

Another participant of this age group has slightly different opinion. He thinks that for the current situation are to be blamed the previous local governments of Mitrovica South, who, according to him, were focused on personal material gains, rather than on the problems of citizens. In addition, he claims that all previous mayors of Mitrovica South did nothing all about Roma and Ashkali people that are the most impoverished and vulnerable communities in this municipality, thus having a huge impact on the development of the city.[14] A similar observation on the state of affairs of these communities is shared by another participant of this age group as well.[15]

When it comes to the driver of education, leisure and cultural opportunities, the research findings show

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[6] U3, A1, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Frang Bardhi" April 12, 2022.

[7] M3. And R1, Focus Group with students of the University "Isa Boletini", April 22, 2022.

[8] E5, A3, Ibid.

[9] D1, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Berdi Gjinaj," April 12, 2022.

[10] A1, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Frang Bardhi" April 12, 2022.

[11] Z4, Ibid.

[12] SH7, Focus Group with students of the University "Isa Boletini," April 22, 2022.

[13] M3. Ibid.

[14] S12, Ibid.

[15] E5, Ibid.

that Mitrovica South suffers from a low level of education, very limited leisure and almost inexistent cultural opportunities. In this regard, an interviewee observes that due to the irregular urban planning in the city, which did not envisage sufficient free spaces and parks, the public infrastructure for leisure is very limited.[16] On the other hand, according to another interviewee, the problems imposed by the limitations of the public infrastructure are used by the private sector that offers additional spaces for sport activities, but these opportunities are available only to youth with good economic conditions.[17] However, another interviewee observed that regardless of these deeply rooted problems, the sport infrastructure has improved significantly in the last years.[18] In this vein, participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years claim that once a very strong cultural identity of Mitrovica has declined almost completely.[19] On the other hand, the research findings show that very few of the participants of the age groups from 12 to 15 years, and from 15 to 18 years, are engaged in sport and cultural activities.

In addition, research findings show that there is a certain level of violence among youth in the Municipality of Mitrovica South. According to an interviewee, there were, and there are, injuries and murders committed by youth in this municipality.[20] A participant of the age group from 12 to 15 years claims that youth in a certain poor neighbourhood of this municipality are particularly violent and prone to delinquency.[21] Furthermore, participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years observe that during their education in primary and secondary schools, they have experienced psychological violence, either from their schoolmates, or from their teachers.[22] Similar experiences of psychological violence were also observed by participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years, including physical violence and sexual harassment exercised by certain teachers against their schoolmates while they were in secondary school.[23]

In regard to injustices, a participant of the age group from 15 to 18 years thinks because the local mentality that is very prejudicial, woman suffer the most, since to a number of them is denied the right to decide for themselves, and they are considered less capable than men.[24] Another participant of the same age group claims that the main sources of injustice in Mitrovica South are economic deprivation and high level of unemployment that have a huge impact on social injustice.[25] However, none of the participants has justified violence to address injustices, except in a case of physical self-defence.[26]

On the other hand, although participants in this research have different opinions about religion as a driver of extremism in Mitrovica South, the research results show that religious preaching by a number of local Muslim clergy is a source of religious extremism. In this regard, an interviewee thinks that the

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[16] Interview with A1.

[17] Interview with A3.

[18] Interview with A2.

[19] M3. SH7, H4, S12, Focus Group with students of the University "Isa Boletini."

[20] Interview with A1.

[21] G3, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Bedri Gjinaj."

[22] B1, A1, A5, U3, Focus Group with pupils of the Secondary School "Frang Bardhi".

[23] S12, A3, M3, Focus Group with pupils of the University "Isa Boletini."

[24] U3, Focus Group with pupils of the Secondary School "Frang Bardhi."

[25] H4, Focus Group with pupils of the University "Isa Boletini."

[26] Focus Group with pupils of the Secondary School "Frang Bardhi" and Focus Group with pupils of the University "Isa Boletini."

religion in itself is not a problem, and is only one of the factors that can be used to develop different political agendas. According to him, the most important factor that can drive people towards extremism is nationalism, which is also the most fertile soil for development of different political agendas.[27] Another interviewee thinks that religion is not the main factor of extremism, due to the fact that economic problems are above the religion in driving people towards emigration to Western Europe in their pursuit for better life.[28] Similarly, another interviewee claims that economic deprivation and unemployment are the most important factors that may push individuals towards religious and other forms of radicalism.[29]

Nevertheless, some participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years show a high level of religiosity in the Municipality of Mitrovica South, but they also emphasise the high level of tolerance towards other religious communities.[30] However, this conviction on tolerance was contested by other participants of this age group. Thus, a participant noted that she was judged by other people because of her friendships with people of other religions, and she added that these judgements are a big mistake.[31] Regarding this issue, another participant observed that people who are less religious do not prejudice other religions, whereas extremists and fundamentalists do not accept easily people of other religious belonging.[32]

Against this backdrop, a participant of the age group from 18 to 30 years observes a high level of religiosity in Mitrovica South. She stipulated that although believers and preachers have the right to practice their religion, however, in the city there is a dominance of Islam in this regard, whereas in some cases the Muslim clergy propagates extremist preaching.[33] Furthermore, by concurring with this observation, another participant claimed that the local population has not reached a sufficient level of education, and of a fair and reasonable understanding of the lectures delivered by various preachers of Islam. As a result, these preachings are sometimes misinterpreted, and consequently they negatively affect human development and even the overall city of Mitrovica. In this vein, she argues that some Muslim clergy in Mitrovica South misinterpret the religion in that way that contributes to the divisions among people, including those between men and women.[34]

The fact that dubious religious preaching is pursued by a number of Muslim clergy was confirmed by other participants as well. A participant of the age group from 18 -30 years has observed cases when a number of local imams were inclined towards lecturing on Sharia Law rather than on Islam.[35] She considers that this is exactly where the danger associated with extremism lies, due to the fact that people can be easily indoctrinated, if they do not have proper worldviews or lack critical thinking. In this

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[27] Interview with A1.

[28] Interview with A2.

[29] Interview with A3.

[30] G3, F2, A7, D1, C2, F19, U3. Focus Group with the pupils of Primary School "Bedri Gjinaj." April 12, 2022.

[31] Z4, Ibid.

[32] A1, Ibid.

[33] H4, Focus Group with students of the University "Isa Boletini."

[34] S12.

[35] M3.

line of argument, another participant of the same age group observes that religious leaders in Mitrovica South are to certain extend extremists in their discourse. He argues that due to their influence on certain groups of believers, they tend to pass their attitudes to others, in order to create a society based on their image by increasing religious extremism.[36]

Furthermore, extreme cases of psychological manipulation through religious interpretations of local Muslim clergy were also witnessed by some participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years. Thus, a participant has observed religious preaching delivered by an imam that had as a topic the existence jinn that can possess the body, or control it. According to him, in the Muslim religion, that is a topic that not everyone can cope with. In some respects, it can cause mental disorders to certain persons, as well as depression or stress. He also argues that in order to cope with these topics one needs to be mentally prepared, otherwise certain individuals can very easily face serious psychological problems.[37] In this regard, another participant has observed religious preaching by some Muslim clergy, when they have spoken about souls and the jinn, which sometimes make certain religious followers to get depressed and to live with fear.[38] On the other hand, based on their personal experience and perceptions, few participants in this research who practice religion have expressed their high opinion about local imams, and particularly those of the age group from 12 to 15 years. In this regard, there were two participants of this age group who think that their local imam is a wise man who has taught them good things.[39]

An interesting finding of this research is that none of the participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years has provided any opinion on the interrelation between national and religious identity in their community, as well as on the role of religious belonging on personal relations among people of different beliefs. On the other hand, few female participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years have clear ideas on these issues, whereas none of the male participants of this age group has provided any opinion at all. In this regard, a participant defines national belonging as related to the origins and community where people live, whereas, according to her, religion is a private matter. In this regard, she thinks that in term of identity, nation comes first, whereas the religion is a secondary matter.[40] Similarly, another participant thinks that nation is related to common language, culture and history, whereas religious belonging is a private matter for members of Albanian nation.[41]

Nevertheless, participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years have well defined opinions about interrelation between national and religious belonging. A participant of this age group claims that she recognises only the national identity and that she does not practice religion. In terms of personal relations with people, she thinks religion is totally irrelevant, because the values that people have are most important for her.[42] In this vein, another participant thinks that she is very proud of her national belonging and that she does not identify herself with any religion. But, according to her, national

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[36] R1.

[37] M19, Focus Group with the students of Secondary School "Frang Bardhi."

[38] D2. Ibid.

[39] A7 and D3. Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Bedri Gjinaj."

[40] U3, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Frang Bardhi."

[41] Z4, Ibid.

[42] S12, Focus Group with students of the University "Isa Boletini."

identities are also a source of conflict in the divided city of Mitrovica, due to the history of conflict between Albanians and Serbs, whereas different religious affiliations are not a source of conflicts or disputes.[43] On the other hand, another participant claims that he feels closer to a Catholic Albanian, than to a Muslim of another nation,[44] an opinion that is also shared by two other participants of this age group.[45]

However, an interviewee thinks that in the mini-context of Mitrovica South national belonging corresponds with religious belonging, since almost 100% of the population is Albanian of Muslim creed, with an exception of around 100 Albanian Catholics.[46] Similar opinion is shared by another interviewee, who also stipulates the fact that Islam in Mitrovica South is multi-ethnic, due to a number of members of Bosniaks, Roma and Ashkali communities that live in the city, whereas according to him, ethnic tensions between Albanians and Serbs have never had a dimension of religious conflict,[47] an opinion that is shared by another interviewee as well.[48]

The most interesting finding in this respect is that the lack of opinions in discussing these two issues, among the participants of the age groups from 12 to 15 years, and from 15 to 18 years. This is an indicator, either of confusion or of social pressure to provide free opinions that would describe their respective identities and their basic attitudes towards social-religious distance. On the other hand, the participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years have expressed some pretty well defined opinions on these matters. This is itself an indicator that the younger the participants in this research, the deeper is the identity shift from the secular nature of Albanian nationalism to religious affiliation.

Against this backdrop, the research findings show that youth in Mitrovica South in general do not identify themselves with certain religious leaders, but there are individual cases of identification that are driven by public attraction of certain Muslim clergy and the humanitarian aid provided by them. The interviewee A1 claims that regardless of the fact that although few Muslim clergy in the Mitrovica South are charismatic and have a political agenda, youth in general do not identify with them.[49] In this regard, the interviewee A3 has stipulated the fact that in addition to their preaching gimmicks, some imams are mediating between individuals and families to reconcile their feuds, instead of having these issues being dealt by the justice institutions.[50]

Interestingly enough, the research findings show that participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years have heard about extremism solely from the lessons of the subject "Civic Education" and from TV news. According to them, they have discussed this issue with their teacher of this subject, but they

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[43] M3, Ibid.

[44] R1, Ibid.

[45] S12 and M3. Ibid.

[46] Interview with A1.

[47] Interview with A2.

[48] Interview with A2.

[49] Interview with A1.

[50] Interview with A3.

remain silent on whether they have discussed it, either with parents, or with their friends.[51] On the other hand, the participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years are more informed on this matter. According to a participant of this group who has done a research in this topic, although many people think that extremism is not wrong, in his opinion religious extremism is mistaken, since religion imposes many rules and norms that limit the freedom of individuals. This may create conflicts among people that will not necessarily lead to violence, but rather to exclusion from different social groups.[52] Another participant of this age group thinks that religious extremism also entails psychological violence, because, since according to her, nobody has the right to influence people or put pressure on them for what they chose to believe or on their way of life.[53] Yet another participant also thinks that extremism is associated with strict rules, like living in frames. According to her, living in a frame is the biggest fear, because it limits the opportunities of individuals to express themselves, and, basically, one has no rights to live otherwise than based on those rules.[54]

Similarly, participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years emphasise that they have heard and learned about extremism. According to a participant of this age group, she has heard about extremism from TV news and social media, and she added that she has discussed it with her closest people. She thinks that there is a difference between extremism and violence, because violence is manifested only after the extremism is rooted.[55] Another participant claims that in addition to TV and social media, she has learned about extremism from different reports and workshops on the topic of extremism. According to her, extremism is the behavior that is projected, or the idea of certain individuals, towards certain social groups, whereas the violence, which is not necessarily limited to the physical one, is the materialization of those attitudes or ideas.[56]

Against this background, the research results show that participants have different attitudes regarding their freedom to discuss issues of their concern with parents, teachers or friends. In this regard, no specific patterns of preferences were noted among participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years,[57] whereas patterns of preferences among participants of the age groups from 15 to 18 years and from 18 to 30 years vary between family members and friends.[58]

When it comes to the driver of social digitalisation, majority of participants confirm that youth spend considerable amount of time being engaged with social media. In this regard, participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years state that social media are part of their daily life, main source of their information, as well as for playing video games and for communication with their social circles.[59] Similar patterns of using social media are also mentioned by participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years,

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[51] Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Bedri Gjinaj."

[52] M.19, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Bedri Gjinaj."

[53] A1, Ibid.

[54] U3, Ibid.

[55] R1, Focus Group with students of the University "Isa Boletini."

[56] H4. Ibid.

[57] Focus Group with pupils of the primary school "Bedri Gjinaj."

[58] Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Frang Bardhi" and with students of the University "Isa Boletini."

[59] F2, D1, E2, A7, Focus Group with pupils of the primary school "Bedri Gjinaj."

and of the age group from 18 to 30 years.[60] Furthermore, these findings are confirmed by interviewees as well. According to one of the interviewees, nowadays for youth social media are dominant over all other media.[61] Another interviewees confirm these patterns as well, and they emphasise a large amount of time that youth on social media, and they also stress the fact that these media and portals have nowadays completely replaced the traditional media.[62]

Interestingly, although participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years confirm that they spent considerable amount of time on social media, they remained silent on whether they have encountered religious or extremist content by using them.[63] But, participants from the age group from 15 to 18 years pointed out that they have encountered such contents in social media. According to a participant, especially during the month of Ramadan, every second or third video in social media is related to religion.[64] According to another participant, some social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook, usually display some information regarding religion which may attract certain individuals. He thinks that the option that some of these posts are directed by extremists should not be ruled out.[65]

On the other hand, participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years also confirm that they encounter a lot of religious content when using social media. In this regard, a participant claims that for some time now she has not come across any content that calls for extremist ideas, which was quite prevalent during the war in Syria. In addition, she thinks that this format of presentation of religious discourse is useful, since people do not need to go to the mosque for hearing what the imam says, but have the opportunity to listen wherever they are.[66] Furthermore, another participant observes that there was a time when there were many posts regarding Palestine that were connected with the religious elements. The narrative of these posts were the West is not helping Palestine because it belongs to the Islamic world.[67] But, interestingly enough, two participants in this research have made a comparison on the stance of Kosovo towards two issues, the issue of Palestine, and the one of the war in Ukraine. According to them, regardless of the fact that both of these countries do not recognise Kosovo, its Government supports Ukraine, but not the Palestine, precisely because of the political agendas of the great powers and Kosovo's alignment with the West.[68]

This research has provided interesting findings regarding the driver of transnational dynamics. One of the participants from the age group from 15 to 18 years thinks that people joined ISIS as a consequence of propaganda and inaccurate information that was spread on the war in Syria, which according to him, not only was wrong, but there was not even a religious justification for it.[69] Another participant of this

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[60] Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Frang Bardhi" and with students of the University "Isa Boletini."

[61] Interview with A1.

[62] Interview with A2 and A3.

[63] Focus Group with pupils of Primary School "Bedri Gjinaj."

[64] Z4. Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Frang Bardhi."

[65] M19. Ibid.

[66] M3, Focus Group with students of the University "Isa Boletini."

[67] SH7. Ibid.

[68] M3 and A3. Ibid.

[69] M19, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Frang Bardhi."

age group observes that almost all of propaganda on ISIS, which was quite massive some years ago, was spread by social media.[70] Similarly, according to another participant, six-seven years ago, this propaganda was massive, and during that time she and her family were hearing quite often that certain individuals from Mitrovica were joining the war in Syria driven by religious militancy. Furthermore, she claims that her parents played a major role in explaining and guiding her on what was going on at that time.[71]

Similar experiences have been witnessed by the participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years.[72] According to a participant of this age group, individuals that joined ISIS were driven exclusively by religion, and they were so much brainwashed that they not only sacrificed themselves, but even their families for this cause.[73] In this regard, another participant claims that religious brainwashing can be so deep, which is illustrated by a case in Mitrovica South, when a women who lost her husband in the war in Syria, has decided to remain faithful to ISIS and has refused to be repatriated together with her children in Kosovo.[74]

Based on the participants' statements above, it can be concluded that the misinterpretation of Islam by fundamentalist imams, represents the major factor of radicalisation and violent extremism in the Municipality of Mitrovica South. The research findings also shows that the driver of transnational dynamics is an important push factor towards radicalisation and violent extremism among youth in this municipality. In addition, according to the participants in this research, the driver of social digitalisation is a major source of radical religious content, and thus significantly contributes to radicalisation and violent extremism in this municipality. Although in Mitrovica South political grievances are at very high level, the research findings show that the driver of political grievances has a rather a peripheral role compared to the drivers of religion, transnational dynamics and social digitalisation. Nevertheless, the driver of political grievances has contributed to economic deprivation and high level of unemployment that may push individuals toward religious and other forms of radicalisation and violent extremism. Finally, the research has shown that there is no evidence of any impact of the driver of territorial inequalities on radicalisation and violent extremism.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS

As part of the meso-level analysis it is important to identify eventual intersections between different drivers and explore whether such intersections could be considered as factors that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism, or, on the contrary, as initiatives to prevent these phenomena.

The above analyses point out to important intersections between the driver of religion and two other drivers - digital socialization and transnational dynamics. The research has shown that social digitalisation plays quite an important role in shaping the way of life of youth in Mitrovica South Municipality. The analysis has shown that youth participating in the research spend a considerable part of their free time on digital social media. Consequently, these youth receive most of the information

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[70] A5, Ibid.

[71] Z4. Ibid.

[72] M3., R1. Focus Group with students of the University "Isa Boletini."

[73] S12. Ibid.

[74] SH7, Ibid.

about religion, as well as radicalisation and violent extremism through them. A number of the participants have acknowledged that they have encountered almost all of propaganda on ISIS, especially some years ago, in social media. They observe that such propaganda was quite massive and has directly contributed for some individuals from Mitrovica South to join the wars in Syria and Iraq. In this way, social digitalisation represents an important driver that intertwines with the driver of religious (mis)interpretations and in some cases reinforces it.

Similarly, the transnational dynamics driver also intersects with religion through foreign influence from Gulf States that often results in the changed perceptions of youth about religions and pushes them towards radicalisation and violent extremism. Namely, a number of organizations from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries that came to Kosovo after the war have openly challenged traditional practices of Islam and have instead tried to impose alien interpretations of Islam. The research results have shown that this was supported by a number of local Muslim clergy who propagated these extremist preaching. The research findings also point out to a loose intersection between religion and the driver of economic deprivation. Although according to macro-level analysis, economic deprivation is not considered a dominant driver of radicalisation and violent extremism, the research shows that having in mind the current reality in Mitrovica, it might push some youth in the community towards radicalisation and extremism. Namely, the city of Mitrovica that was once the richest city during 1970s – 1980s, has nowadays become the poorest city in Kosovo and consequently in Europe. In such circumstances, the economic impoverishment and high level of unemployment may drive people towards radicalism and extremism. Another important intersection to which the research has pointed out is the one between religion and the driver related to education, leisure and cultural opportunities. A number of youth and interviewees have emphasised that the level of education of the population in the city of Mitrovica South is very low, while leisure and cultural opportunities are very limited. According to youth and interviewees participating in the research, some radical imams who propagate radical Islam beliefs could easily manipulate individuals with low level of education and improper knowledge about religion. On the other hand, faced with very limited and almost inexistent leisure and cultural opportunities, some youth in the community might seek spiritual comfort and socialization with radicalised and extremist groups.

In addition to a number of intersections of religion with several other drivers, research analysis has identified several intersections between other drivers related to radicalisation and violent extremism. An important identified intersection in this case is the one between political grievances and economic deprivation. As already mentioned, since Mitrovica South is a part of ethnically divided city of Mitrovica, grievances are much higher than in other municipalities of Kosovo. In this regard, the vast majority of participants in this research consider the intersection between the driver of (ethnically based) political grievances cause a number of grave consequences for the citizens of this municipality. The existing local political context has undoubtedly contributed to a very high level of unemployment and impoverishment of a large number of families in the Mitrovica South, thus leading to obvious economic deprivation. By the same token, the reverse is also true, given that unemployment, lack of job prospects and limited access to decent level of social welfare might contribute among certain youth towards increased dissatisfactions and despair with the performance of political parties and local government. While for the time being, according to some participants such dissatisfaction and disappointment with

political elites does not lead towards radicalism and extremism, if the ongoing economic deprivations persists, in the future, this might be the case.

The research also sheds light on an additional important intersection between digital socialisation and transnational dynamics. On the one hand, youth participating in the research have admitted that they have spent the bulk of their free time on digital social media. On the other hand, there is sufficient evidence that information technologies have continuously served for the dissemination of radical extremist messages. Research findings have confirmed that there are cases in which foreign extremist elements have used digital technologies to spread their extremist ideologies and to recruit individuals for their aims.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

In addition to important intersections between different drivers, the research analysis also enables us to identify certain interactions between the drivers and the social contexts that could be considered as factors that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism. It should be noted that these interactions could in turn also help in building community resilience to prevent these phenomena.

The above analyses points out to important interactions between the driver of religion and the unemployment and education as the social contexts. The research findings clearly show that employment and education are of special importance in building social resilience of the community against radicalisation and violent extremism. Namely, the low level of education could seriously threaten the social resilience of the community, since, as the research has shown, it is easier for radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam beliefs, to manipulate individuals without proper education. On the other hand, unemployment as a factor that limits access to decent level of social wellbeing could also threaten the social resilience of the community, since in the past, radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam beliefs have managed to recruit some unemployed youth with limited access to decent level of social welfare to join the war in Syria.

The research shows that interaction between religion and ethnic community as a social context may also play a significant role in building community resilience to religious radicalisation and violent extremism. Most of the youth and interviewees participating in the research consider ethnic affiliation more important than the religious one. Consequently, national identity could contribute to the prevention of religious radicalisation and violent extremism in the Municipality of Mitrovica South, and thus strengthen the social resilience of the community.

Another important interaction is evident between the driver of political grievances and the ethnic identity. Because Mitrovica South is a part of ethnically divided city of Mitrovica, political grievances there are much higher than in other municipalities of this district that do not face such problems. On the other hand, almost all youth and interviewees participating in the research believe that political grievances in Mitrovica South are primarily ethnically based. These grievances have often resulted in varying levels of ethnically based political tensions in Mitrovica South, with the possibility to cause ethnic radicalism and extremism. The meso-level analysis of the conducted research has not indicated any other relevant interactions between remaining drivers and social contexts.

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS OF THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

As described above, Mitrovica is a city divided along ethnic lines in which the Municipality of Mitrovica South and the Municipality of Mitrovica North are almost entirely mono-ethnic and mono-religious, Albanian and Muslim, and Serbian and Christian Orthodox, respectively. As such, it represents a neuralgic point of ethno-political tensions in the country in which political grievances are inevitably linked with economic deprivation and ethnic radicalisation. According to research analysis, the Mitrovica South shows a high level of religiosity with many citizens attending the Islam religious preaching in numerous mosques of the municipality. At the same time, though youth in Mitrovica South in general do not identify themselves with certain religious leaders, there are individual cases of identification, primarily driven by public attraction of certain members of Muslim clergy and the humanitarian aid provided by them. A rather worrisome finding of this research is that none of the participants of the group age from 12 to 15 years has provided a single opinion on the interrelation of national and religious identity in their community as well as on the role of religious belonging on personal relations among people of different beliefs. This in itself might be an indicator that among younger ages in the Municipality of Mitrovica South there is a shift from the secular nature of Albanian nationalism and ethnic identity towards religious affiliation.

Against this backdrop, it is worth noting that according to research findings the impact of meso-level drivers in the Municipality of Mitrovica South generally converges with Macro-level drivers. Likewise, at the macro-level analysis, the research participants perceive the driver of religion as the major factor of violent extremism, which is intrinsically intertwined with the drivers of digital socialisation and transnational dynamics. The drivers of economic deprivation and the driver related to education, leisure and cultural opportunities are perceived by participants as also having a certain impact on radicalisation and violent extremism. The driver of political grievances is considered as peripheral, whereas the driver of territorial inequalities is considered as largely insignificant to violent extremism.

In terms of identified intersections among drivers, the intersections between religion and two other drivers – digital socialisation and transnational dynamics – are certainly the most important ones. The research findings have also indicated an important intersection between religion and the driver of economic deprivation, and not so important intersection between religion and the driver related to education, leisure and cultural opportunities. In addition, the research analysis has pointed out to important interactions between religion and the unemployment and education as social contexts. The research has also shown that interaction between religion and ethnic community as a social context may play a significant role in building community resilience to religious radicalisation and violent extremism.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO- LEVEL ANALYSIS

The Meso-Level analysis has identified several prevention indicators pertaining to radicalisation and violent extremism in the Municipality of South Mitrovica. First and foremost, the research findings clearly show that education and knowledge play an important role in building social resilience to radicalisation

and violent extremism. It is more difficult for young people with low or improper education to avoid manipulation and indoctrination by radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam beliefs.

Secondly, the research has shown that employment that provides access to decent level of social welfare is also a rather important factor in building social resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Unemployed youth, who lack job prospects and have limited access to decent level of social welfare, are more likely to accept tenets of the radical Islam. The research has indicated that radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam doctrines have managed in the past to recruit some form the unemployed youth with limited access to decent level of social welfare to join the wars in Syria and Iraq.

Finally, ethnic identity could also play an important role in building community resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism since most of the youth participating in the research consider ethnic affiliation more important than the religious one. Furthermore, because the secular character of ethnic identity of Kosovo Albanians coincides with the Western European values, pursuing secular character of Kosovo embodied in its Constitution could serve as an important pull factor in countering violent extremism. However, research finding have identified a rather worrisome indicator that among younger ages in the Municipality of Mitrovica South there is a shift from the secular nature of Albanian nationalism and ethnic identity towards religious affiliation. It is of utmost importance in terms of prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism to educate children about the importance of the secular character of Albanian national identity and religious cohabitation.

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO LEVEL ANALYSIS

Prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism requires a deep understanding of the radicalisation process that takes into account macro, meso and micro levels of analysis. It is an integrated whole comprised of different motivational factors operating at these three levels that makes an individual vulnerable to the influence of religious (mis)interpretations. The meso-level analysis has combined drivers with social contexts in order to identify contexts and drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in the municipality of Mitrovica South. This analysis of different combinations between drivers and crossings between drivers and social contexts has enabled us to identify certain factors that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism, but can also help in building community resilience to prevent these phenomena. In addition, through this meso-level research it was possible to identify certain paths that should be taken into consideration in the micro-level analysis.

In the same way in which no single driver can establish a causal relationship between radicalisation and violent extremism, no motivational factor operating at only one level of analysis can determine whether an individual becomes radicalised or not. For instance, most of the youth that participated in the research are not satisfied with political leadership of the country and the previous local governments of Mitrovica South. Although according to the research analysis political grievances are currently not an important push factor towards religious radicalisation, certain individuals who have continuously been disappointed and dissatisfied with the performance of political parties and governments might in some cases turn towards radicalism and extremism. On the other hand, the meso-level analysis has

shown that certain unemployed individuals with limited access to decent level of social welfare in Mitrovica South might turn towards radicalism and extremism. Finally, research findings have shown that young participants spend a considerable part of their free time on digital social media where they have witnessed cases in which extremist elements used digital technologies to spread their extremist ideologies, and to recruit individuals for their aims. However, not all of these youth - dissatisfied with political parties and governments, unemployed or exposed to extremist ideologies disseminated through digital social media - will become radicalised or turn to violent extremism. In all these cases, whether an individual will turn towards radicalism and extremism will depend on a set of individual motivational factors that need to be examined through the micro-level analysis.

General Conclusion

This research analysis provides credible findings proving that the impact of meso-level drivers in the Mitrovica South converges with the impact of macro-level drivers, by specifying religion as most influential driver of violent extremism that is strongly inter-related with the drivers of digital socialisation and transnational dynamics. Furthermore, the research findings show that the driver of political grievances has rather a peripheral importance in relation to radicalism and violent extremism.

In conclusion, this analysis provides answers to the following pre-determined research questions:

1. What is the impact of the political context in the process of radicalisation? To what extent do the democracy, good governance, the rule of law and political inclusion have a role in shaping the perceptions and expectations on drivers of radicalisation?

The political context in the Mitrovica South has resulted in economic deprivation and poverty, high level of unemployment and occasional ethnic tensions that have been eased in the last years. Nevertheless, the research results have shown that the political context in itself is not a source of religious radicalism and violent extremism. Furthermore, the ethnic tensions between Albanian and Serbian communities have not been transformed into a conflict with inter-religious character. In contrary, radicalism and violent extremism in Mitrovica South, as elsewhere in Kosovo, is a part of global extremist political Islam that has not originated from the local circumstances, but those circumstances have been misused by a number of organizations from the Gulf countries and certain local radical imams to introduce and strengthen these tendencies.

The research results have shown that especially rule of law is of utmost importance in shaping the perceptions and expectations on the driver of religion that is the most important one in the local context. In this regard, the fact that a number of Muslim clergy are sometimes taking reconciling role in feuds among people and families, thus replacing the rule of law institutions. This in itself is indicator of the state of affairs of the justice institutions in Mitrovica South, which empowers religious actors in community and public affairs. On the other hand, the research inputs have shown that democracy, good governance and political inclusion in the local context do not have not a particular role in shaping the perceptions on the most relevant drivers of radicalisation.

2. How are the different actors of radicalisation framed by the state in each targeted country?

The research findings have shown that according to some participants a number of charismatic radical Muslim clergy are can be considered as actors of radicalism. These clergy are perceived as more knowledgeable than other imams, able to attract their congregations with preaching gimmicks, and sometimes mediate/arbitrate feuds among individuals and families.

3. What are the dominant narratives on community grievances based on the political claims?

The research inputs have shown that the dominant narratives are insecurity and poverty due to the fact that people live without having clear prospects for peace and the future in this divided city. In addition, political grievances have been reinforced by the fact that Mitrovica, once as the most industrialised and the richest city in Kosovo, has nowadays has turned into the poorest city in the country.

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Transnational Dynamics in the Municipality of Gjilan

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Introduction

The research findings of the Kosovo Country Paper on Macro Level Drivers have clearly identified the religious (mis)interpretations as the driver with the highest impact on the violent extremism at the national level that is inherently intertwined with the driver of transnational dynamics, namely with global radical Islamic ideologies and movements (Peci and Demjaha, 2021). The Municipality of Gjilan was chosen as a case study for scrutinizing the impact of the driver of transnational dynamics at the meso-level, since it is situated close to the cross-border triangle Kosovo – North Macedonia – Serbia, and it also has a huge diaspora in Switzerland and Germany.

The data of the last population census conducted in 2011 show that the Municipality of Gjilan has had 90,178 inhabitants (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2017). In terms of their ethnic background, 97,4% of the inhabitants of the municipality were Albanians, 0.1% were Turks, 0.6% Serbs, 0.4% Roma, 0.1% Bosnians and the rest belonged to other ethnic groups (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2017), whereas in terms of religious background, 98.6% of the population declared themselves as Muslims, 0.7% as Christian Orthodox, 0.05% as Catholics, and the rest were declared as other, without religious affiliation, or have preferred not to answer (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2011). The largest number of the young people (59.5%) lives in the urban areas, and the rest (40.5%) lives in rural areas of the municipality (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2011). The Municipality of Gjilan has in total 52 pre-school, elementary, and secondary, educational institutions, as well as the Public University "Kadri Zeka" and few campuses of private colleges (KIPRED, 2019, p.8).

This study will initially present its research methodology, then it will analyse the Meso-Level Dynamics that include the relations of social contexts to the results of Macro-Level Analysis and the workability of Macro-Drivers at the meso-level, as well as the intersections between drivers, and interactions among drivers and social contexts. The concluding analysis represents key findings related to meso-level drivers, prevention indicators from the meso-level analysis, as well as micro-paths reported from meso-level analysis. The general conclusion summarises the main research findings, and presents the answers to the research questions of this research endeavour.

This study is based on qualitative primary sources, such as focus groups with youth of age from 12 to 30 years, and correctional interviews with two seasoned civil society activists of the Municipality of Gjilan. The selected sample is based on balanced gender and urban – rural representation.

Research Methodology

RECAP OF THE RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The research from Macro-Level Analysis has highlighted that the source of violent extremism deriving from extremist ideologies is a transnational phenomenon, which has penetrated in Kosovo from abroad. In war-torn Kosovo, different organizations with religious background from Middle East and Turkey, often camouflaged as charity enterprises, have invested heavily in rebuilding and building new mosques, organizing religious courses, and in translating and distributing religious literature with radical content. Initially, the propagators and recruiters came in Kosovo from North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandjak (Serbia).

The research has shed light on the interrelation of transnational dynamics and communication technologies, which, in regard to violent extremism, nowadays are two sides of the same coin, and complementary to one another. Nevertheless, the underlining finding from the research is that the driver of violent (mis)interpretation of Islam represents the major factor of violent extremism, and that it is integrally intertwined with the drivers of digital literacy (online propaganda) and that of transnational dynamics (global radical Islamic ideologies and movements).

THE ADDED VALUE OF THE MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The meso-level analysis scrutinises the impact of identified drivers at the local context with youth of the age from 12 to 30 years, which is potentially the most vulnerable age group to be affected by radicalism and violent extremism, and this, in itself, represents an important added value. Furthermore, this analysis highlights possible convergence or divergence of the research results at the local social context (Municipality of Gjilan) with the research results at the macro-level analysis related to the impact of identified drivers of violent extremism.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The key objective of this research is to determine the social factors that feed the patterns of violent extremism at the community level, and the relations of these factors with macro-level drivers. In this regard, the results of the Macro-Level Analysis and the workability of drivers will be tested at the meso-level context, including the intersections between drivers and interactions among drivers and social contexts in the Municipality of Gjilan. In this regard, this research is to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. How do the globalization and transnational movements impact the politics and the society?
2. Are perceptions on foreign policy a driver of violent extremism?
3. What is the role of new family patterns and diffuse social relations in the field of the transnational nature of radical groups?
4. How do the globalised communities link themselves to transnational movements?

THE DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND THE IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

The meso-level institutions in this research are families, neighbourhoods, schools, universities, religious communities, municipal institutions, and sports and culture associations.

THE CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The main purpose of this project is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of violent extremism (VE) among youth aged from 12-30 years. At the same time, Kosovo Country Report has shown that most of the foreign terrorist fighters who have travelled to Syria and Iraq from Kosovo were from 20 – 30 years old. On the other hand, the report suggests that youth is evidently especially vulnerable towards radicalisation, both online and through direct contacts.

Against this background, and having in mind the local context in the Municipality of Gjilan, the criteria used for sample selection was based on gender, religious, and urban rural balance, as well as coverage of young participants of the age 12 to 30 for focus groups. In addition, there were two interviews conducted with seasoned former and current institutional representatives, with an in-depth knowledge on the evolving social context in the last three decades in the Municipality of Gjilan, in order to get a comprehensive picture in relation to this research.

THE SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

All participants in this research belonged to Albanian ethnicity. Regarding gender, urban-rural representation, and religious affiliation, out of the 19 individuals who participated in this research, 10 were male and 9 female. All of them were Muslims, and 13 were from urban and 6 from rural areas.

The focus group of young participants of the age from 12 to 15 years consisted of six individuals, four of whom were female and two male; two were from rural, and the other four from urban areas of the Municipality of Gjilan.

The focus group of young participants of the age from 15 to 18 years consisted of six individuals, three female and three male; two were from rural, and the other four from urban areas of the Municipality of Gjilan.

The focus group of young participants of the age from 18 to 30 years consisted of five individuals of the age 18 to 27 years, two of whom were female and three male; three of them were from urban, and the other two from rural areas of the Municipality of Gjilan. The two interviewees are male, of the age from 50 and 55 years, and both of them were from the urban area of Gjilan.

THE DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS

During this research, three focus group discussions took place with youth of the age group from 12 to 30 years, as well as two interviews with seasoned civil society activists.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

Initially, this research was planned to cover the entire district of Gjilan, which also includes five other municipalities. Nevertheless, given the fact that Municipality of Gjilan in per-capita terms had the largest number of foreign terrorist fighters in this region that joined the conflicts in the Middle East, and that its citizens have considerable family ties with ethnic Albanians in Preshevo Valley (Serbia) and in Skopje and Kumanovo (North Macedonia), the research conducted with the focus groups and the interviews was limited to this municipality only.

The Meso-Level Dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS: HOW DO THE MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS WORK AT THE MESO-LEVEL?

The research conducted on the macro-level context highlights that the transnational dynamics is one of the key drivers of violent extremism in Kosovo. In this regard, the Municipality of Gjilan is characterised as one of the epicentres of transnational dynamics in Kosovo, due to the fact that it is situated close to the border crossing triangle Kosovo – North Macedonia – Serbia. In addition, a number of its citizens have family ties with Albanians in Preshevo Valley (Serbia) and with Kumanovo and Skopje (North Macedonia), and the municipality has a huge diaspora in Switzerland and Germany.

Against this background, the interviewee A2 observes that although Kosovo was an isolated place before the war of 1999, the importance of transnational dynamics has changed after the war when a number of global extremist movements from the Middle East, and some individuals from North Macedonia connected to them, penetrated Kosovo and specifically Gjilan.[75] Furthermore, the interviewee A1 notes that from 2012 to 2013, five – six imams from the North Macedonia were active in spreading religious extremism in Kosovo, until their entrance in the country was banned by Kosovo's authorities. In this regard, he observes that many individuals from Gjilan who have extremist views and the majority of those who joined the conflict in Iraq and Syria, have family relations in the North Macedonia, whereas there were only few cases from diaspora that joined extremism.[76] According to him, the division of the Islamic Community of the North Macedonia in two wings, namely the traditional Hanafi madhhab (Ottoman), and the Wahhabi one, has had an impact on radicalism in Kosovo and Gjilan specifically, due to family links, especially in the North Macedonian cities of Kumanovo and Skopje. Consequently, due to the role of these family relations, Islamization has become very present in Gjilan[77]. In this regard, a participant of the age group from 12 to 15 years claimed that he has heard that some Muslim clergy from the North Macedonia were propagating extinction of other religious communities, whereas another participant of this age group has observed cases when they have offended atheists as well.[78] A participant from the age group from 15 to 18 years thinks that after the war, many religious organizations from abroad that were propagating extremism entered Kosovo,[79] whereas participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years have surprisingly not observed such cases.

When it comes to the issues of globalised Islam and transnational movements, the situation is rather similar. Regarding the role of families related to transnational nature of radical groups, the interviewee A1 claims that their impact is a significant one. According to him, families with democratic and liberal orientation are generally oriented towards the West, but families impacted by religious ideologies are

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[75] Interview with A2, Gjilan, May 11, 2022.

[76] Interview with A1.

[77] Ibid.

[78] E37, E7, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko", Gjilan, April 28th, 2022.

[79] U6, Focus group with students of the Secondary School " Zenel Hajdini", April 29th, 2022.

sometimes influenced by the radical groups.[80] However, the interviewee A2 observes that there are some cases when a number of radicalised youth came from very patriotic families that haven't had anything to do with extremism. According to him, these cases are a result of the change of the traditional role of the family that occurred after the war of 1999, and of the opening of Kosovo to the world, as well as of the distortion of the educational system.[81] On the other hand, a young participant in this research thinks that religions at the global level play a role, because they may get nations closer to one another, but, also, nations may fall apart because of them[82].

When it comes to foreign policy perceptions, both interviewees claim that such perceptions have no role in Kosovo in relation to violent extremism.[83] In this vein, a participant of the age group from 12 to 15 years thinks that foreign policy orientation of Kosovo towards European Union and the United States has no impact internally in terms of national and religious identity, but there is an impression that some Western countries are Islamophobic and that they do not prefer to have as an EU member a country with the majority Muslim population.[84] On the other hand, the participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years appreciate the foreign policy orientation of Kosovo towards EU and U.S., and they do not see any impact of it on the national and religious identities in the country. Furthermore, they view this orientation as a venue for strengthening the society and the state of Kosovo.[85] Similar views are shared by the participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years as well.[86]

The research findings reveal interesting patterns of behaviour of local communities in the Municipality of Gjilan related to foreign perceptions. In this regard, the interviewee A1 thinks that, when it comes to developments in international arena, the ethnicities in this municipality usually follow the political patterns of their national governments. He explains this with the recent case of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, where Albanian community in Gjilan follows the Kosovo Government by showing solidarity to Kyiv, but there is not even a single sign of sympathy for Chechens that are fighting on the Russian side, although they belong to Islam. On the other hand, the Serb community follows the behaviour of the Government of Serbia by showing sympathy for Russia, and, similarly, the Turkish community follows official Ankara. Finally, he stresses that religious fundamentalists in Kosovo are neutral regarding the war in Ukraine, because in essence they do not support Ukraine, due to its alignment with US, but they cannot support Russia and Chechens, because they know that the entire Albanian community is against them.[87]

Against this background, the research has also revealed interesting findings regarding the relation between national and religious identity among the youth in the Municipality of Gjilan. Participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years, as well as those from 18 to 30 years, consider the nation to be their

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[80] Interview with A1.

[81] Interview with A2.

[82] C4, Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[83] Interviews with A1 and A2.

[84] T6, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko", Gjilan, April 28th, 2022.

[85] L17, N1, S8, U6, E5, Focus group with students of the Secondary School " Zenel Hajdini", April 29th, 2022.

[86] L13, Z8, Focus group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka," May 11th, 2022.

[87] Interview with A1.

primary identity, rather than their religious affiliation,[88] whereas, with a single exception,[89] all participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years consider as their primary identity the religious one.[90] Related to this issue, the interviewee A1 claims that in general national identity has primacy among Albanian population in Gjilan, but there are cases when certain individuals give primacy to religion to such an extent that they even refuse to take a photo in front of the statue of Albanian medieval hero and Catholic Prince, George Castriotis Skanderbeg. Furthermore, he thinks that individuals who, in terms of identity, put religion before the nation, have already joined the extremist religious ideologies.[91] This social tendency is confirmed by the interviewee A2 as well, who thinks that after years of dullness of national identity that already started after the war, there are many individuals who give primacy to the religious affiliation.[92]

When it comes to religious practices in the Municipality of Gjilan, the research reveals interesting finding that in addition to the general religious tolerance, there are also cases of religious hatred and extremism. In this regard, the interviewee A1 observes that in this municipality, in general is practiced the traditional Islam, but there are also some mosques that are under control of imams and congregations that propagate Muslim Ummah, who give primacy to religious affiliation before national one, and are usually intolerant towards other religions. According to him, in the Council of Islamic Community of Gjilan there are some imams who are known for their radical ideas. These imams are elected by their congregations and control 5-6 mosques. Moreover, even the head of the Islamic Council of Gjilan was in the past connected to people that joined the war in Syria.[93] Furthermore, the interviewee A2 claims that certain congregations prefer radical imams, and refuse to pray in the mosques in which moderate imams preach in accordance with the program of the Islamic Community of Kosovo. According to him, there were also cases when congregations fuelled with radical ideologies have exercised physical violence against moderate imams.[94]

On the other hand, the young participants in this research have different opinions on this matter. A participant of the age group from 12 to 15 years thinks that there are prejudices among some Muslims in Gjilan towards persons of other religions, which, according to him, is a consequence of ignorance and lack of knowledge about other religions.[95] Contrary to these observations, participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years think that religious tolerance is very high in this municipality,[96] whereas another participant thinks that situation with religions is very good, although he admitted that he has never met a person of another religion.[97] A participant of the age group from 18 to 30 years observes that religion is practiced freely, but she thinks that it would have been better to have higher religious

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88 E37, T6, R9, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko."

89 U6, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zejnel Hajdini."

90 Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zejnel Hajdini."

91 Interview with A1.

92 Interview with A2.

93 Interview with A1.

94 Interview with A2.

95 E7, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko."

96 S8, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zenel Hajdini."

97 N1, Ibid.

diversity because it would improve inter-religious understanding and tolerance.[98] Furthermore, according to another young participant, families in this municipality have prejudice about the inter-religious marriages, and there are many cases when some religious hardliners revile those who congratulate religious holidays to person of other religions.[99]

When it comes to the role of clergy, the opinions among the participants of this research are also divided. Participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years think that religious leaders in general are doing a good job with their congregations, but they have also heard about some Muslim clergy that have pushed youth towards extremism and joining the ISIS.[100] A participant of the age group from 15 to 18 years thinks that Muslim clergy do a very good job with their congregations[101]. A participant from the age group from 18 to 30 years stated that in general Muslim clergy do a good job[102], but another participant observes that Muslim clergy preach different interpretations of Islam that sometimes creates confusion among congregations[103]. Another participant of this age group thinks that around 30% of the Muslim clergy preach extremism and fuel hate towards other religions[104]. In this regard, the interviewee A1 claims that religious leaders in Gjilan are very influential, and that some youth identify with them. Another matter of concern, according to him, is what to do with imams and other extremists who have been charged for terrorism and are finishing their sentences. He worries that there is a risk that these persons, who entered jail as imams, can get out as leaders.[105] This point of view is shared by the interviewee A2, who observes that in Gjilan the identification of some yuoth with certain religious leaders is evident. Furthermore, he blames the political elite for flirting with religion due to their electoral interests, and for not hesitating to approve all requests of the Municipal Islamic Community for building mosques.[106]

In this vein, a participant of the age group from 12 to 15 years notes that his classmates have discussed extremism with their teacher of the subject "Civic Education," and that they have conducted internet research on this matter.[107] Furthermore, some participants of this age group indicated that they have known some extremists who joined ISIS or were planning to join it. According to them, these individuals were clearly brainwashed by extremist propaganda.[108] On the other hand, participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years claim that they have heard about extremism from the news,[109] and that they hesitated to discuss about this matter. In this regard, a participant of the age group from 18 to 30 years notes that she has heard about extremism from the news and discussed it with friends. Furthermore, she considers extremism as a "mental regime" linked to the religion that is very dangerous

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[98] L13, Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[99] E37, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko."

[100] E37, E7, B28, ibid.

[101] L17, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zenel Hajdini."

[102] C4, Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[103] Z8, ibid.

[104] L13, ibid.

[105] Interview with A1.

[106] Interview with A2.

[107] T6, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko."

[108] E36, T6, Ibid.

[109] N1, E5, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zenel Hajdini."

for society. One of her main concerns is that not a small number of people in Gjilan have extremist views towards other religions, but there many others for whom this is neither as a problem, nor as a threat.[110] Furthermore, another participant of this age group thinks that religious extremists aim to change the social fabric and push people to embrace extremist views. In this regards, she claims that people are primarily influenced by Muslim clergy who preach extremist ideas.[111] On the other hand, the interviewee A1 observes that the majority of extremists and foreign terrorist fighters in Gjilan come from two neighbourhoods. This, according to him, started with congregations in local mosques that later penetrated primary and secondary schools in Gjilan, thus having a huge social impact in this municipality.[112]

When it comes to social digitalisation, participants of the age group from 12 to 18 years notice that religious contents are very much present in the social media, but they have not encountered any content that calls for violent extremism.[113] Contrary to these observations, a participant of the age group from 15 to 18 years claims that she has encountered in social media religious content that fuels gender, religious and ethnic discrimination.[114] Furthermore, participants from the age group from 18 to 30 years have seen plenty of extremist religious content in social media, which, in many cases, is accompanied with disinformation, in order to influence people to embrace radical and extremist views.[115]

On the other hand, research findings show that participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years spent most of their free time on social media, and that they have very little interests for sports and cultural activities.[116] Participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years, in addition to social media, spent their free time engaged with sport activities, reading and listening music, but not with cultural activities,[117] whereas, the participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years claim that they spent most of their free time with their families and their readings.[118] Furthermore, although participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years did not give any opinion regarding the infrastructure for sports and cultural activities in the Municipality of Gjilan, participants of the age groups from 15 to 18 years and those from 18 to 30 years claim that, in general, this infrastructure is sufficient.[119] The fact that there is sufficient infrastructure for sports and cultural activities, but that also there is no interest shown by youth to be engaged in these activities, is confirmed by the two interviewees as well.[120]

In terms of freedom of expression, the research findings show that youth of the age groups from 12 to 15 years, and from 15 to 18 years, feel freer to discuss issues of their concern with friends and siblings than with their parents and teachers, due to age conflicts and inability to have their emotions

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[110] L13, Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[111] Z8, Ibid.

[112] Interview with A1.

[113] Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko."

[114] U6, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zejnel Hajdini."

[115] C4, Z8, L13, Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[116] Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko."

[117] Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zenel Hajdini."

[118] Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[119] Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko," Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zejnel Hajdini,", and Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[120] Interviews with A1 and A2.

understood by them. Also, a barrier for communication is the fact that, in some occasions, teachers have judging behaviour and often offend their students. On the other hand, participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years claim that, in general, they trust more their families than their friends, but some of them added that there are also cases when they prefer to discuss with their friends, especially when they do not find understanding by their families. At the same time, they said that they do not prefer to discuss issues of concern with their professors, since on many occasions they are ignored by them.[121] These findings were confirmed by the two interviewees as well.[122] In this regard, A1 adds that social circles among youth nowadays are not limited only to their schoolmates and friends, but they have been enlarged with their virtual friends through social media, with whom they spent most of their free time.[123]

Against this backdrop, young participants in this research claim that bullying and violence are quite present among youth in Gjilan. According to participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years, bullying is not very much present among pupils, but they have witnessed few cases of racial injustice. Unfortunately, according to them, there are also cases when pupils use narcotics, which is a very worrisome phenomenon.[124] Furthermore, they have observed certain neighbourhoods in Gjilan, where violent gangs of youth operate and use narcotics as well.[125] On the other hand, according to participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years, bullying is widespread among their peers, and it is also accompanied with blackmail on social media. Due to the lack of communication with their parents, some youth have encountered grave problems that even pushed them towards suicide. In addition, they have also witnessed the cases of bullying by their teachers. Moreover, participants of this age group are aware of certain violent neighbourhoods in which gangs of youth operate.[126] According to participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years, in the Municipality of Gjilan, bullying and violence are widespread in the primary and secondary schools, including here the violence and bullying by teachers.[127]

The research findings have not revealed any elements of punitive justice system in the Municipality of Gjilan. Nevertheless, some participants in this research have noted several injustices that are observed by them. A participant of the age group from 15 to 18 years claimed that social and economic conditions are sources of injustice. According to him, youth that belong to wealthier families are better positioned when applying for a job, and in school they get also higher marks without merits.[128] A participant of the age group from 18 to 30 years claimed that injustices are widespread. According to her, injustices start in family, first and foremost because females are discriminated in division of inheritance. In addition, she claims that the children of those who hold political offices, without any

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[121] Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko," Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zejnel Hajdini," and Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[122] Interviews with A1 and A2.

[123] Interview with A1.

[124] Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko."

[125] Ibid.

[126] Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zejnel Hajdini."

[127] Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[128] L17, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zejnel Hajdini."

merits are treated better and evaluated higher than other youth in schools.[129] However, another participant of this age group thinks that justice system creates a balance against many forms of injustices that people might experience.[130]

Regarding the political grievances participants in this research have observed different factors that are of their concern. Participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years think that corruption is the biggest problem that hinders perspectives of Kosovo to join EU and the free movement of its citizens in the Schengen Zone.[131] Whereas, one from them thinks that political dissatisfaction can be used by extremists to spread their ideas,[132] but the other one thinks that there is no interrelation between political grievances and extremism.[133] A participant of the age group from 15 to 18 years thinks that political dissatisfaction is very high in Gjilan, and according to him, this is not related to extremism, but rather to emigration.[134] Another participant thinks that the cases in which the political dissatisfaction are related to economic deprivation might drive certain individuals to move towards extremism, since they are more vulnerable due to their harsh economic conditions.[135] Similar views are shared also by the participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years.[136]

Against this backdrop, participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years do not have any opinion about youth from Gjilan that joined ISIS, because they have been very small when this phenomenon occurred in this municipality.[137] A participant of the age group from 15 to 18 years thinks that youth that joined ISIS did this because they misunderstood the Islam, and, in essence, they were not fighting for religion.[138] Another participant of this age group observes a case of a returnee from the conflict in Syria who has witnessed terrible things, and who claimed that she was not aware where in reality she was going.[139] Another participant claims that extremism has decreased nowadays, because due to the state punitive measures, imams are afraid to preach extremist ideas to their congregations.[140] Participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years have also mentioned different reasons that pushed youth towards joining violent extremism. A participant of this age group knew a person that joined ISIS, who in fact was very polite with others, but his family has exercised violence on him. According to her he joined to ISIS as an act of rebellion against mistreatment by his family.[141] Another participant thinks that the main push factor for youth that joined conflict in the Middle East was low level of education,[142] whereas another one thinks that socio-economic situation may have driven youth to join this conflict.[143] In this

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[129] Z8, Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[130] C4, Ibid.

[131] T6, E7, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko."

[132] T6, Ibid.

[133] E7, Ibid.

[134] L17, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zejnel Hajdini."

[135] U6, Ibid.

[136] L13, Z8, C4, Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[137] Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Thimi Mitko."

[138] L17, Focus Group with students of the Secondary School "Zejnel Hajdini."

[139] U6, Ibid.

[140] N1, Ibid.

[141] Z8, Focus Group with students of the University "Kadri Zeka."

[142] C4, Ibid.

vein, the interviewee A2 observes that the recruitment of youth was not based solely on the ideology, but has also involved financial means. Nevertheless, he has also noted cases in which people with very good socio-economic status joined the conflict in the Middle East.[144] The interviewee A2 has a similar opinion, has claims that socio-economic situation has not had an important impact on extremism, given that, according to him, this is an ideological matter. He admits that there were cases when some individuals with very good economic situation joined the conflict in Syria, but there were also cases when individuals with harsh economic conditions joined the conflict.[145]

Against this background, the social factors that can strengthen the resilience towards violent extremism, according to interviewee A1 is the fact that for the vast majority of the population the prevailing primary identity is the national one.[146] According to the interviewee A2, important resilience factors also include the improving socio-economic conditions and education.[147] On the other hand, the social factors that weaken this resilience, according to the interviewee A1 are different imams who propagate Muslim Ummah and give primacy to religious affiliation in relation to national one,[148] whereas, according to the interviewee A2, such weakening factors are corruption and nepotism[149].

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the driver of religion represents the major factor of radicalisation and violent extremism in the Municipality of Gjilan. Radical interpretations of fundamentalist imams, who also propagate Muslim Ummah and intolerance towards religions directly contribute towards radicalisation and violent extremism. The research also shows that the driver of transnational dynamics is a fundamental factor of radicalisation and violent extremism among youth in this municipality. Global extremist movements from the Gulf States and certain radical imams from North Macedonia have actively spread religious radicalism and violent extremism in Gjilan. The driver of social digitalisation also plays a major role towards radicalisation and violent extremism, since through them, youth is exposed to various extremist radical content. On the hand, the research findings show that the drivers of economic deprivation, political grievances, and education have rather a peripheral impact on radicalisation and violent extremism. The research findings provide no evidence that the driver of territorial inequalities has any impact on radicalisation and violent extremism in this municipality.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS

As part of the meso-level analysis in the Municipality of Gjilan, it is important to identify eventual intersections between different drivers and explore whether such intersections could be considered as factors that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism, or, on the contrary, as initiatives to prevent these phenomena.

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[143] L13, Ibid.

[144] Interview with A2.

[145] Interview with A1.

[146] Interview with A1.

[147] Interview with A2.

[148] Interview with A1.

[149] Interview with A2.

In this municipality, the meso-level research findings point out to important intersections between religion as the most important driver to radicalisation and violent extremism and two other drivers - transnational dynamics and social digitalisation. The research has shown that the Municipality of Gjilan, being situated close to the cross-border triangle Kosovo – North Macedonia – Serbia, is heavily affected by the transnational dynamics driver which intersects with religion primarily through cross-border foreign influence from neighbouring North Macedonia. A number of young participants and both interviewees have acknowledged that radical forms of Islam in their municipality where initially preached by certain imams from this country. They were especially active during the period 2012-2013, when extremism reached its peak and a number of youth were recruited to join wars in Syria and Iraq. As a result, one of the interviewees believes that individuals with the obvious extremist ideologies and majority of those who joined the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have family connections and visit more often North Macedonia.

On the other hand, the meso-level research analysis has also identified an important intersection between the drivers of religion and driver of social digitalisation that plays a very important role in shaping the way of life of youth in Gjilan. Namely, the youth participating in the research, especially those of the age groups from 12 to 15 years, have admitted of spending a considerable part of their free time on digital social media. As a result, they receive most of the information about religion, as well as radicalisation and violent extremism through digital social media, in particular Tik-Tok and Snapchat. A number of the participants have acknowledged that they have encountered religious content, including radical ones, on social media. Obviously, these digital social media have often been misused for the dissemination of radical extremist messages. In this way, social digitalisation represents an important driver that reinforces the impact of the driver of religious (mis)interpretations.

The research findings shed light to a loose intersection between the driver of religion and the economic deprivation driver. Although according to above analysis, economic deprivation is not considered an important driver of radicalisation and violent extremism, few participants consider that unemployment, lack of job prospects and limited access to decent level of social welfare might push some youth in the Gjilan Municipality towards Islamic religious radicalised and extremist groups.

Finally, the research analysis also points out a loose intersection between religion and the driver related to education, leisure and cultural opportunities. A number of participants in this research, especially those of the age group from 18 to 30 years, believe that it is easier for radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam beliefs to manipulate certain individuals who lack proper level of education. On the other hand, an interviewee considers that a higher level of education and knowledge could in some cases contribute in building community resilience to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism.

In addition to a number of intersections of religion with several other drivers, research analysis has identified several intersections between other drivers related to radicalisation and violent extremism. An important identified intersection is the one between transnational dynamics and digital socialisation. On the one hand, youth participating in the research have admitted of spending some of their free time on digital social media. On the other hand, as already mentioned, the Municipality of Gjilan is heavily affected by the transnational dynamics driver primarily through cross-border foreign influence

from neighbouring North Macedonia. In addition to preaching radical forms of Islam in mosques of Gjilan, certain imams from North Macedonia have also used digital technologies to spread their extremist ideologies.

The research analysis has indicated another intersection, though not so important one, between drivers of political grievances and economic deprivation. The research has shown that although political dissatisfaction is very high in Gjilan Municipality, most of the research participants do not relate it directly with radicalism and extremism. However, some research participants also claim that career progress as well as finding a job depends heavily on family social and political status. Thus, nepotism and corruption might drive certain social and economically deprived individuals towards radicalism and extremism.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

In addition to important intersections between different drivers, the research analysis also enables us to identify certain interactions between the drivers and the social contexts that could be considered as factors that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism. It should be noted that these interactions could in turn also help in building community resilience to prevent these phenomena.

The research analysis points out to an interaction between the driver of religion and the education and unemployment as the social contexts. The research findings clearly show that education and employment are of special importance in building social resilience of the community against radicalisation and violent extremism. On the one hand, the low level of education could seriously threaten the social resilience of the community, since according to the research findings, it is easier for radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam beliefs, to manipulate individuals without proper level of education. On the other hand, high levels of unemployment which limit access to decent life could also threaten the social resilience of the community, because there were cases where by misusing bad economic conditions certain radical imams have managed to recruit some youth to join the wars in Syria and Iraq.

Another important interaction indicated by the research was the one between the driver of religion and ethnic community as a social context. In the two previous case studies of Gjakova and Mitrovica South, national identity was identified as crucial in building community resilience to religious radicalisation and violent extremism since the majority of the youth and interviewees participating in the research considered ethnic affiliation more important than the religious one. However, in the Gjilan Municipality only participants of the age groups from 12 to 15 years and 18 to 30 years consider nation as their primary identity, while with one exception, all participants from the age group from 15 to 18 years consider religious belonging as their primary identity. In such a context, national identity could on the one hand serve as a pull factor for certain youth in the Municipality of Gjilan, and thus contribute to the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism. On the other hand though, in cases where youth consider religious affiliation rather than the ethnic one as their primary identity, community resilience could be weakened, and thus creating a social context permissive to radicalisation and violent extremism.

Research findings have also identified two important interactions between drivers of transnational dynamics and social digitalisation, and ethnic community as a social context. By preaching radical forms of Islam, imams from North Macedonia have contributed to increased religiosity of the community and radicalisation and extremism in the Gjilan Municipality. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, imams from this country have not only preached radical forms of Islam in mosques of Gjilan, but they have also spread their extremist ideologies through digital social media. In both cases, these interactions weaken the ethnic identity of the Albanian population as an important factor in building community resilience, and could thus create a social context permissive to radicalisation and violent extremism.

Finally, the research analysis has pointed out to an interaction between the social digitalisation driver and education as social context. The research has shown that youth participating in the research, especially those of the age groups from 12 to 15 years and 15 to 18 years, spend a considerable part of their free time on digital social media. In doing so, they receive most of the information about religion as well as radicalisation and violent extremism through digital social media. In this way, the driver of social digitalisation becomes the key mechanism of transmission of ideas, values, and identities to youth in the Municipality of Gjilan. The meso-level analysis of the conducted research has not indicated any other relevant interactions between remaining drivers and social contexts.

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS OF THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

According to research analysis, the Gjilan Municipality has a relatively high level of religiosity with many citizens attending the Islam religious preaching in mosques of the municipality. Though in general traditional Islam (Ottoman) is practiced in the municipality, there are also some mosques in which radical imams preach radical Islam. At the same time, some of the religious leaders in Gjilan are very influential and some youth identify with them. A rather worrisome finding of this research is that with one exception, all participants from the age group from 15 to 18 years consider religious affiliation rather than the ethnic one as their primary identity. This in itself might be an indicator that among certain youth in the Municipality of Gjilan there is a shift from the secular nature of Albanian nationalism and ethnic identity towards Muslim Ummah. On the other hand, it is encouraging that all participants of the age groups from 12 to 15 years consider national belonging and not the religious one as their primary identity. This might indicate that among Albanians of younger age groups in the municipality there is a re-shift towards primacy of the national identity.

It is worth noting that according to research findings the impact of meso-level drivers in the Municipality of Gjilan fully converges with macro-level drivers. Similarly, to the macro-level analysis, the research participants perceive the driver of religion as the major factor of violent extremism, which is intrinsically intertwined with the drivers of transnational dynamics and digital socialisation. The drivers of economic deprivation, political grievances, and the driver related to education, leisure and cultural opportunities are perceived by participants as having a peripheral impact on radicalisation and violent extremism. Finally, the driver of territorial inequalities is considered as having no impact to radicalism and violent extremism in this municipality.

In terms of identified intersections among drivers, the intersections between religion and two other drivers – transnational dynamics and digital socialisation – are certainly the most important ones. In addition, an important intersection was identified between transnational dynamics and digital socialisation. The research findings have also shed light to loose intersections between religion and the drivers of economic deprivation and education, leisure and cultural opportunities.

The research analysis has also indicated several important interactions between drivers and social contexts. In this direction, the most important interactions were identified between the driver of religion and unemployment and education as social contexts. The research findings have also indicated an important interaction between religion and ethnic community as a social context. In certain cases this interaction may play a significant role in building community resilience to religious radicalisation and violent extremism in the Gjilan Municipality. However, in cases where youth consider religious affiliation rather than the ethnic one as their primary identity, community resilience could be weakened, and thus create a social context permissive to radicalisation and violent extremism.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO- LEVEL ANALYSIS

The Meso-Level analysis has identified several prevention indicators pertaining to radicalisation and violent extremism in the Municipality of Gjilan. First and foremost, the research findings clearly show that proper level of education plays an important role in building social resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Young people with low or improper level of education have fewer resources to avoid manipulation and indoctrination.

Secondly, the research has shown that employment that provides access to decent level of social welfare is also rather important factor in building social resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Unemployed and economically deprived young people who lack job prospects and have limited access to decent level of social welfare, are more likely to accept tenets of the radical Islam. The research findings have indicated that certain radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam doctrines have managed in the past to recruit some unemployed and economically deprived youth to join the wars in Syria and Iraq.

Finally, the research findings of all three case studies have shown that ethnic identity could also play an important role in building community resilience to religious radicalisation and violent extremism. In the Gjilan Municipality only participants of the age groups from 12 to 15 years and 18 to 30 years consider nation as their primary identity, while with one exception, all participants from the age group from 15 to 18 years consider religious belonging as their primary identity. In the case of youth from the first two age groups, national identity could serve as an important pull factor for countering radicalisation and violent extremism. However, in cases where youth consider religious belonging rather than the ethnic one as their primary identity, community resilience could be weakened.

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO LEVEL ANALYSIS

The Meso-Level analysis has identified several prevention indicators pertaining to radicalisation and violent extremism in the Municipality of Gjilan. First and foremost, the research findings clearly show that proper level of education plays an important role in building social resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Young people with low or improper level of education have fewer resources to avoid manipulation and indoctrination.

Secondly, the research has shown that employment that provides access to decent level of social welfare is also rather important factor in building social resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Unemployed and economically deprived young people who lack job prospects and have limited access to decent level of social welfare, are more likely to accept tenets of the radical Islam. The research findings have indicated that certain radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam doctrines have managed in the past to recruit some unemployed and economically deprived youth to join the wars in Syria and Iraq.

Finally, the research findings of all three case studies have shown that ethnic identity could also play an important role in building community resilience to religious radicalisation and violent extremism. In the Gjilan Municipality only participants of the age groups from 12 to 15 years and 18 to 30 years

consider nation as their primary identity, while with one exception, all participants from the age group from 15 to 18 years consider religious belonging as their primary identity. In the case of youth from the first two age groups, national identity could serve as an important pull factor for countering radicalisation and violent extremism. However, in cases where youth consider religious belonging rather than the ethnic one as their primary identity, community resilience could be weakened.

Prevention of radicalidation and violent extremism requires a deep understanding of the radicalisation process that takes into account macro, meso and micro levels of analysis. An integrated whole comprised of different motivational factors operating at these three levels is the one that makes an individual vulnerable to the influence of religious (mis)interpretations. The meso-level analysis has combined drivers with social contexts in order to identify contexts and drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in the municipality of Gjilan. The analysis of different combinations between drivers and crossings between drivers and social contexts has enabled us to identify certain factors that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism, but can also help in building community resilience to prevent these phenomena. In addition, through this meso-level research it was possible to identify certain paths that should be taken into consideration in the micro-level analysis.

The same way as no single driver can establish a causal relationship between radicalisation and violent extremism, no motivational factor operating at only one level of analysis can determine whether an individual becomes radicalised or not. For instance, although political dissatisfaction is very high in Gjilan Municipality, most of the participants in the research do not relate it directly to radicalism and extremism. However, in some cases certain individuals with high level of political grievances might eventually turn towards radicalism and extremism. On the other hand, the meso-level analysis has shown that certain unemployed and economically deprived young people in Gjilan Municipality might also turn towards radicalism and extremism. Finally, research findings have shown that young participants of this municipality who spend a considerable part of their free time on digital social media might be manipulated by extremist elements that spread their extremist ideologies through digital technologies. However, not all of these youth - dissatisfied with political performance, unemployed or exposed to extremist ideologies disseminated through digital social media - will become radicalised or turn to violent extremism. In all these cases, whether an individual will turn towards radicalism and extremism will depend on a set of individual circumstances and motivational factors that need to be examined through the micro-level analysis.

General Conclusions

This research analysis provides credible findings proving that the impact of meso-level drivers in the Municipality of Gjilan converges fully with the impact of macro-level drivers, by specifying religion as most influential driver of violent extremism that is strongly intertwined with the drivers of transnational dynamics and social digitalisation. Furthermore, the research findings show that other drivers have a rather marginal or non-existent importance in relation to radicalism and violent extremism.

In conclusion, this analysis provides answers to the following pre-determined research questions:

1. How globalisation and transnational movements impacted on politics and society?
The research findings have provided evidence that after the war a number of global extremist movements from Middle East and some imams connected to them from the North Macedonia have penetrated Gjilan. This has had an impact on the change of general culture by strengthening Islamic religious affiliation at the expense of traditional secular national identity of Albanians in this municipality. Nevertheless, the consequence of this impact was the changed behaviour of the local political elite that started to flirt with the leaders of the Municipal Islamic Community, because of their electoral interests, which was not a case in the past, when politics was strongly separated from the religion.

2. Are perceptions on foreign policy a driver of violent extremism?
The research results show that perceptions on foreign policy are not a driver of violent extremism. All participants in this research, being strongly or loosely affiliated with religion, have appreciated foreign policy orientation of Kosovo towards European Union and United States. Though, some of the participants think that there is no willingness by some Western countries to admit a country with majority Muslim population in the European Union.

3. What is the role of new family patterns to diffuse social relations in the field of the transnational nature of radical groups?
The research has provided evidence that many individuals from Gjilan who have extremist views and the majority of those who joined the conflicts in the Middle East have family relations in North Macedonia, whereas there were only few cases from its large diaspora that joined violent extremism. In this regard, the role of parents is becoming rather peripheral due to the fact that youth feel freer to discuss the issues of their concern with their social circles and because they spent most of their free time on digital social media. In strengthening this argument, the research has provided evidence that many youth that joined the conflict in Syria belonged to families with strong secular national identities and liberal orientation.

4. How globalised communities link themselves to transnational movements?
The research has provided evidence that in the case of Gjilan Municipality globalised Islamic movements that propagate the Muslim Ummah and ignore national identities are linked with transnational extremist movements that also have a cross – border character (North Macedonia). In this regard, the research has revealed evidence that religious fundamentalists in Kosovo are neutral regarding the war in Ukraine, because though they do not support Ukraine due to its alignment with US, they cannot support Russia and Chechens, because they know that the entire Albanian community is against them.

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Religious Interpretations in the Municipality of Gjakova

Lulzim Peci, Agon Demjaha

Introduction

The research findings of the Kosovo Country Paper on Macro Level Drivers have clearly indicated that the religious (mis)interpretations have been identified as the driver with the highest impact on the violent extremism at national level (Peci and Demjaha, 2021). For scrutinizing the impact of this driver, as well as the other ones, at meso-level, the Municipality of Gjakova has been chosen as a case study, due to its plurality of religious practices and beliefs, for which this municipality is unique in Kosovo. In this region, Sunni, Bektashi as well as different Tariqats within Islam, Catholicism and Christian Orthodoxy, have cohabitated for centuries. Furthermore, in this region, especially after the end of the Kosovo War of 1998-99, Protestantism is taking root as well.

According to the last census in Kosovo of 2021, the Municipality of Gjakova has 94,556 inhabitants, out of which 42% are living in urban and 58% in rural areas (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2011). The ethnic composition of the municipality is predominantly ethnic Albanian (92,7%), followed by Egyptian community (5.4%), Roma (0.78%), Ashkalis (0.65%) and Serbs (0.017%) (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2011), whereas in religious terms, the population largely belongs to Islam (81,7%), followed by Catholics (17,20%), whereas members of other religions and atheists compose 1.1% of the population (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2011). Economically active is 39.6% of the population, the employment rate is 51%, the percentage of people dependent on social assistance is 4.4%, and on pensions 6.5%, whereas 5.8% of the population is supported by remittances (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2011). The municipality has 60 pre-elementary, elementary, and secondary schools, as well as a public university (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2018).

Against this background, this study initially presents its research methodology, then analyses the Meso-Level contexts results in relation to the Macro-Level Analysis, and the workability of Macro-Drivers at the meso-level, as well as the intersections between drivers, and interactions among drivers and social contexts. The concluding analysis represents key findings related to meso-level drivers, prevention indicators from the meso-level analysis, as well as micro-paths reported from meso-level analysis. The general conclusion summarises the main research findings, and presents the answers to the research questions of this research endeavour.

This study is based on qualitative primary sources, such as focus groups with youth of the age 12 to 30 years, and correctional interviews with seasoned civil society activists of the Municipality of Gjakova. Representative sample is based on balanced gender, religious and urban – rural representation.

Research Methodology

RECAP OF THE RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The research on the macro-level context in Kosovo has explored the impact of seven identified drivers of violent extremism, namely religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, digital literacy, political grievances, cultural factors and transnational dynamics. The macro-level research results show that among other drivers, the (mis)interpretations of Islam represent the underlining driver of violent extremism, which is inherently intertwined with the driver of digital literacy and the one of transnational dynamics, whereas the impact of other drivers is rather marginal (Peci and Demjaha, 2021).

The response of Kosovo's relevant institutions towards violent extremism was focused on two dimensions, namely, the security-centric measures through conventional rule of law mechanisms, and countering the radical religious preaching at the doctrinal/ideological level. Kosovo's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Kosovo Police lead the efforts in the first dimension, whereas the Islamic Community of Kosovo was at the epicentre of the second dimension. It is worth noting that the driver of economic deprivation was largely neglected in practice by Kosovo authorities, due to budgetary shortcomings. Furthermore, cultural factors and territorial inequalities were not included in the Strategy of Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalism Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020 (SPVERLT) (Peci and Demjaha, 2021).

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

The meso-level analysis scrutinises the impact of identified drivers at the local context with youth of the age from 12 to 30 years that are potentially the most vulnerable age group to be affected by radicalism and violent extremism, and this in itself represents an important added value. Furthermore, this analysis highlights possible convergence or divergence of the research results of the local social context (Gjakova Municipality) with the research results of the macro-level analysis related to the impact of identified drivers of violent extremism. The research results may also challenge the conventional wisdom imposed by security centric and counter-narrative/doctrinal approach on dealing with violent extremism in Kosovo.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The key objective of this research is to determine social factors that feed the patterns of violent extremism at the community level, and relations of these factors with macro-drivers. In this regard, the results of the Macro-Level Analysis and the workability of drivers will be tested at the meso-level context, including the intersections between drivers and interrelations among drivers and social contexts in the Municipality of Gjakova. In doing so, this research will try to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. Is religion a driving factor of violent extremism with greater relevance than other colliding factors? Has religious education any role in preventing violent extremism? Do youth identify with existing religious leaderships?

2. Does the relation between religion and national belonging play any a specific role?
3. What is the impact of social experience and practice of religion on communities, or is it rather the individual attitude towards religion that what drives young people to radical ideas and actions?
4. What is the impact of plurality of religious interpretations on inter-religious cohabitation and extremism?

THE DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND THE IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

The meso-level institutions in this research are families, neighbourhoods, schools, universities, religious communities, municipal institutions, and sports and culture associations.

CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The main purpose of this project is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of violent extremism (VE) among youth aged from 12-30 years. At the same time, Kosovo Country Report has shown that most of the foreign terrorist fighters who have travelled to Syria and Iraq from Kosovo were from 20 – 30 years old. On the other hand, the report suggests that youth is evidently especially vulnerable towards radicalisation, both online and through direct contacts.

Against this background, and having in mind the local context in the Municipality of Gjakova, the criteria used for sample selection was based on gender, religious, and urban rural balance, as well as coverage of young participants of the age 12 to 30 for focus groups. In addition, there were three interviews conducted with seasoned local civil society activists, with an in-depth knowledge on the evolving social context in the last three decades in the Municipality of Gjakova, in order to get a comprehensive picture in relation to this research.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The focus group of the young participants of the age 12 to 15 years was comprised from eight individuals, four female and four male participants, of whom five belonged to Muslim, and three to Catholic religion; four were originating from urban and the other four from rural areas of the Municipality of Gjakova.

The focus group of the young participants of the age 15 to 18 years was comprised from six individuals, three female and three male participants, of whom four belonged to Muslim and two to Catholic religion, and three were originating from urban and the other three from rural areas of the Municipality of Gjakova.

The focus group of the young participants of the age 18 to 27 years was comprised from seven individuals, six female and one male participant, of whom five belonged to Muslim and two to Catholic religion, and four were originating from urban and the other three from rural areas of the Municipality of Gjakova.

The three interviewees were males of the age 54 to 65 years old, and they were an Atheist, Muslim and Catholic, all originating from the urban area of Gjakova.

In total, there were 24 individuals who participated in this research, 11 of whom were male and 13 female; 15 were Muslims, 8 were Catholics, and one Atheist; 14 were from urban and 10 from rural areas.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

During this research, meetings and interviews have been conducted with three focus groups with youth of the age 12 to 27 years, as well as three interviews with seasoned civil society activists.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

Initially this research was planned to cover the entire district of Gjakova, which also includes three other municipalities. Nevertheless, due to the level of the plurality of religions and religious interpretations in Gjakova, that is incomparably higher than in other municipalities of this district, for the purpose of this research, the focus groups and the interviews were limited to the Municipality of Gjakova.

Meso-Level Dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS: HOW DO MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS WORK AT THE MESO-LEVEL?

The research conducted on the macro-level context highlights that among the identified drivers, the (mis)interpretations of Islam present the major factor of violent extremism, which is intrinsically intertwined with two other drivers, digital socialisation, and transnational dynamics. At the macro-level, these drivers have the highest impact on radicalisation and extremism, compared to the drivers with peripheral effect, such as economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, political grievances, and education, leisure and cultural factors.

In this regard, as mentioned above, Gjakova Municipality is characterised with high level of plurality of religious practices. Within the Muslim community, there are two prevalent traditions of practicing Islam, namely the Bektashi order and the Sunni Islam. Christian community is traditionally Catholic, but there is also a small Protestant community, whereas nowadays there are only few people belonging to the Serbian Orthodox community.

Against this background, the research results show that the perceived social context related to multi-religiosity is generally characterised with a high level of cohabitation, but with some problems related to socio-religious distance. In this regard, the participants of this research of the age from 12 to 14 years have in general emphasised the lack of religious differences in social relations with their schoolmates or with their peers in the communities where they live[150]. However, they pointed out that the conversion of religion is in certain case accepted with uneasiness by many from their peers,[151] and that inter-religious marriages are still viewed with prejudices[152]. Similar attitudes were noted among the participants of the age group from 16 to 18 years, who have also emphasised the lack of religious differences in their social relations, and their close friendships with their peers of another religions[153]. According to the participants of this age group, persons from rural areas face the gravest social injustices, while the rural–urban divide as a local social pattern is still prevailing in this community[154]. The participants of the age group from 18 to 27 years, in general maintain similar observations.[155] According to one participant, religion is not the primary identity pattern of individuals in this municipality, and it is generally perceived by society as somehow neutral,[156] while another participant has observed an increasing trend of inter-religious marriages nowadays, although in the past they were somehow "forbidden"[157].

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[150] K10, E13, E7, S6, R7, T23, Focus group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekeria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022.

[151] Ibid. A 32.

[152] Ibid. E 13.

[153] D10, L10, S4, Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022.

[154] Ibid.

[155] B02, A1, N4, S29, F27, V12, Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

[156] Ibid, B02.

[157] Ibid, A1.

By the same token, the interviewee A.1. considers that social practices of religion in Gjakova are liberal. As he mentions, whoever makes a choice to go to tekke, mosque or church can do it without any obstacle. People usually freely practice their own religion, without any discord or interference, and have high respect for each other regardless of their religious beliefs. However, he observes that the number of inter-religious marriages remains low, though today's young people do not have the prejudices of his generation[158]. On the other hand, the other interviewee observes two categories of people in relation to terms of their social behaviour toward religions of others. The first category boast for having a friend of another faith, while the other one does not accept them in their close circles. Furthermore, according to him, inter-religious marriages are still stigmatised and ignored by certain social circles[159]. However, the last interviewee has a slightly different opinion about these issues. According to him, the Gjakova Municipality is well known for its religious coexistence within Albanian population despite of being one of the places with the highest percentage of members of Catholic faith. Especially during the times of Yugoslav/Serbian regime, the religious tolerance has been nurtured and strengthened over the years, and was pursued with fanaticism. This has also continued after the war in 1998-99, since the Municipality of Gjakova, regardless of the fact that a vast majority of its population nominally belongs to Islam, in two terms has elected a major of Catholic faith (Pal Lekaj, 2007 - 2013). In addition, the Catholic community comprises only 17.2% of the population, it is over-represented with around 30-40% in the decision-making structures of the local government[160].

An interesting finding of this research is that the majority of the young participants do not follow religious preaching in the objects of cult, and they do not identify themselves with religious leaders.[161] Nevertheless, there were some participants who have shown interest in religious practices and have occasionally observed them.[162] On the other hand, a number participants think that a certain number of clergyman are not worthy the posts they hold, that they are corrupted, and that they should be licenced by the state,[163] thus expressing huge mistrust on them.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the driver of religion, all three interviewees claim that it is the main source of radicalisation and violent extremism in the Municipality of Gjakova. According to the interviewee A1, the so called humanitarian organisations from the Gulf States, after the war successfully recruited youth in the Municipality in Gjakova by luring them with different incentives and making their religious doctrines attractive to them. These organisations infiltrated the "virus" of radicalisation and violent extremism among certain youth in the municipality, and this still poses

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[158] Interview with A.1. (age 65), Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[159] Interview with A.2. (age 54), Gjakoava, March 14th, 2022.

[160] Interview with A.3. (age 54), Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[161] The Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022, the Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022, and the Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022. This is also confirmed by the interviewees A.1. and A.3. The interviewee J.J observes that there are some cases of identification by youth with religious leaders.

[162] E13, S6, R7, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th;, 2022, and L10, Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022.

[163] B2, A1, G7, Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

a potential threat[164]. On the other hand, the interviewee A3 observes that some young individuals from Gjakova joined ISIS, although they belonged to families that were not religious or were not at all attracted by religious conservatism and fundamentalism[165]. Similarly, the interviewee A2 claims that some imams have managed to indoctrinate certain individuals by preaching radical Islam and by denigrating other religions and their believers[166].

In this regard, some participants perceive the driver of transnational dynamics as rather influential regarding violent extremism. In this line of argument, one participant has noted that years ago, in the mosques in Gjakova a number of charity organisations from the Middle East have distributed "humanitarian aid" to some local worshipers, who have after some time gone to Syria and died there[167]. Another participant mentioned that some years ago, some Arab organisations were distributing leaflets with religious content, that, among other things were also propagating radicalism and supporting violent extremism[168]. Furthermore, an interviewee[169] has pointed out to a case when a number of imams from Gjakova participated in a protest organised by the elements of Muslim Brotherhood in Kosovo that took place in Prishtina more than 10 years ago[170]. Based on these evidences provided by the participants it can be concluded that the driver of transnational dynamics contributed to radicalisation and violent extremism among youth in this municipality.

Against this background, according to an interviewee, the number of Muslim believers joining the congregations in the mosques of Gjakova is quite small. He pointed out that, on Friday prayers in total a maximum of 1,000 believers worship in the 11 mosques left from the Ottoman Empire[171]. He further explained that in the municipality of Gjakova where the seat of the Bektashi Quarter[172] of Kosovo is located, the majority of Muslim believers belong to Bektashi tradition[173]. The interviewee also claims that tekkes are more powerful than mosques in Gjakova, and that they are frequently used for arbitration of private disputes between their followers.[174]

In line with this observation, another interviewee claims that, to a large extent, Bektashian sheikhs have an overwhelming authority and influence in the community. According to him, there are well documented cases that the sheikhs have had influence on the elections of mayors of the municipality through their congregations. Furthermore, he thinks that although they have twice supported a catholic candidate to become a mayor of the municipality, this was not a virtue of their open-mindedness, but rather a consequence of their desire to interfere in local politics by aligning with a party that derived

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[164] Interview with A1, March 14th, 2022

[165] Interview with A3, March 14th, 2022

[166] Interview with A2, March 14thh, 2022

[167] B2, Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

[168] S4, Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022.

[169] Interview with A.1., Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[170] The protests took place on June 24, 2010. For further information see: Fatos Bytyçi, Headscarf ban upsets devout Muslims in Kosovo, https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-49612120100624?edition-redirect=in

[171] Interview with F.G, Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[172] Bektashi Quarters, The World Bektashi Headquarter, Tirana, https://kryegjyshataboterorebektashiane.org/en/bektashi-quarters-gjyshatat/

[173] Ibid.

[174] Interview with A.1., Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

from the war wing of Kosovar politics. He further claims that the local population often sees the religion not solely as faith, but also as an interest or as an activity of a certain groups that makes personal benefits, meaning less religious and more business oriented[175].

The research findings show that drivers of economic deprivation and the education sub-driver are of special importance regarding social resilience to radicalism and violent extremism. In this context, regardless of the fact that seven inhabitants of Gjakova joined the ranks of ISIS, an interviewee claims that there is no radicalism and extremism in the municipality, but he believes that the existing social resilience could be threatened by the low level of education and socio-economic development.[176] He argues that some "charity organizsations" from the Middle East have through the provision of humanitarian aid, computer courses and other benefits, managed to recruit some youth to join the war in Syria, by misusing their bad economic conditions for their political aims[177].

The other interviewee claims that plurality of religions and social practices have no impact on radicalisation and extremism. However, he considers that some local decision-makers that neglect the secular character of Kosovo by allowing public servants during working hours to join congregations in mosques may contribute towards radicalism. According to him, the same is true for electronic media that sometimes have no sense either about the secular character of the state or the religious plurality. Accordingly, he considers that the level of education and socio-economic development plays a very important role in building social resilience in the community[178].

On the other hand, another interviewee observes that the increase of the number of congregations in the local mosques is a result of the need for solace from bad economic and social situation, socialisation and solidarity between people. In addition, he claims that today many believers are also philanthropists, who often initiate humanitarian actions for various religious holidays, regardless of whether these are Muslim or other holidays. He underlines that the Muslim community has given funds to build a Catholic church in Gjakova, while the Catholic community has also raised funds for reconstruction of the mosques damaged by the Serbian regime during the war. Furthermore, he claims that in such an environment, young people cannot find a venue to become radicalised on religious bases, and that this phenomenon is limited only to certain individuals[179].

Regarding culture and leisure, participants in this research have observed that nowadays youth have sufficient access to sport, cultural and other activities and premises[180]. Nevertheless, different age groups have expressed the wish for changing the routine of their free time. Some participants of age group from 12 to 14 years would prefer to work with NGOs dealing with human rights or technological innovation[181].

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[175] Interview with A.3., Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[176] Interview with A.1., Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[177] Ibid.

[178] Interview with J.J, Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

[179] Interview with A.3., Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[180] Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022, the Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022, and Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022

Others, belonging to the age group from 15 to 18 years prefer to spend more time in practical work related to their future professions[182]. Finally, the majority of participants from the age group from 18 to 27 years would prefer to travel abroad, especially to Europe, but the lack of visa liberalisation for Kosovo citizens hinders such desire.[183] The interviewees have also confirmed that sports and cultural facilities in Gjakova have improved in the last years, but they note that despite that youth does not participate in large numbers in these activities[184].

This research has provided sufficient evidence that social digitalisation is rapidly shaping the way of life of youth in this municipality, and that it is an important driver that intertwines with the drivers of religious interpretations and transnational dynamics. In this regard, the majority of young participants in this research have declared that they spent many hours of their free time engaging with social media,[185] which has also been confirmed by the interviewees[186]. Furthermore, the majority of youth participating in this research admits that it acquires most of the information about religions via social media[187]. In this regard, a participant of age group 12–14 years said that she enjoys different people talking about their religions in social media (Tik Tok and Instagram)[188]. Similarly, another participant confirmed that social media have a lot of religious content, and that by using them she learns about religions,[189] whereas another participant said that she uses Youtube to learn and listen religious preaching[190]. On the other hand, a participant of this age group observed that when different people post about their religion on social media, often others contest their religion. Sometimes, they even argue that their religion is not a true one, which, according to her, is an issue of lack of respect for religious plurality[191]. Finally, another participant has claimed that she uses social media not only to learn about her religion, but also to learn about other religions[192].

In this vein, a participant from the age group from 16 to 18 years has observed that he has encountered video-games simulating fights via internet, which used holy religious objects as a target, and that many other pages have seductive religious content. He also referred to pages propagating that only a certain religion is true, which according to him may cause misunderstanding and unintentional conflicts among many people[193]. Another participant had similar observation, and claimed that especially in Instagram, there are posts that urge for religious fanaticism, which, according to him, are particularly dangerous, due to their tendentious content that may affect relations between people.[194] Furthermore, a participant from

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[181] E12. K10, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022.

[182] A13, L.10, D10, Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022.

[183] B02, G7, F27, Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

[184] Interviews with A.1., A.2., and A.3. Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[185] The Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022, the Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022 and the Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

[186] Interviews with A.1., A.2. and A.3. March 14th, 2022.

[187] Ibid.

[188] E 13, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022

[189] Ibid, E7.

[190] Ibid. M.13.

[191] Ibid. A32.

[192] Ibid. S6.

[193] S4, Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022

[194] Ibid. D10.

this age group has experienced a case when in a football fans page there were discussions about religion that escalated to hostility among its members. He thinks that younger people could be endangered by these hate spreading contents, since social media have become also virtual venues for debates[195]. Similarly, young participants of the age group from 18 to 27 years have observed that groups who stand behind different pages, including those that entail criminal activities, such as paedophilia, prostitution and even terrorism, massively use social media for recruitments for their aims. He pointed out that also there are many pages of religious content that at the first sight look fine, but when searched deeper, their content is quite problematic[196]. Whereas, another participant claimed that there are many pages in social media that contain religious content, which contradict Koran, if they propagate Islamic content or Bible if they propagate Christianity, and usually spread disinformation[197].

When it comes to violent extremism, the sources of information acquired by young participants in this research are similar, but they have discussed this topic with people from different relational backgrounds. Some participants of the age group from 12 to 14 years said that they have received information on this topic, including ISIS, from teachers who lectured the subject "Civic Education" as well as from electronic and social media, and that they have also discussed it with their family members[198]. A participant of this age group thinks that ISIS is a product of criminal groups, whose aim is to instil fear through killings in order to achieve its aims[199]. On the other hand, some participants have confirmed that some of their schoolmates believe that scenes of these crimes transmitted by media are either manipulated or false, which in itself is a matter of concern[200]. Participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years have also claimed to have received information on this issue from electronic and social media, and have then discussed it with parents, friends and the teacher of history.[201] Regarding foreign fighters from Kosovo in ISIS, a participant thinks that the responsibility for this lays at Muslim clergy and financial incentives.[202] Similarly, some participants of the age group from 18 to 27 years said that they have acquired information mainly from electronic and social media, but in contrast to other age groups, they have mostly discussed these matters with friends. They have also confirmed of being aware of atrocities committed by ISIS, including those by Kosovo foreign terrorist fighters.[203]

This research has also explored the freedom and trust of youth to discuss issues of their concerns with their parents, friends and teachers. In this regard, diverse results were noted among young participants in this research. The highest level of trust and freedom to discuss these issues varies between friends and parents among the young participants at the primary and secondary schools, whereas the trust in teachers is limited solely to the issues related to school matters or problems.[204] However, different

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[195] Ibid. A13.

[196] G7, Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

[197] Ibid. B2.

[198] E13, S6, R7, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022

[199] Ibid. E13.

[200] Ibid. T23.

[201] Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022.

[202] Ibid. S4.

[203] B2, G7, A1Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

[204] Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022, the Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022.

patterns were noted among the participants belonging to the age group from 18 to 27 years. Some of the participants have declared that they discuss important matters solely with parents and family, and they do not have sufficient trust on their friends and social circles to discuss important personal issues[205]. In this regard, the interviewees share similar opinions on this issue. The interviewee A1 emphasises that although youth trust their parents to talk about issues of their concern, in general, they are more open with their friends than with their parents[206]. Similarly, interviewee A2 also thinks that youth are more open with their social circles than with their parents. According to him, the reasons for these attitudes of youth, regardless of their gender, depend on the intellectual level and openness of their parents. He claims that parents have a particular responsibility in prevention of radicalisation, since they can detect the slightest changes in the behaviour of their children. Another problem that he has stipulated is that if two parents work, they do not have enough time to spend with their children, which, in turn, makes youth naturally more open to their social circles to talk about issues of their concern[207]. The interviewee A3 has confirmed that the lack of sufficient time to spend with children causes failure of parental factor. In addition, he observes that nowadays children talk openly to their parents and that they are not overwhelmed by their authority like in the past[208].

An interesting finding of this research is that the vast majority of participants have claimed that they have either been victims of bullying, or that they have witnessed it happening to their peers in primary or secondary schools. In addition, they have admitted that physical violence among youth is occasionally present in their schools and neighbourhoods[209]. Such cases of bullying and violence in schools were usually solved after being reported to teachers[210]. Nevertheless, certain youth were hesitant to report to Police some cases of violence occurring outside the schools, out of fear of being considered as traitors[211]. Additionally, according to a participant in this research, another phenomenon that is becoming prevalent is cyberbullying, which is occasionally affecting youth badly with depressive effects and sometimes even hurts them more than physical violence[212].

Another finding of this research is that political grievances are not considered by young participants as a push factor towards radicalisation. These grievances are rather limited to dissatisfaction with political parties or performance of either local or national governments, which in certain cases may push people towards radicalisation. In this regard, a participant of the age group from 12 to 15 years said that she does not agree at all with any political party, because instead of taking care about the well-being and living standard of citizens, they only work for their own interests. Consequently, she pointed out that everyone tries to corrupt and profit for its own personal gains, though she praised the work of the

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[205] Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

[206] Interview with A.1., Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[207] Interview with A.2., Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[208] Interview with A.3.., Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[209] Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022, the Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022, and Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

[210] Ibid.

[211] M29, Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022.

[212] G7, Ibid.

incumbent mayor[213]. The other participant of this age group thinks that consecutive dissatisfactions and despair with the performance of political parties and governments may lead some individuals towards violent extremism,[214] while others may join NGO-s to oppose the bad governance[215]. Participants from the age group 15 to 18 years have also expressed similar views. A participant of this age group thinks that certain persons might turn to extremisms after being despaired numerous times by politics,[216] whereas another participant admitted that she has such a case in her family[217]. Furthermore, a participant of the age group from 18 to 27 years pointed out that nowadays each family needs to have at least one member in a political party, in order to achieve something, thus making politics not a voluntary, but rather a mandatory engagement[218].

When analysing whether interaction between religious and national belonging plays any specific role in relation to radicalisation and extremism, one should keep in mind that while in the case of other Balkan nations religion was a factor of unification, in the case of Albanians, who are the only multi-religious nation in the Balkans, it certainly had a divisive role. In this regard, the macro level analysis has shown that religious (mis)interpretations of Islam was the most important factor that contributes to radicalisation and violent extremism in Kosovo. On the other hand, it has also provided sufficient evidence that national belonging and religion are among the most powerful expressions of group and individual identities. The research conducted in the Municipality of Gjakova has basically yielded similar findings.

There is an overall consensus among participants of all age groups, as well as interviewees, that national belonging is more important than religious affiliation[219]. A participant of the age group 18 to 27 years has maintained similar position, while also saying that in her community national or religious affiliation does not play a great role in relations among citizens[220]. She also claimed that based on her experience, religious affiliation plays an important role outside Kosovo, since the moment she declared being a Muslim while visiting Western Europe, some peers belonging to Catholic and Orthodox religion have immediately asked her if she was a Wahhabi or an extremist.[221] Another participant of the same age group also responded that first comes the nation, since the national belonging cannot be changed, while the religious affiliation is changeable[222].

Similarly, the interviewee A.2. has also reiterated the preeminent importance of the national identity by explaining that while national belonging does not change, the religious and party affiliations may

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[213] E13, R7, Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022.

[214] F2, E7, Ibid.

[215] E7, Ibid.

[216] D10, Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022.

[217] Ibid, S4.

[218] B02, Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14thh, 2022.

[219] The Focus Group with pupils of the Primary School "Zekiria Rexha", Gjakova, February 25th, 2022; the Focus group with students of the Secondary School "Hajdar Dushi", Gjakova, March 1st, 2022; and the Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022. This was also confirmed by the interviewees A.1., A.2., and A.3.

[220] B02, Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

[221] Ibid, B02.

[222] Ibid, G7.

change, in the same way in which the support for a football club can change[223]. He further pointed out that although there were attempts in the past, the religion has not been able to overtake the place of the nation. In addition, according to him, the nation has never been endangered, at least not in Gjakova[224]. The interviewee A.1., also believes that the Kosovar identity, i.e. the state identity, is the dominant one, and not the religious one, since Kosovo, even by its Constitution is defined as a secular state. He even went a step further, by stating that, in fact, the national affiliation is a deterrent and preventive factor of radicalisation and extremism[225]. Furthermore, according to him, the religious identity is not national at all, since through religious discourses it is possible to brainwash most of the believers. For him, the brainwashing through religion in relation to the nation is exactly the extremism that has been happening in recent years[226]. According to the interviewee A.3., in terms of the ethnic composition, 90% of the Albanian majority population lives in tolerance with the minority RAE community, so he sees no possibility or elements of radicalism in the national relationship between these two ethnicities that coexist in the municipality of Gjakova[227]. He believes that religious uneasiness can become a source of potential intolerance only if there is inequality within society. For instance, if the ratio of the Muslim community to the Catholic one is 80% to 20%, it is not advisable to have almost half of the decision-making members in the municipality from the Catholic community, because that would immediately create inequality between the two communities[228].

Based on the above statements by the participants it can be concluded that the misinterpretation of Islam represents the major factor of radicalisation and violent extremism in the Municipality of Gjakova. The research also shows that the driver of transnational dynamics contributed significantly to radicalisation and violent extremism among youth in this municipality. Furthermore, according to the research findings, the driver of social digitalisation plays a major role in shaping the way of life of youth in this municipality, and it is a major source of information regarding religious radicalism and violent extremism. On the hand, the research reveals that the drivers of economic deprivation, political grievances, territorial inequalities (urban-rural divide) and education do not play an important role on radicalisation and violent extremism.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS

As part of the meso-level analysis, it is important to identify eventual intersections between different drivers and explore whether such intersections could be considered as factors that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism, or on the contrary as initiatives to prevent these phenomena. The above analyses point out to an important intersection between religion as the most important driver to radicalisation and violent extremism and two other drivers - digital socialisation and transnational dynamics. The research has shown that social digitalisation plays a very important role in shaping the

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[223] Interview with A.2. (54 years old), Gjakova, March 14thh, 2022.

[224] Ibid.

[225] Interview with A.1. (65 years), Gjakova, March 14thh, 2022.

[226] Ibid.

[227] Interview with A.3. (54 years old), Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

[228] Ibid.

way of life of youth in Gjakova Municipality. The youth participating in the research have admitted of spending a bulk of their free time on digital social media. As a result, these youth receive most of the information about religion in general, and radicalisation and violent extremism in particular, through social media. In this way, social digitalisation represent an important driver that intertwines with the driver of religious (mis)interpretations and in some cases reinforces it. On the other hand, transnational dynamics driver also intersects with religion though foreign influence from Gulf States that often results in changed perceptions of youth about religions and pushes them towards radicalisation and violent extremism.

The research findings also point out to a loose intersection between religion and the driver of economic deprivation. Although according to macro-level analysis, economic deprivation is not considered a dominant driver of radicalisation and violent extremism, the research shows that unemployment, lack of job prospects and limited access to decent level of social welfare might push some youth in the community to seek spiritual comfort and socialisation with radicalised and extremist groups. The research has also indicated to a loose intersection between religion and the driver of political grievances, although not so important one. Namely, while young participants do not consider political grievances as an important push factor towards radicalisation, consecutive dissatisfactions and despair with the performance of political parties and governments in some cases may lead certain individuals towards radicalism and extremism. Finally, the research analysis indicates to a loose intersection between religion and the driver related to education, leisure and cultural opportunities. The conducted research has shown that some radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam beliefs could easily manipulate individuals with low level of education and lack of proper knowledge about religion. On the other hand, proper level of education and knowledge could contribute in building community resilience to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism.

In addition to a number of intersections of religion with several other drivers, research analysis has identified several intersections between other drivers related to radicalisation and violent extremism. An important identified intersection is the one between digital socialisation and transnational dynamics. On the one hand, youth participating in the research have admitted of spending most of their free time on digital social media. On the other hand, there is no doubt that information technologies have increasingly served as an amplifier for dissemination of radical extremist messages. Research findings have confirmed that some young participants have witnessed cases in which extremist elements used digital technologies to spread their extremist ideologies and to recruit individuals for their aims.

The research shed light to another intersection, though perceived as not so important one, between economic deprivation and political grievances. Certain unemployed individuals without job prospects and equal employment opportunities sometimes become members of political parties in order to eventually get a job in public institutions. If after repetitive efforts these individuals fail to get a job, they might get even more disappointed, fall into despair and turn towards radicalism and extremism.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Based on the above analysis, it is possible to identify certain interactions between the drivers and the social contexts that could be considered as factors that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism.

These interactions could in turn also help in building community resilience to prevent these phenomena.

The research analysis points out to an interaction between religion and the education and unemployment as the social context. The research findings clearly show that education and employment are of special importance in building social resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Namely, the low level of education could seriously threaten the social resilience of the community, given that it would be easier for radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam beliefs, to manipulate individuals without proper education. On the other hand, unemployment as a factor that limits access to decent level of social wellbeing could also threaten the social resilience of the community, because it was by misusing their bad economic conditions that some Middle East "charity organisations" have managed to recruit some youth to join the war in Syria.

The research shows that interaction between religion and ethnic community as a social context may play a significant role in building community resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Being considered as more important than religious affiliation, national identity could serve as a pull factor for youth in the Municipality of Gjakova, and thus contribute to the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

Another important interaction is evident between religion as a driver, and the political and social participation as a social context. The influence of the Bektashian sheikhs on the elections of mayors of the municipality through their congregations represents a clear crossing between a specific driver and a given social context. In the past, rather than leading to radicalisation and violent extremism, such interaction has contributed to religious tolerance since the Muslim sheikhs have twice supported a catholic candidate to become a mayor of the municipality.

The research findings indicate to a relevant interaction between drivers of economic deprivation and education, leisure and cultural opportunities, on the one hand, and urban and peri-urban spaces as a social context, on the other. Namely, the research has shown that the urban-rural divide as a local social pattern is still prevailing in the Gjakova Municipality. Such a divide results in economic deprivation of citizens from rural areas as well as in their exclusion from leisure and cultural activities. Having in mind that the urban population is predominantly Muslim, while the Christian one mainly lives in rural areas, the crossing between the above-mentioned drivers and the social context may lead to inter-religious intolerance within these communities. The meso-level analysis of the conducted research has not indicated any other relevant interactions between remaining drivers and social contexts.

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS OF THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

The research findings show that religious social practices in Gjakova are liberal, and that social context pertaining to multi-religiosity is characterised by high level of cohabitation. The fact that an Albanian Catholic, Mr. Pal Lekaj, was elected a mayor twice in a row, in a municipality with more than 80% of population nominally belonging to Islam, is a strong indicator of the inter-religious cohabitation in Gjakova. In addition, the research findings have proven that the national identity in Gjakova Municipality has supremacy over the religious affiliation. Another finding is that majority of youth do not attend religious preaching in the objects of cult, and do not identify themselves with religious leaders. Nevertheless, some evident problems have been displayed related to socio-religious distance, since inter-religious marriages to large extent are stigmatised and ignored by certain social circles.

Against this backdrop, the research results provide sufficient evidence that the impact of meso-level drivers in the Municipality of Gjakova generally converges with Macro-level drivers. Equally as at the national level analysis, the driver of religion is perceived by the research participants as the major factor of violent extremism, which is inherently intertwined with the drivers of digital socialisation and transnational dynamics. The drivers of economic deprivation and the sub-driver of education as well as the one of political grievances are perceived by participants as also having a certain impact on radicalisation and violent extremism. The drivers of territorial inequalities and leisure and cultural opportunities are considered as largely insignificant to violent extremism.

In terms of identified intersections among drivers, the intersections between religion and two other drivers – digital socialisation and transnational dynamics – are certainly the most important ones. The research findings have also indicated a loose intersection between religion and the driver of economic deprivation, and not so important intersection between religion and the driver of political grievances.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO- LEVEL ANALYSIS

The meso-Level analysis has identified several prevention indicators pertaining to radicalisation and violent extremism. First and foremost, the research findings clearly show that education and knowledge play an important role in building social resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Young people with low or improper level of education have fewer resources to avoid manipulation and indoctrination. It may be concluded that youth with low level of education can be manipulated easier by radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islam belief.

Secondly, the research has shown that employment that provides access to decent level of social welfare is also rather important factor in building social resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Young people who see themselves as being economically deprived, especially if they are Muslim, are more likely to accept tenets of the radical Islam. The research has proven that it was by misusing their bad economic conditions that some Middle East "charity organisations" have managed to recruit some youth to join the war in Syria.

Thirdly, being perceived as more important than religious affiliation, national identity could also play an important role in building community resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Since the secular character of ethnic identity of Kosovo Albanians coincides with the Western European values, pursuing secular character of Kosovo embodied in its Constitution could serve as an important pull factor in countering violent extremism. Finally, increasing awareness on the detrimental effect of the urban – rural divide, that also entails an important inter-religious connotation, as well as countering "political nepotism" in case of employments in public sector represent important factors for increasing social resilience towards violent extremism.

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO LEVEL ANALYSIS

Prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism requires a deep understanding of the radicalisation process that takes into account macro, meso and micro levels of analysis. An integrated whole comprised of different motivational factors operating at these three levels is the one that makes an individual vulnerable to the influence of religious (mis)interpretations. The meso-level analysis has combined drivers with the social contexts in order to identify contexts and drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in the municipality of Gjakova. The meso-level analysis of different combinations between drivers and crossings between drivers and social contexts has enabled us to identify certain factors that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism, but can also help in building community resilience to prevent these phenomena. In addition, through this meso-level research it was possible to identify certain paths that should be taken into consideration in the micro-level analysis.

The same way as no single driver can establish a causal relationship between radicalisation and violent extremism, no motivational factor operating at only one level of analysis can determine whether an individual becomes radicalised or not. According to meso-level analysis, certain unemployed individuals without decent level of social wellbeing might turn towards radicalism and extremism. Similarly, although according to the research analysis political grievances are not an important push factor towards radicalisation, certain individuals who have continuously been disappointed and dissatisfied with the performance of political parties and governments might in some cases turn towards radicalism and extremism. Finally, research findings have shown that young participants spend most of their free time on digital social media where they have witnessed cases in which extremist elements used digital technologies to spread their extremist ideologies and to recruit individuals for their aims. However, not all of these youth will become radicalised by extremist ideologies being disseminated through digital social media. In all these cases, whether an individual will turn towards radicalism and extremism will depend on a set of individual motivational factors that need to be examined through the micro-level analysis.

General Conclusion

This research analysis provides credible findings proving that the impact of meso-level drivers in the Gjakova Municipality converges with the amplitude of the impact of macro-level drivers, by specifying religion as most influential driver of violent extremism that is strongly inter-related with the drivers of digital socialisation and transnational dynamics.

Furthermore, this analysis provides answers to the following pre-determined research questions:

1. Is religion a driving factor of violent extremism with greater relevance than other colliding factors? Has religious education a role in preventing violent extremism? Do youth identify with existing religious leaderships?

The research analysis clearly indicates that religion is the key driving factor of violent extremism in comparison with other drivers. Nevertheless, since the information about religions by youth is mainly obtained from social media, on the one hand, and given the strict mono-religious knowledge of local clerics, on the other, the religious education under such circumstances can hardly play any role in preventing violent extremism. Furthermore, the research findings indicate that participants of this research, and youth in general, do not identify with existing local religious leaders, and a number of them questions their professional credentials.

2. Does the relation between religion and national belonging play a specific role?

The research findings have highlighted that there is an overall consensus among participants of all age groups, as well as interviewees, that national belonging is more important than religious affiliation. Having in mind the secular character of Albanian nationalism, the supremacy of ethnic identity in relation to religious belonging can serve as a cohesive factor that enables inter-religious cohabitation and as a preventing factor to violent extremism.

3. What is the impact of social experience and practice of religion on communities, or is it rather the individual attitude towards religion that drives young people to radical ideas and actions?

The research findings indicate that in the Gjakova Municipality the social practice of religion is liberal, and that it is individual attitude towards religion that might drive youth towards radical ideas and violent extremism. In addition, the research analysis concludes that Kosovo foreign terrorist fighters were rather a result of transnational dynamics, and were primarily influenced by a number of "charity" organisations from the Gulf countries that came to Kosovo with an agenda of instilling political and radical Islam.

4. What is the impact of plurality of religious interpretations on inter-religious cohabitation and extremism?

The research analysis shows that the impact of plurality of religious interpretations is not relevant for traditional religious cohabitation in the Municipality of Gjakova, which is largely driven by the secular character of Albanian identity. Nevertheless, as research findings have indicated, possible deviances from the secular character of Kosovo as a state may also affect the traditional secularism of ethnic Albanians, which may pave the way not only to inter-religious tensions, but also to those between secularists and religionists, thus eventually leading certain social circles towards extremism.

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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.