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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

NORTH MACEDONIA

Lidija Georgieva, Elena Mujoska Trpevska, Naum Trajanovski



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Commemorations of the 2001 Macedonian conflict in Tetovo

Naum Trajanovski, Lidija Georgieva

Introduction

Commemorative events provide “powerful piece of theatre” for projecting mutual leanings (Suttmoeller et al. 2011 in Lowe 2014). In post-conflict settings, commemorations, as well as, what a Northern Ireland’s research group defined as, “commemorative-related violence” – or the process surrounding the “efforts to bring the past into focus in the present” – can contribute to denting efforts at building peace, damaging inter-communal relations at a local level and trigger crisis on a national one (McDowell & Braniff 2014; McDowell, Braniff & Murphy 2015). We take a step back and depart from the classic memory studies’ view on commemorations: practices and performances that mobilise communities by marking a shared perception of past events and persons (i.e. Gillis 1994; Olick 2008). Commemorative events, as such, bear moral and emotional dimensions – as the communities are continually choosing who and what is worth remembering and, by the same token, who and what is not; and are heavily relying on symbols and cultural artifacts as means of representing the past. We also draw on the more recent literature which explores the radicalisation-commemorations nexus: depicting, on the one hand, commemorative events as “one of the steps in a radicalisation process used for recruitment” (Suttmoeller et al. 2011 in Lowe 2014), and, on the other hand, looking at the wide and complex set of social actors that engage into mnemonic activities of victims of terrorism and terrorist attacks. The commemorations of the terrorist attacks in Europe as of the mid-2000s are thus an example of many “spontaneous” practices of the communities, which can oppose, complement or go hand-in-hand with official memory politics, policies and discourses (for an overview, see Milošević 2017).

We argue that such a standpoint on North Macedonia can provide a better understanding of several social and political developments related to the aftermath of the 2001 armed conflict (2001 conflict) in the state, their occurrences as interaction platforms at a meso-level, as well as their radicalisation potentials. Although the former southernmost Yugoslav state managed to avoid the bloodshed of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the inter-ethnic tensions between the two largest ethnic communities in the state – the Macedonian and the Albanian one – escalated in early 2001, soon after the end of the war in the neighboring Kosovo. More precisely, on 22 January 2001, the so-called National Liberation Army (NLA), mostly consisted of ethnic Albanian rebels from Kosovo, then Yugoslavia and Macedonia, attacked the police station in Tearce, in the vicinity of the city of Tetovo, thus provoking a clash with the state security forces. The shootings between the NLA fighters and the state security forces escalated in March 2001 and lasted up to August that year, resulting in more than 200 casualties and over 100,000 internally displaced persons (more in Ortakovski 2001; Ackerman 2002; Bellamy 2002; Brunnbauer 2002; Phillips 2002; Daskalovski 2004). The six months conflict was settled with the Ohrid Framework

Agreement (OFA): a peace agreement signed by the leaders of the largest domestic parties from the two dominant blocks – Macedonian and Albanian – and the international brokers, which paved a way for a major institutional restructuring of the Macedonian state (Bieber 2008; Ilievski 2007; Ilievski & Wolff 2011; Georgieva, Mehmeti & Musliu 2011; Horowitz 2014).

Although OFA was a blueprint for the new power-sharing model, it also paved the way for the establishing of a peculiar ethno-centric “citizenship regime” where the citizens “realise their rights, obligations and participate in the public and political spheres exclusively as members of ethno-national and religious communities” (Spaskovska 2012; see, as well, Janev 2011). The commemorations of events related to the 2001 conflict took a similar turn and, ever since, they were almost exclusively organised separately, within the domains of the two largest ethnic groups in the state. These events were – and still are – multi-faceted and organised by state and religious institutions, political parties, veteran organisations and civil actors; generally, take the form of annual commemorations at several memory sites within several state institutions or at sites related to the shootings; materialised as memorials and monuments, commemorative plaques and murals; but also got organised as vernacular events by the families, friends and colleagues of the casualties. It is important to be mentioned that the national media reported several cases of commemorative-related violence triggered by commemorative events – mostly clashes of participants in commemorations and venues – and, almost annually, of acts of vandalisations of memory sites: in the majority of cases related to the commemorative plaques dedicated to the killed members of the Macedonian state security forces. Violence at and after commemorative events in the contemporary Macedonian society is not a novelty per se: in the past years, we observed contestations along religious, ethnic and national lines in and beyond Skopje, about themes that stretch from the recent to the ancient history (see, for instance, Trajanovski 2021). However, we postulate that the legacy of the 2001 conflict presents one of the most heated memory-related topics in the domestic public discourse and unarguably the most contested issue from the history of Macedonian-Albanian interethnic relations in North Macedonia.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The memory discourses over the 2001 conflict were heretofore primarily discussed as part of the symbolic conflict between the two largest ethnic communities in the state, while the scholars traced either the pre-history of these tensions or their embeddedness in the post-conflict setting (see, for instance, Ragaru 2008; Dimova 2013). Neofotistos’s study (2012a) on the construction of the Albanian memory culture in North Macedonia after 2001 remains the most elaborate attempt to grasp its bottom-up formation and annual development (see, as well, the recent take by Reef 2018). A 2021 research project mapped the commemorations of the 2001 conflict in the state and presented them as an online platform (see ofa-2001-2021.mk), while several oral history publications on 2001 appeared since 2019 (i.e. Stojanov et al. 2019). However, we argue that the commemorative events related to the Macedonian 2001 are rarely a standpoint for discussing the aftermath of the conflict. Here, the ethno-centered memory cultures and politics are mostly discussed through the prism of the so-called “Skopje 2014 project” – a term that depicts the over 130 monuments and memorial objects in North Macedonia’s capital city, instigated in the late 2000s. Many scholars, hence, argued that the “project” filled in the urban core with ethno-centric content and paved the way for analogous response from the

“Other” – ethnic Albanian – side (for an overview, see Trajanovski 2020). Notwithstanding, the annual dynamism of the commemorative activities is largely overlooked, even so, we argue, it hints at several important aspects.

CASE STUDY SELECTION

The local contexts beyond Skopje, especially after the announcement and the establishment of the above constructing undertaking, did not get the same attention and treatment as the developments in the capital city. This is certainly the case of Tetovo, the third most populated city in the state, that was the major theatre of some of the most intense shootings in 2001. In short, the armed clashes in Tetovo started in March 2001, when several rebels opened fire on the Macedonian police from the Kale suburb and attacked the nearby village of Selce. This episode from the 2001 conflict was the “first time the guerrillas had gone into action during daylight” (Phillips 2002: 85-102). The siege of the city lasted twelve days, with the city being under constant fire by NLA, while the major clashes between NLA and the Macedonian security forces took place in the hills surrounding the city. On 28 March, Macedonian army launched a “military offense” pushing the rebels to retreat in Kosovo after several days of shootings (Ortakovski 2001: 40-41). The clashes in Tetovo and its vicinity continued up to the official ceasefire with different intensities: on 28 April, NLA ambushed the Macedonian forces near the village of Vejce, in the vicinity of Tetovo, and brutally killed eight of them; on 5 June, five army members were killed by the NLA in an ambush at the nearby Šipkovica-Gajre road; and on 8 August, ten Macedonian soldiers were killed in an NLA ambush near Karpalak on the Skopje-Tetovo highway (Neofotistos 2012b).

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Today, Tetovo is a multi-ethnic city of more than 84,770 inhabitants (alongside its vicinity), out of which 15,529 of ethnic Macedonian (mostly Orthodox Christian) and 60,460 of ethnic Albanian origins (mostly Muslim). Even so the city holds a history of peaceful coexistence, that dates back way beyond the 2001 conflict, interethnic tensions reappeared after 2001. As an illustration, we dealt with Tetovo’s football fan groups in the other CONNEKT country report from this WP and argued that the ethnic affiliation was among the strongest drivers for affiliating with fan groups. However, it is also worth mentioning that this aspect of Tetovo’s history and present did not translate into Islamic radicalisation in the course of the last years; the local inhabitants appeared to be more resilient than the ones of Skopje and Kumanovo in these regards (Qehaja & Perteshi 2018: 29-31). The memory of the 2001 conflict, however, is still informing the local life, even so many Tetovars adopted different strategies of dealing with it. The only attempt to grasp these dynamics is the 2010 paper by the anthropologist Kristina N. Nikolovska, who argues that despite the fact that the memories of 2001 “remain strong [...], on the surface [the locals] chose to ignore the past” (2010: 67). Nikolovska is closely examining the developments in a single apartment block in the city that mirrors the urban population structure, and claims that its residents “articulate different forms of subtle resistance to the ongoing ethnisation of the city” – thus consciously choosing to not engage with groupist and official narratives over 2001 (ibid, 74). The above finding resonates with the notion of “bridging capital” – or the “individual’s trust and confidence in people from other [ethnic and religious] groups” – that a group of authors observed in the city of Kumanovo after 2001 (Dukic, Hulse & Hooton 2021) – which we discuss in more detail below.

Research Design

MACRO-LEVEL FINDINGS

The variety of commemorative practices in and around the city, however, – and especially the violent reactions that frequently followed those events – led us to assume that these events have a radicalisation potential at the local, community context. Here, it is important to be noted that the OFA projected changes of the state’s political system led to de-centralisation of the power and, in the case of Tetovo, remarking of the municipal borders and an institutionalisation of the Albanian language as an official one alongside the Macedonian. Ever since 2001, the local municipality in Tetovo is led by Albanian political parties; in particular, DUI, up to 2021. As argued in the country report on the macro-level drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism, the OFA-instigated structural changes led to better and proportional political representation of the ethnic and religious communities in the state, however, the “weaponisation of the public discourse across ethnic, national and cultural lines” remains a serious issue for the fragile inter-ethnic balance in the state (Kambovski, Georgieva & Trajanovski 2021: 11). Hence, we depart from the hypothesis that the commemorative events related to the 2001 conflict are used as platforms for promoting exclusivists and ethno-centric agendas which, in turn, mobilise individuals and, eventually, can fire up inter-ethnic tensions. More precisely, we assume that these events can trigger ethnic and religious hatred at individual and community levels, and re-enhance the borders between the two dominant communities in the public discourse. We also believe that a closer look at the local context of Tetovo will provide a better understanding of the institutional work, the bottom-up dynamics and the legacies of the inter-ethnic past at a meso-level – which we also touch upon below in this section.

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METHODOLOGY

To better grasp the case study of Tetovo: i) we analysed media texts on the commemorative events in and around Tetovo as of 2001; ii) we organised two focus groups with Tetovo vicenarians of Macedonian and Albanian ethnic backgrounds; and iii) we conducted four semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders regarding the commemorations of 2001 in the city and in the state. The rationale behind this approach was to get as multivocal perspective as possible, taking under consideration the factual and diachronic developments over the last two decades (via the media texts), the voices of the local youth of the two largest ethnic communities in the city (via the focus groups), and the standpoints of the stakeholders that are actively participating, organising or following the commemorative dynamics in the city in the state from both the sides (via the interviews). The two focus groups were organised in Tetovo, in February 2022, and both of them had five discussants each. As we already mentioned, we aimed at speaking with a generation of Tetovars who were born during or immediately after the conflict, so they could not have a direct memory of the conflict, but have as much experience with the annual commemorations of 2001 as possible. Hence, the Macedonian discussants are born from 2001 to 2002, while the Albanian ones are all born in 2001. We discussed topics related to radicalisation and violent extremism in general, the 2001 conflict, the commemorations related to the conflict and their perceptions of the commemorative activities, while we also talked about the seven potential drivers of radicalisation that are within the general scope of the CONNEKT project. As for the interviews, we

managed to speak with a former member of the Macedonian security forces and a high representative of a war veteran organisation (interview no. 1), a high representative of the Macedonian army (MA) (no. 2), a former high representative of the Ministry of Interior (Mol) (no. 3), and a former high representative of the Ministry of Defense (MoD) (no. 4) and expert on the Albanian commemorations (no. 5). The interviews were conducted following a similar key as the focus groups and an adjusted set of questions related to the particular experience and expertise of each interviewee.

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

It is important to be mentioned that several state institutions are formative for the commemorative activities related to the 2001 conflict in the state and in the city of Tetovo. At a macro-level, almost immediately after the conflict, MA, Mol and MoD established memorials within the complexes of army barracks and police stations across the state – mostly in the cities of the killed members of the state security forces (Skopje, Prilep, Bitola and Štip) – almost always in cooperation with the friends and the families of the victims, as well as the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC). In parallel, municipal actors and institutions emerged as another set of agents active in the institutionalisation of the memory of the killed members of the security forces, born on their territories: i.e. such memorials were erected by the municipalities of Dračevo (2002), Strumica (2007) and Skopje's Gjorče Petrov (2008), among the others. On a different note, it would be in the mid-2000s when the state institutions started to commemorate the day of the signing of OFA (more in Georgieva, Trajanovski and Wolffe 2021); an activity that was undertaken by the ethnic Albanian party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) [al. *Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*] from 2001 onwards. DUI, a political party formed in 2002 in Džepčište, in the close vicinity of Tetovo – largely made up of former NLA fighters – also promoted itself as the main custodian of the memory of NLA alongside its veteran organisation, and still champions the narrative that legitimises the armed struggle (for an earlier account, see Rusi 2004). Finally, the memory of 2001 was also in the focus of the activities of Macedonian veteran organisations – such as Dignity [mk. *Dostoinstvo*], formed in 2001 and turned into a political party in 2011 – other non-governmental organisations and football fan groups – such as, relevant for the other discussion of ours, Tetovo's Voivodes [mk. *Vojvodi*].

Meso-level dynamics

AN OVERVIEW OF THE COMMEMORATIVE ACTIVITIES

Tetovo commemorations related to the 2001 conflict, similarly to the ones in Skopje and Kumanovo, are being organised separately by members, affiliates and sympathisers of the two conflicting sides, have different events and persons in the foci, and are used to promote radically different views and messages over the occurrences in 2001. The commemorations of the members of the security forces were predominantly organised by religious actors – or the local branch of the MOC, – MoD and MA, and, only recently, by other formal and informal organisations. One of the first commemorative events dedicated to the victims of the Vejce ambush was organised in the Lešok monastery complex near Tetovo in April 2002, by the religious authorities of the monastery; an event attended by high representatives of the Macedonian police (Nikolovski 2002). Ever since, the commemorative activities related to the Vejce massacre took place at the birthplaces of the killed Macedonian security forces, while in Tetovo, their commemorations were conducted by the local branch of MOC which organised annual religious services for the killed members of the security forces in the “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” city church (i.e. Eftoski, 2005). As of the governmental change in 2006, the religious services in Tetovo got additional visibility in the Macedonian public as they were, only once, in 2007, attended by the then PM and the Ministers of Interior, and Transport and Communications (see, for instance, A1 2006 and MIA 2007). Parallely to the religious services, MA established a commemorative plaque dedicated to the five army members who were killed at the Šipkovica-Gajre road and held annual commemorative ceremonies at this memory site ever since June 2002. The veteran organisation Dignity was ever since the late 2000s active in the commemorations of the killed members of the security forces, placing, for instance, five commemorative plaques in the Tetovo area – Popova Šapka, Gajre, Vejce, Brvenica and Ratae – in 2010 (A1 2010).

As aforementioned, the memory activities over NLA’s involvement in the conflict in Tetovo were molded by the NLA veteran organisation and DUI. These activities were focused on commemorating the start of the hostilities in Tetovo, framing this event in celebratory terms, as well the ethnic Albanian war and civil victims from the 2001 conflict. Most illustrative event for the first point is the manifestation “The Tetovo fortress epic” organised on 12 March 2002 in the nearby villages of Šemševo and Poroj, arranged and attended by high members of NLA and DUI, that celebrated the start of the so-called “Battle for Tetovo” in 2001. The event had a celebratory tone, similarly to the initial commemorations of OFA by DUI; both positioning NLA as an ultimate winner of the 2001 conflict (Flaka 2002; as in OFA-2001-2021 platform). Several media texts from March 2002 claimed that the organisers’ initial plan of having the event in the city of Tetovo was stopped in the last moment by the diplomatic corps in the state. NLA, however, managed to organise the second anniversary of the start of the hostilities at the Tetovo fortress in 2003, under the title “The spring of dignity.” The culmination of this trajectory of celebrating the start of the hostilities in Tetovo was the establishment of the memorial complex dedicated to the 112. NLA brigade “Mujdin Aliu” in Tetovo’s village of Selce in 2005. In parallel, DUI and the local communities in and around Tetovo visited – and kept visiting as of 2002 – the graves of the killed NLA fighters and the civil victims in the Tetovo villages of Džepčište and Poroj. The memory activities of these organisations in the region of Tetovo are in line with Vasiliki Neofotistos’s observation of the

framing the killed NLA fighters as “martyrs of the Albanian nation” – as a discursive and practical operation of combining Islamic symbols and Albanian folklore with a single goal of legitimising ethno-nationalistic historical narratives (2012).

The commemorations of the 2001 conflict in Tetovo provoked several incidents in the course of the years. One of the first incidents took place in the village of Čelopek in 2005, when the local Albanian community stopped the Macedonian group from entering the village, in their attempt to commemorate the two killed civilians by NLA in the 2001 Brioni bombing at the village’s graves; the revolted group redirected to the governmental building instead and expressed their disappointment with the situation there (A1 2005a). In a similar vein, in 2008, a commemorative group directed at Vejce was stopped from reaching their desired destination by a blockade on the local road to the village (interview no. 1). In addition, the commemorative plaques dedicated to the killed members of the security forces in the villages of Vejce, Ratae, Gajre, and at the Tetovo fortress were demolished immediately after their mounting and the commemorative ceremonies (see, for instance, Makfaks 2010; Andonov 2021). However, the most outspoken events – in terms of their tensed aftermaths – were the commemorations at Karpalak as of 2003. Namely, in 2003, the first group consisting of the families and friends of the killed and MOC affiliates from Prilep set a commemorative plaque that was violently demolished shortly after the commemoration (Eftoski 2003). Ever since, the annual commemorations at Karpalak evolved into an epitome of the inter-ethnic tensions in the state and the conflicting memories over 2001 – in 2008, for instance, a NLA graffiti was written at the memory site prior the annual commemoration (Kanal5 2008) – as well as a platform for articulating anti-governmental stances – mostly related to the ill-treatment, as per the families and friends of the killed members of the security forces, such as in the commemorations in 2004 (Vreme 2004) and 2005 (A1 2005b). The tensions at Karpalak did not come to a closure as the commemorative plaques were demolished in several other occasions ever since, while the promised monument dedicated to the killed members of the security forces at Karpalak is yet to be built: the plan to erect the monument was firstly announced in 2004 and 2005, and, again, in 2019 (Andonov 2019).

FOCUS GROUPS DISCUSSIONS

The first set of questions that we discussed with the participants of the two focus groups aimed at getting a better grasp of their understandings of the processes of radicalisation, violent extremism and inter-ethnic tensions in the state and in the city of Tetovo. Both discussions suggest that the Tetovo youth has a nuanced understanding of the notion of radicalisation: considering it both as a negative category (such as in terrorism, physical aggression and war) and a positive practice (such as in radical reforms, mentioned by the Macedonian group, or the political radicalisation of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, mentioned by the Albanian group). We noticed a similar line of argumentation, during the two discussions, of juxtaposing radicalisation to individualism, or in other words, positioning radicalisation as a product of group dynamics – be it political, ideological, ethnic, religious or economic; all of them mentioned during the discussions – and a “blind following” of leaders, as per the Albanian group. Both groups of discussants thus framed the inter-ethnic tensions, or nationalism as per the Macedonian group, in the state and the city of Tetovo as typical for the “older” generations and “alien” to their generation. Moreover, both the groups identified the state’s political parties as the major

proponents of interethnic tensions in North Macedonia, but also maintained that the partisan media, the unsatisfactory economic situation and the malfunctioning of the state institutions are the other equally important set of factors that contributes to building animosities between the two dominant ethnic communities in Tetovo.

These perceptions of the Tetovar youth suggest that the drivers related to culture and cultural identity – or the culture as a set of identity-related markers, as we observed in one of the previous reports (2021) – as well as political grievances and economic deprivation are seen as the most potent means for radicalisation and violent extremism in their city. However, we have to, again, highlight the almost identical articulation of the standpoint by the two focus groups' discussants that these divisions are a past legacy and more common for the older generations of Tetovars, while their generation is not as prone to them. "We should not live in the past" – as framed by one discussant in the Macedonian group – is the phrase that epitomises the best this worldview. We view this standpoint as corresponding to the observations of the other recent, above-mentioned, study of resilience to violent extremism at a meso-level in North Macedonia: the multiethnic city of Kumanovo that has 98.104 inhabitants according to the 2022 population census, out of which 54.741 Macedonians and 25.493 Albanians, among the others. The authors of the 2021 study, based on a quantitative methodology had a goal to measure the community resilience to radicalisation, and argued that the younger generations of Kumanovo – from 15 to 35 – "have greater bridging capital than their elders" due to the lack of the memory of the "bloody dissolution" of Yugoslavia and the 2001 conflict. However, the authors also observed that there is a large fall in bridging capital scores among 20-24 years old locals (more in Dukic, Hulse & Hooton 2021).

The second set of questions were related to the 2001 conflict and the commemorations stemming from it: primarily in their city, but also at a state level. We noticed that the two groups provided somewhat contrasting opinions to their previous ones when narrowing and pinning the discussion down to the recurrences of the 2001 conflict in the public space and discourse.

More precisely, the two groups identified the commemorations of the 2001 conflict in Tetovo – of their respective ethnic communities – as grievances, or acts of "showing respect to the victims" by the Macedonian group, and an "important activity" for the local and ethnic Albanian community as per the Albanian one. Both the groups perceive these commemorative activities and events as risk-free and consider them as limited happenings within the domains of the involved families and the local communities. However, their interpretations of the tensions surrounding the commemorative activities over the 2001 conflict as of 2002 are immensely telling. Starting with the Macedonian group, the discussants pointed out the commemorative activities in Lešok and Karpalak as the most significant ones, or the ones that they follow the most; yet, without paying much attention to the annual developments. They identified the demolition of the plaques as a "provocation" by the local Albanians, stressing that such activities are common only in the areas inhabited with Albanians and likely to happen in the future as well. They also agreed upon the argument that no Macedonian ever demolished a commemorative plaque of NLA in the course of the last years. Moreover, the group also define as an eventual "provocation" the scenario in which an ethnic Albanian attends a commemoration of Macedonians killed in 2001. It is interesting to note, here, that such a discourse was promoted in the

media by rightist political activists, especially after the first ever joint commemoration of civil victims in 2018 in the village of Lipkovo.¹ The Albanian group, on the other hand, stated that the commemorations of the war casualties and civil victims are important, yet, acknowledged the fact that smaller and radical groups are responsible for fueling tensions before and after certain commemorative events. Even though the group was not as open as the Macedonian one when discussing these topics, they stressed that the general constellation of ethnic hate speech from both the communities in the state, alongside the slow economic development in general – “nothing has changed since 2001” – contributes to escalating and manifests as a demolition of memorial artifacts.

We also noted that the Macedonian group held a perception that there is a lack of a dialogue between the Tetovar youth from all the ethnic and religious backgrounds. They argued that this communication gap stems, as well, from the lack of a mutual understanding of the histories and the language of the other ethnicity, both in the city and in the state. More precisely, the young Macedonians that we spoke with hold that their Albanian peers lack a basic knowledge of- and fail to understand the Macedonian national history and history narratives – a process which, as per the same focus group discussion, works in both the cases and for both the groups. Although several experts mapped certain efforts in increasing the inter-ethnic dialogue and mutual understanding of the histories as of 2001, mostly in the educational domain (see, for instance, Todorov 2017; Petrovska-Beshka & Kenig 2017), these issues remain open, as we also witnessed in the focus groups discussions. As an illustration of the above point, the Macedonian group mentioned the municipal government decision to change the street names and the names of the municipal institutions to ones from the Albanian history – a decision which they find wrong and oppose it.

INTERVIEWS

All the interviewed stakeholders agreed upon the argument that the commemorative activities themselves do not present a threat for radicalisation and violent extremism; however, their public interpretations by certain political actors classifies them as tools for discursive weaponisation of the inter-ethnic relations in the state. In other words, all the interviewees claimed that the commemorations are used in the political arena as means of gaining immediate political points and sympathy from the voters. This, as per the second interviewee, is certainly the case for Tetovo where the political struggle within the Albanian political block is immensely significant for the local and the state’s political scene in general. Hence, as per the same interviewee, the commemorative events in the city have a twofold function: on the one hand, they are instruments in the hands of the organisers and the political leaderships, and serve as tokens of self-ascribing the role of custodians of the victory of 2001 and the memory of the killed NLA fighters, while on the other hand, they are also used by members of the lower party echelons which often view the commemorative events as platforms for expressing their loyalty to the party. This model of commemorating the 2001 conflict is thus constantly re-legitimising itself on the field with every coming commemorative event.

¹ The leading figures of the commemoration were Stojanče Angelov, former General Major of the special Macedonian forces, and Abedin Zimberi, former NLA commander. Both of them laid flowers on the graves of the civil victims and made public statements in favor of inter-ethnic reconciliation (Georgieva, Trajanovski & Wolffe 2021: 296).

There are certain differences between the two commemorative sides, however. As per two of our interviewees (interviews no. 1 and no. 2), the Albanian side – especially DUI – came up with a certain narrative over 2001 immediately after the end of the hostilities that further solidified in the years after the conflict. Hence, these commemorations were aired on the second channel of North Macedonia's public broadcaster and they were also partially sponsored by the state budget. They are also "political events" (interview no. 3), as they are attended by political elites and high profiled party members. On the contrary, the Macedonian elites failed to demonstrate a joint stance over 2001, while the conflict is still a hot topic that is used to scapegoat political opponents. As per one of the interviewees (no. 3), the topic of the 2001 conflict within the ethnic Macedonian political block is still a highly potent divisive issue that determines if a certain political actor is a patriot or not. We also noted this tension in the two interviews with Macedonian informants that we conducted, as we heard two different stances on the role of the veteran organisations that are organising several annual commemorative events in the last years: on the one hand, this was argued to be of utmost importance for the memory of the 2001 conflict and the role of the state security forces in the conflict, while we also noted that this type of commemorative activities have a single goal of granting the organisers immediate political points.

Importantly enough, though, all the interviewers agreed upon the notion that the commemorative events related to the 2001 conflict in North Macedonia should be used as platforms for promoting tolerance, peace and interethnic reconciliation. However, we noted that the interviewees hold a different standpoint on the means, the scope and the dynamics of the reconciliation through commemorations. As per the second interviewer, the state institutions are already performing discourses of tolerance, coexistence and mutual respect during the commemorative events related to the state security victims of the 2001 conflict. The decision to perform such a discourse, as per the same interviewee, suggests that the officials are having in mind the younger generations in the state and hence they use the commemorative events to articulate anti-war and peace messages. The third interviewee expressed a similar opinion on the potentials of the commemorative events as platforms for promoting peace, but stressed a single prerequisite: the highest state officials should make an additional effort and issue an official apology to the families of all the victims in 2001, while NLA should issue an apology to the ethnic Macedonian citizens. As per the first interviewee, the society should avoid parallel commemorations as they lead to triumphalism and defocus the public attention from the commemorative events' primary goal: the mourning of the war casualties and civil victims from 2001. The fourth interviewee claimed that one possible solution in these regards is joint – Macedonian and Albanian – state delegations to all the commemorative events related to the 2001 conflict: starting with the civil victims and proceeding, in time, with the war casualties. Moreover, the same interviewee emphasised the role of the international actors – foreign delegations, ambassadors and other delegates – as positive in terms of the process of reimagining the commemorative events related to the 2001 conflict as platforms for promoting peace.

Concluding Remarks

The case study of Tetovo showcased that the memory of the 2001 conflict in North Macedonia impacts the everyday dynamics both at local and national levels. We approached the youth Tetovars and some of the key stakeholders regarding the local and state commemorations of the 2001 conflict in order to grasp the perceptions on the commemorative events and their potentials for radicalisation and violent extremism. We also made a survey of the media texts in the time span of two decades in order to get a better understanding of the annual dynamism of the commemorative activities in Tetovo.

The research showed that the memory cultures and practices related to the 2001 conflict are influencing the public discourse in the state, especially in regards to inter-ethnic relations. Such relations, as well as the ethnic identities, cultures and the history of inter-ethnic dynamics were already identified as one of the dominant drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism at the state level. We observed that other social – political parties, war veteran organisations and CSOs, among others – are active in the commemorative domain related to the 2001 conflict. This is especially the case in the ethnic Albanian segment and, as of early 2010s, in the ethnic Macedonian one. As per the interviews we conducted, the memory of the 2001 is instrumentalised by political parties. This is done by the high party officials, who use the commemorative events to mobilise the party base, and by the lower party echelons, who use them to pledge loyalty to the party.

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When it comes to the findings at the meso-level, the research showed that the two groups of discussants hold a similar perception of the “nature” of the commemorative events related to the 2001 conflict in the city: acts of grievances, performed within the domains of the family and the local communities. As such, the shared perception is that these events are risk-free. The two focus group discussions also showed that the Tetovar youth holds a shared repulsiveness towards inter-ethnic tensions that are being additionally fueled by the commemorative activities related to the 2001 conflict. However, there are some differences on how the commemorative-related violence is perceived at the macro and meso-levels. In the public discourse, the annual commemorations of the 2001 conflict and, especially, the commemorative-related violence are almost exclusively interpreted from an ethnic perspective in the public discourse. Both groups of discussants agreed upon the statement that these acts of radicalisation are not exclusively related to the legacies of the 2001 conflict, but also resonate with the economic situation and the political affiliations of the involved participants. Nonetheless, differences between the group of discussants were observed. While in the Albanian group, the commemorative-related violence is not a mere result of the inter-ethnic tensions and sometimes occurs as a reaction to the unfavorable economic situation in the city and in the state; according to the Macedonian group, one of the major issues related to the commemorative-related violence is the lack of understanding of the Macedonian national narrative by the Albanian peers in Tetovo. Both groups pointed out that smaller and radical groups are, in most cases, the ones that escalate tensions before and after commemorative events related to the 2001 conflict in the state. In this sense, our interviewees pointed out that the commemorative events related to the 2001 conflict have a potential to become platforms for communicating anti-war and peace messages, yet, there is a lack of a clear institutional and, especially, joint institutional approach in these regards.

Avenues for further research:

- After two decades from the start of the 2001 conflict, the legacy of the conflict still presents a divisive issue for the Macedonian society. A closer look at the participants in the commemorations related to the 2001 conflict can thus reveal the best their intentions.
- We believe that the “bridging capital” of the Tetovar youth is a topic which is worth a further exploration, although the research showed that they are also influenced by the local legacies of 2001. Drawing upon the memory studies methodological arsenal, these dynamics can be approached as a case study of “post-memory” in the context of North Macedonia.
- We also hold that the commemorative-related violence is another pointer to the fact that the legacy of 2001 is a particularly potent issue in the domestic public discourse that often goes beyond the commemorative events related to the conflict. A closer look at the work of the memory agents active in the commemorative events related to 2001 can hence showcase the narrative strategies and the political practices of these stakeholders that shape the discourse over the 2001 conflict.

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Football Fan Groups in Tetovo

Naum Trajanovski, Lidija Georgieva

Introduction

MAPPING THE STUDY FIELD

Football fandom is a largely discussed topic in the scholarship. Starting from its security-related issues – such as violence at football events and football hooliganism; its criminal phenomena – such as discrimination, racism and hate speech; more recently, many experts analyse its various “unspectacular” aspects: among the others, the “ordinary” football fan cultures, other developments on micro level of the fandom and the transnational connections and cooperation of fan groups (Sonntag, 2011). A particular commonplace in the football fan groups’ studies is the very assumption that they provide platforms for social bonding, while their everyday activities evolve in multiple and different fashions. Many authors in this study field point out the Heysel Stadium tragedy from May 1985, when 39 people were killed and approximately 600 injured in a crowd disaster, as a particular trigger both for the scholarly interest in sport-related violence and the public policing of violence at sport events in Europe (for an overview of the study field, see: Cleland et al., 2018; Doidge, Kossakowski & Mintert, 2020).² Council of Europe’s 1985 *European Convention for the Prevention of Violence and Misbehavior at Sport Events and in particular at Football Matches* – adopted just a few months after the incident as a direct response to it – was one of the key international documents in battling the ever-evolving phenomenon of football fan violence ever since. In 2016, it was succeeded by Council of Europe’s *Convention on Integrated Safety, Security and Service Approach at Football Matches and Other Sports Events*, a document that paves a way for a broader approach for securing safe and secure environment at football and other sport events: envisioning, among the other things, better infrastructure and cooperation with fan groups.

In the ex-Yugoslav, post-conflict region, a large portion of the recent scholarship links football fandom with various nation- and identity-building processes before and after the Yugoslav demise (Čolović, 1997: 247-274; Vrcan & Lalić, 1999; Mills, 2012; Đorđević, 2015). Here, sport – and especially football – are considered to be “major rituals of popular culture” that contributes to establishing the symbolic borders between the nations (Brentin & Cooley, 2015: 1), while the well documented football fans’ involvement in the war activities of the 1990s hints at their actual inputs in the establishment of the physical borders between the nation-states (see, for instance, Kelly, 2019; Hodges, 2019; Međedović, Kovačević & Knežević, 2020). In the decades that followed, scholars observed various types of political instrumentalisation of the regional fan groups, as well as their criminal activities beyond the football

² The 1989 Hillsborough disaster – or the human crush at the Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, UK, that resulted with 97 deaths and over 760 injuries – is the other critical event from the 1980s which informed many European security policies and activities regarding safety at sport events.

stadiums such as, *inter alia*, bashing protesters, involvement in organised crime and illegal drug trade (for a recent overview, see The Global Initiative report, 2019). The newer scholarship, however, points out to the very fact that the regional football fandom and fan cultures are not as uniform and homogeneous, similarly to every other region across the globe: pointing out, among the other topics, the progressive politics and activism of some of the fan groups.³ This is the regional context for the fan cultures in North Macedonia, a former Yugoslav federal state which gained independence in 1991, encircled the initial Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, but suffered an armed conflict in 2001 between the state security forces and insurgents of ethnic Albanian origins. In brief, inter- and intra-ethnic animosity and violence between football fan groups in the state are documented as emerging as of the early 1990s. Most recently, a report published by OSCE, based on roundtable discussions with domestic experts, revealed that several of the fan groups in Skopje function as “springboards” for hate speech, political and religious extremism, while some of the foreign fighters in Syria and Ukraine from North Macedonia were identified as former fan group members (Doda & Mklelan, 2020: 39-40; also: Qehaja & Perteshi, 2018: 34-35; Mishkova et al., 2021: 56).

FAN GROUP CONTEXT OF TETOVO, NORTH MACEDONIA

The above contexts lead us to assume that football fan groups might present critical social milieus that facilitate radicalisation of the Macedonian youth.⁴ In this case study report, we focus on the city of Tetovo, one of the most populated cities in the state (third, according to the 2022 census), due to various historical, demographic and political reasons. According to the last census results, Tetovo is a multiethnic city of more than 84,770 inhabitants (alongside its vicinity), out of which 15,529 of ethnic Macedonian and 60,460 of ethnic Albanian origins. Even though the city has a history of peaceful multiculturalism and toleration, the recent two post-conflict decades are marked by the process of cleaving along ethnic lines. As an illustration, a November 2021 report by the German “*Tageszeitung*” daily newspaper, focused exclusively on the growing divisions in the city after the conflict, argued that this phenomenon is all-pervasive – from the schools to the local cafés – and observable among all the age groups. The article also noted comments of several local teachers who claimed that they have to constantly divide the Macedonian and the Albanian pupils, “especially at the PE classes,” as the “sport in the state was divided across ethnic lines since always” (Laper, 2021). These very recent observations from the field can be supported with scholarly findings: in a recent study of the social identities of 102 young adults from Tetovo, for instance, it was argued that the ethnic communities present the dominant markers of identification among the local Albanian and Macedonian youth; who, for instance, showed larger indexes of attachments with the respective ethnic communities than their peers in Skopje (Pajaziti et al., 2017: 140-141).

The above divisions are evident, as well, in the local football fan scene: the two largest fan groups – Voivodes [mk. *Vojvodi*, established in 1988], the fan group of FK Teteks, and Ballists [al. *Ballistët*, 1992], the fan group of KF Shkëndija – are also divided across ethnic lines as *Vojvodi*’s core consists of ethnic

³ See, for instance, Soccer & Society special issue on fan protest and activism in South-East Europe (Hodges & Brentin, 2018).

⁴ An overview of the scholarly debate on the football-related violence is available in Newson, 2019.

Macedonians, while *Ballistët* one of ethnic Albanians from North Macedonia. In terms of their popularity and fan bases, as per Vangelovski (2017, 283), the claimed size of *Vojvodi* is 300 members, while the claimed size of *Ballistët* is 4400. While *Vojvodi* are also rooting for the local volleyball and basketball teams, *Ballistët* are focused exclusively on the football club they root for. The number of its core make *Ballistët* the largest football fan group in the state, in front of Bitola-based group of FK Pelister's fans of *Čkembari* (2000) and the Skopje-based fans of FK Vardar, *Komiti* (900) (ibid). Worth mentioning, as well, from a football standalone perspective, is the fact that Tetovo has a long-lasting football tradition hosting the oldest Macedonian football club – FK Ljuboten (established in 1919), – the 2020/21 champion of the First Football League – KF Shkëndija (1979), – as well as FK Teteks (1953), a club with a history of competing in the First and the Second Yugoslav Leagues which is currently competing in the Macedonian Second League, while KF Renova (2003), a First League competitor, also uses the facilities of the Tetovo City Stadium.

Research Design

MACRO-LEVEL FINDINGS

We do believe that this research will provide a better understanding of the meso-level dynamics of radicalisation and violent extremism in a given spatial context (Tetovo, North Macedonia) of social interactions (football fan groups). The analysis of the macro-level drivers of radicalisation in North Macedonia suggested that, in terms of the territorial diffusion across the state, there is a certain gap between the general foci of the public and the actual institutional C/PVE work on the field (Kambovski, Georgieva & Trajanovski, 2021: 9-10). The city of Tetovo is one such case where this gap is being constantly recreated. The major rationale behind this reasoning are the developments related to the 2001-armed conflict in Tetovo and the series of inter-ethnic incidents in the course of the last two decades in the city. The history of the inter-ethnic relations, as well as the cultural, religious and ethnic drivers of radicalisation and the cleavages across political lines, were already pointed out in the report on macro-level drivers (ibid). This report, in turn, aims at going beyond the straightforward assumption of reflecting the prevailing inter-ethnic tensions to the football fan scene in the city. Therefore, we primarily focused on the Tetovo youth and spoke with several experts in order to better understand the football fandom in the city and its potentials of providing platforms for radicalisation and violent extremism. In the other report from this WP of CONNEKT, we discuss, again, the case of Tetovo and the public commemorations of the 2001 conflict in the city.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study purposes, we conducted two focus group discussions with members and sympathisers of the two largest football fan groups in the city of Tetovo – *Vojvodi* and *Ballistët* – and four in-depth interviews with experts-practitioners from the field (from Skopje and Tetovo). The two focus groups were conducted in Tetovo in January and February 2022, with four participants each. We spoke with a generation of football fans who are above 18 years old, but still they are young adults, as the youngest participant in the focus groups was born in 2002, while the oldest in 1996. The participants in the two focus groups were of different ethnic backgrounds, proportional to the ethnic structures of the two major fan groups mentioned above. The focus groups discussions were based upon four thematic topics related to the general project's framework and methodology: identity-related questions (on cultural, religious and ethnic identity markers), political and economic questions (questions related to political influences and agendas, territorial inequality and the financial situation of the local fan groups' members), questions on radicalisation, extremism and violence, and, finally, a set of questions related to transnational influences and social media usage. The four in-depth interviews present a qualitative addition to the argument as they all refer to particular and important aspects which were triggered during the two focus groups. Therefore, after the completion of the two focus groups discussions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a legal scholar (no.1), a legal practitioner (no.2), a football coach (no.3), and a CSO expert (no.4), all of them having vast experiences with the football fandom and sports scene in the state, as well as various phenomena related to football-related violence.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Football fans have been objects of scholarly analyses in the last two decades in North Macedonia, however, focus group discussions were not among the most popular tools for assessing the developments related to them. The pioneering study, in this regard, is the book coauthored by Anastasovski, Nanev and Klimper (2009), published by the Football Federation of Macedonia (FFM). In the book, the authors approach the “prevention and repression of violence at the football stadiums” by mapping the cultural, ethnic, economic and territorial drivers for violence among football fans (alongside a list of incidents involving football fan groups in the state from 2001 to 2009) and providing an overview of the domestic legal infrastructure regarding this phenomenon. The authors defined the violence at the sport events as deviant social behavior and argued that the state measures of battling it are more repressive and less preventive. The newer scholarly works further developed these two major claims and argued in favor of broadening the preventive measures in battling violence at sport events (Anastasovski et al., 2013; Petrevski & Stanojoska, 2014; Doda & Mklelan, 2020); involving various stakeholders in the process (Petrevski, Stanojoska & Shushak, 2015; Doda & Mklelan, 2020); focused on the violent behavior of youngsters at sport events (Anastasovski et al., 2015; Dimovski & Ilijevski, 2015; Anastasovski, 2018); and pointed out the new fan initiatives and social media usage as a tool for spreading hate speech and discrimination (Anastasovski & Nanev, 2016).

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

The critical background of this debate was – and still is – the changing institutional and legal environments for battling violence at sport events in post-Yugoslav Macedonia. A signatory of the 1985 European Convention as a Yugoslav federal state, Republic of Macedonia passed its first Law on suppression of violence and misbehavior on sport events in 2004.⁵ The Law had several amendments ever since – in 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2015 – which projected better cooperation in security terms between the state Ministry of Interior (Mol), the national football federation (FFM), the Agency of sport and youth (AMS), and the sport events’ organisers and conveners, as well as set of soft measures for cooperating with fan groups in the state (Petrevski & Stanojoska, 2014; Doda & Mklelan, 2020). In 2012, for instance, a National coordinative body for suppressing violence at sport events was established with a major goal to facilitate communication between the relevant institutions and coordinate their activities. This trajectory of developing the legal and institutional infrastructures towards prevention and towards cooperation with relevant social stakeholders can be identified as similar to the development of the holistic P/CVE approach in the state as of the mid-2010s, discussed in the two CONNEKT national reports for North Macedonia (see Kambovski, Georgieva & Trajanovski, 2020; 2021). Some of the most recent activities in these regards are AMS’s newly established cooperation with the National Committee for P/CVE and two Skopje-based high schools within the platform of an EU-funded CSO project entitled “Youth Civic Education Platform for Countering Radicalisation” (interview no.4).⁶

⁵ The EU legislative and the agency of OSCE were formative for the development of the national legal infrastructure for battling violence in sport in North Macedonia. The state thus by and large followed the 1996-1997 EU “Recommendation for suppression and limiting the disorder connected to football games” (more in Petrevski & Stanojoska, 2014) and it was among the first to sign the abovementioned 2016 Convention. The national football federation frequently cooperates with FIFA and UEFA, as well, in violence in sport related projects (interview no.1).

⁶ AMS was also active in sponsoring public campaigns against substance abuse as of 2000s, probably the most prominent one being the “Choose life, choose sports” campaign (Dimovski & Paunova, 2012).

It is important to be mentioned, especially for this report's purposes, that Mol was also targeting high school pupils in Tetovo and Gostivar as an age group that is "present the most at the sport events and participates the most in the incidents between the fan groups" and organised several "preventive-educational" workshops in the early and mid-2010s (Samardžiev, 2014).

MESO-LEVEL OPENINGS

In practice, however, the repressive security measures for the football-related violence remained dominant over the preventive ones, mostly as a result, as per two experts that we interviewed, of the lack of coordination between the relevant legal acts and institutions regarding violence in sports (interviews no.1 and no.2).⁷ This gap left by the institutions is often filled with other stakeholders' activities which suggests that many non-state and international actors view football competitions, fan groups and football-related violence in the state as important for societal day-to-day functioning. Football and its general popularity in Macedonia, for instance, were used as means for reconciling the Macedonian and Albanian communities after the conflict in 2001. Here, worth mentioning is the fact that the first game between a Macedonian and an Albanian team of youngsters was organised just weeks after the official end of the conflict within the "Open Fun Football Schools" program (interview no.3), a Danish CSO initiative for connecting youngsters via football – firstly promoted in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina – that also aimed at establishing cross-institutional network of local schools, sport federations, ministries and relevant state agencies for its planned activities. In the Republic of Macedonia, a total number of 178 ended up being involved in their activities up to 2010, as well as a number of more than 38,000 youngsters and 2,700 leaders and volunteers (Anger, van't Rood & Gestakovska, 2010).

The roundtables organised by the national branch of the OSCE, mentioned in the introductory section, are also an illustration for some of the recent activities of the international organisations in this field. One of the concluding remarks of the roundtables emphasised the ample room for a better communication between the fan groups in the state which the "international community" can assume (Doda & Mklelan, 2020: 64). Finally, one should mention the involvement of various religious organisations in facilitating dialogue between fan groups: the above report notes, for instance, attempts by the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MPC) to work with several Skopje-based fan groups (ibid: 66), while in 2017 the local branches of MPC and the Macedonian Islamic Religious Community in Tetovo organised a friendly football match between their affiliates – mixed in two teams – with a single goal of promoting interconfessional tolerance.⁸ Hence, we believe that a closer look at the meso-level developments in the given local context will help us understand the relevance of the various drivers of radicalisation and, moreover, trigger a broader debate on the topic of fan groups and violence at sport events.

⁷ As per interviewer no.1, the outcomes of the preventive-educational workshops with fan groups are also questionable, as there were situations when they actually provoked conflict between the members of the different fan groups.

⁸ The event was reported in the "On the same side" [mk. *Na ista strana*] TV series.

Meso-Level Dynamics

TETOVO – A SPATIAL INTERACTIONAL CONTEXT

The social context of Tetovo and its vicinity was unanimously identified as “unique” and/or “different” than the other cities or regions in the state in the two focus groups we conducted, primarily due to the abovementioned population structure and the recent history of inter-ethnic relations in the city. The 2001 armed conflict in Macedonia and the series of inter-ethnic incidents in the course of the last two decades were already pointed out as the general background against the radicalisation and violent extremism issues in the report on the macro-level drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in today’s North Macedonia (see in Kambovski, Georgieva & Trajanovski, 2021: 4; see the other national report from this WP for an overview of the commemorative activities in Tetovo over various episodes of the 2001 conflict). The animosities which these histories of inter-ethnic – predominantly ethnic-Macedonian and Macedonian-Albanian – tensions in Tetovo are perpetuating in the cultural, educational and leisure domains are also visible when observing the two dominant football fan groups’ behaviors and cultures in the city.⁹ One straightforward reason for these developments is the very fact that Tetovo, as mentioned in the introductory part, is one of the rare ethnically divided cities in the state – beside Skopje – that hosts more than two competitors in the top two national football leagues. Yet, the most recent turmoil between the two largest local fan groups of *Ballistët* and *Vojvodi*, lead us to assume that the tensions in Tetovo are ever-growing and get to occupy new discursive domains with time. In November 2018, for instance, members of the two groups were accused of ethnic hate speech performed on two separate events during a single weekend in the city. Even though the xenophobic messages and violent behavior – firstly reported at an anniversary celebration of *Vojvodi* and then at a KF Shkëndija home match – caused vocal public reactions and resulted in the first ever criminal charges for 14 fans from both the groups in the state’s history, the two groups were fast to officially condemn North Macedonia’s Mol effort to facilitate a post factum reconciliation between the groups (Meta, 2018).¹⁰ Hence, we establish the meso-context of fan groups in Tetovo as primarily defined by the recent history of inter-ethnic developments in the city, the ethnic identities in the city and the state of the art with the local sport competitors.

In addition, the two focus groups revealed that the particularities of the local context are also a result of the intra-state territorial inequalities, political agendas and affiliation with different religious denominations, beside the prevailing push factor of ethnic identities, inter-ethnic relations and history

⁹ Such a dynamic was also identified in an earlier study of the football hooliganism in the turn of the 21st century Macedonia by Atanasovski, Naney and Klimper: here, the authors viewed violent behavior at the sport events as a result of the “deep social relations” and the “groupist identification” among the fans (2009: 23-24).

¹⁰ Similarly, in 2019, the Macedonian football fan groups – with *Vojvodi* among the first ones – declined the President of the Republic offer to reconcile with the Albanian ones in North Macedonia (MakPress, 2019). The context of this evident soft measure activity – as discussed in the previous section – is touched upon in the next section and the footnote no.5. *Vojvodi*’s denouncement of eventual reconciliation between the ethnically divided fan groups in the city, as well as the “peaceful coexistence” of the two dominant ethnic groups in the state, is frequently supported by the references to the several of its members who were allegedly killed by ethnic Albanians and the many which were injured in Tetovo. Most recently, *Vojvodi*’s social media reaction to the murder of *Komiti*’s Nikola Sazdovski-Sazdo in July 2018 – who was 20 at the time, by two members of *Shvercerat* (more in Perry et al., 2021: 208) – was in line with the aforementioned discourse on the interethnic relations in the state and the city (Taratur, 2018).

of interethnic tensions. The perception of territorial inequality and, more precisely, state absence and the low – or even nonexistent – trust in the central institutions, was presented by the members and sympathisers of *Ballistët*. This point was further enhanced with the articulated common sense of police brutality over KF Shkëndija fans, improper treatment of the club and the fan group by FFM and, finally, by the very fact that the fanbase of the club is ethnically uniform and thus prone to nurture its ethnic Albanian identity and relations with the neighboring Kosovo and Albania. In January 2020, as an illustration, *Ballistët* announced that they would support the national team of Kosovo against the North Macedonia's one in the UEFA Nations League competitive playoff game (Stojančev, 2020). This decision came just days after the unification of all the ethnic Macedonian fan groups, in Tetovo, soon after scheduling the match (Sport1, 2020).¹¹ Even though we did not explicitly discuss it during the focus group, we assume that the territorial inequality discourse of the KF Shkëndija fans is also informed by their club's sport rivalry with two Skopje-based clubs: FK Vardar and KF Shkupi.¹² FK Teteks's fans, on a different note, point out to the "unfair treatment" of their club and fan group by the local authorities – predominantly of Albanian ethnicity in the last two decades – who, according to them, favor KF Shkëndija.¹³ The recent episode of KF Shkëndija and Tetovo Municipality initial refusal to provide FK Teteks the City Stadium for the Teteks-Vardar match – a stadium which has a long history of being shared by several Tetovo-based clubs – provoked a similar public reaction by *Vojvodi* and led, eventually, to a wider public pressure and an approval to use FK Teteks' home venue for the game (Sloboden pečat, 2021).

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All these points are closely connected to the political influences over the football fan groups in the city and the state, as well as the political agendas of those groups. Both the focus group discussions revealed that the members and sympathisers of the fan groups in Tetovo are aware of the various political influences over the fan groups in the city and the state, while this phenomenon was predominantly depicted in negative terms by mapping the linkages with political actors, groups and parties of the other, rival, fan groups. The similarity, in these regards, lies in the implied connection with state institutions as normatively bad and unacceptable by the fan groups. KF Shkëndija fans thus sought to present themselves as more politically independent than KF Shkupi's *Shvercerat* – a rival Macedonian-Albanian Skopje-based fan group which they consider to be supported by the Macedonian-Albanian political party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) – and, to a lesser extent, FK Vardar's *Komiti*, which they consider to be linked with the Macedonian right-wing parties. This narrative should be contextualised within the political history of the Tetovo Municipality which was under DUI's rule from 2005 to 2021, while we also read their claims and criticism regarding the present state of the City Stadium along those lines: even though it underwent certain refurbishing in the mid-

¹¹ The match, however, ended up being played behind closed doors in October 2020 due to the global COVID-19 pandemics. North Macedonia's win paved the way for its debut appearance at the 2020 EURO.

¹² The clashes between *Ballistët* and FK Vardar's *Komiti* – a rival group which holds fraternal ties with *Vojvodi* – and KF Shkupi's *Shvercerat* are well documented in the media: clashes during Shkëndija-Vardar matches are reported as of the early 2010s (see, for instance, Gol.mk, 2017), similarly as clashes before, during and after Shkëndija-Shkupi matches (for instance, Skopjeinfo, 2016; see, as well, the last match of the 2021/22 season between the two teams). On a different note, the tensions between the Albanian fan groups in North Macedonia were not discussed in the scholarly literature.

¹³ We also noted *Vojvodi*'s official reaction to the grant which *Ballistët* received in 2018 by the Ministry of Culture of North Macedonia. The grant was supposed to help the production of a promo video for KF Shkëndija's fan group within the series "Get to know Macedonia" [mk. *Zapoznajte ja Makedonija*] and, according to the media, contained ethnic hate speech. *Vojvodi*'s reaction to the video problematised the governmental care of the national interest by granting *Ballistët* (more in Republika, 2018; Jolevski, 2018).

2010s, it still does not comply with the international standards thus forcing KF Shkëndija to play their international fixtures in Skopje. *Vojvodi* members and sympathisers scapegoated politicians and political parties as major triggers for the incidents and tensions among the fan groups in the city, while stating that their fan group tends to be as much distanced from political influences as possible. Even though we were not able to get to know more relevant information from this focus group, we identified several recent activities by *Vojvodi* as paradigmatic for the group's political affinities: the most emblematic being the April 2021 call for joining the protest for justice for the "constitutional defenders" [mk. *ustavobranitelite*] who stormed the Macedonian Parliament in 2017 (Republika, 2021).¹⁴ In the national report on the macro-drivers, we presented that the results of the storming were 95 injured individuals and charges of 211 years for terrorist threat to the constitutional order and security of the state (Kambovski, Georgieva & Trajanovski, 2021, 9).

FOOTBALL FAN GROUPS – A SOCIAL INTERACTIONAL CONTEXT

If the spatial context of Tetovo helped us reveal more about the territorial inequalities, political aspects and ethnic identities, the other set of questions which we discussed at the two focus groups are focal for better understanding of the particularities of the football fan groups as contexts of social interactions. Here, we will discuss two findings from the focus groups related to the thought-experiment of profiling the average football fan in North Macedonia and in Tetovo, as well as the discussions and the informants' opinion on the processes of extremism, radicalisation and violence in general. We conclude with two additional and brief points on the transnational aspects of the football fan cultures and activities, and the social media in the very same context, which are already established as potential drivers for violent radicalisation in the project conceptual and analytical framework (more in Torrekenes & de le Vingne, 2020).

The first point refers to the probes of profiling the average member of the football fan groups in the state and in Tetovo. The participant at the first focus group (*Vojvodi*) pictured this person as a male, relatively young (from 14 to 24 years old) and religious (Orthodox Christian) individual with a strong interest in its national identity (ethnic Macedonian) and in a "depended economic situation" – either living with his parents or working for a salary that is close to the state's minimal one. The very same group portrayed KF Shkëndija's average fan in a similar fashion; with a single remark of ours that the hinted national and religious affiliations of the rival group were Albanian and Islamic. The participant at the other focus group (*Ballistët*) had similar responses, however, all of the informants agreed over the claim that an average KF Shkëndija fan is not religious at all or not as much as the FK Teteks ones. Moreover, they noticed the importance of the religious denominations of its rival group and pointed out to their logo which contains an Orthodox Christian cross.¹⁵ We interpret the religious aspects of the football fan groups as instrumental for the identity-building of the group and its members: delineating,

¹⁴ In 2019, the group announced that it will never accept the new constitutional name of North Macedonia and that their members "fight for a unitary Macedonia" (MakPress, 2019). At another occasion, in May 2020, a group of *Vojvodi* and *Komiti* booed the erstwhile Minister of Defense of North Macedonia during a commemorative event in Skopje, chanting paroles against the name change of the state (Tocka, 2020).

¹⁵ *Vojvodi*'s motto also contains religious references – "With trust in God, *Vojvodi* till the end" [mk. *So verba vo Bog, Vojvodi do grob*] – and the group was established on the religious holiday of St. Parascheva [mk. *St. Petka*]. A 2018 documentary film about the group – premiered on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of *Vojvodi* – opens with the religious identity of the fan group and its connections with MOC.

on the one hand, the symbolic borders with the other rival – and, importantly, local – groups and functional in merging the groupist identity markers of the ethnic communities and the football fan groups. Hence, we read KF Shkëndija's fans complains about *Vojvodi*'s slurs at the football matches not only against the Muslim background of *Ballistët*, but also against the Catholic Albanians – which are hard to be mapped and confirmed in the media – as an illustration of the latter thesis of projecting the symbolic borders of the fan group as equal with the ones of the respective ethnic community.¹⁶

Another suggestive remark about the average fan was his apparent desire to be part of a group and ability to spend his time with the other members of the group. This claim was further re-legitimised in one of the interviews with an expert-practitioner we conducted in 2022. Namely, the informant depicted the larger fan groups in the state as “immensely organised” groups with a clear hierarchy, being able to mobilise in a very short time period for activities such as “defending its own territory” in the city.¹⁷ Therefore, we find the focus group discussions on the topics of extremism, radicalisation and violence incredibly telling in these regards: similarly to the political agendas of- and influences over the fan groups, the participants in the two focus groups showed awareness of the global phenomena of violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism; yet, when asked about the violence at the sport events in the state, they scapegoated the rival fan groups as the “aggressive” ones and agreed upon the fact that their group acts only when attacked. The same discussion revealed, as well, that the focus group participants were certain in their definitions of radicalisation and violent extremism as a set of deviant beliefs and activities that are opposed to the state norms and values, and even the football fandom and fan culture in general. These claims, however, are contradicting some of the evidence gathered by the domestic scholars and experts, as well as the recent history of fan groups' clashes in the state: a 2015 study, for instance, showcased that above 68 percent of 409 football fans are falling under direct influence of the leaders of their fan groups, while approximately 25 percent of them disclosed that they participated in a violent incident or an attack (see more in Atanasovski et al., 2015). This leads us to conclude that some of the football fans tend to focus on the violent behavior of the other fan groups as example of deviant behavior in sport fandom, while they did not identify – publicly, at least – with similar behaviors by members of their groups. In other words, we observed that the football fan groups in Tetovo provide a platform for presenting the eventual violent behavior of the group as group-defending attitude, frequently in heroic tropes.

The final two points which we would like to briefly present are related to the transnational aspects of the football fandom in Tetovo, as well as the social media and digital tools used by the members and sympathisers of these groups. The set of questions on these topics were intertwined, so we managed to understand that the football fan groups members and sympathisers (*Vojvodi*, predominantly) use social media as an instrument to get informed on the global sport events and the newest developments related to the sports fandom across the world, as well as the latest trends of fans' activism and actions. The other focus group discussion (*Ballistët*) showcased that the fans and sympathisers of the football

¹⁶ Even so there is a significant Catholic community of Albanians in Albania and Kosovo, their number in North Macedonia was approximately 1% of the total population according to the 2001 census (one should also have in mind the fact that there are ethnic Macedonians and Croats in North Macedonia who identify as Catholics).

¹⁷ Interview with expert-practitioner no.2, conducted in January 2022 in Skopje. The recent incident at the location of Straža where *Ballistët* members clashed with Montenegrin group of fans can be read in this key. The incident ended up with 14 criminal charges (Kanal5, 2016).

club KF Shkëndija are aware and follow – predominantly online – the latest political developments and news related to the football fan groups in the region. However, they all agreed that the local and national developments are being the dominant triggers for tensions with the other rival fan groups. Again, we can juxtapose these findings with the empirical evidence from the scholarship: a 2016 study of the social media activities of 54 football fans in the state revealed that more than a half of the informants used various social media platforms for hate speech and discrimination (Anastasovski & Nanev, 2016). Similarly to the findings of the macro-level research on digital literacy (Kambovski, Georgieva & Trajanovski, 2021: 11-13), we do identify that the online attitudes and behaviors of the fan group members in the state are not given the proper treatment. However, an important observation that must be mentioned is that the transnational dimension and the digital tools were understood in a different manner during the two focus groups. More precisely, the more successful KF Shkëndija's fans viewed the transnational dynamics via the optics of their club's international fixtures, while FK Teteks's ones referred to the national teams' matches and the major developments in the regional fan scenes. We do want to underline, again, that the two discussant groups viewed the local events as more significant than the regional and international ones.

Concluding Remarks

Drawing upon the history of clashes between the two dominant fan groups in Tetovo, we approached the fan scene in the city as a mean of potential radicalisation and violent extremism. We also focused on young adults above 18 years old who are members and sympathisers of the two dominant fan groups in the city and we complemented the two focus groups with four in-depth expert interviews. We present the findings below, structuring them according to their relations with the analysis of macro-level drivers, the main meso-level findings and the avenues further stemming from this research.

As for the relation with the macro-level findings, the research showed that the recent state approaches to football-related violence are generally in line with the state P/CVE action plan as of late 2010s, as they focus on prevention rather than repression. In reality, however, this is rarely the case due to many reasons concerning human resources, lack of training and non-compliance. In turn, the lack of state institutional coordination and realisation of the newest legal and policy solutions hinders the dialogue with fan groups and contributes to their perception of the state agencies as alien and unfriendly. In particular, we found that the young members and sympathisers of *Ballistët* view the state institutions as distant, while *Vojvodi*'s ones view the local authorities as hostile, mostly due to lack- and perceptions of lacking political representation.

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The room left by institutions is often filled by international actors that perceive sport and the fan groups in the state in multiple fashions: as means for social reconciliation of different groups, but also as platforms for radicalisation. All these approaches are in line with the most recent involvement of the international community in the state P/CVE, which we outlined in the macro-level report. As for the meso-level, the football fan members and sympathisers hold ambivalent views over radicalisation and violent extremism: the groups allow for presenting the violent behavior of the very group as a group-defending attitude and, oftentimes, its members use heroic tropes and references of ethnic and religious identity-markers to endorse these and similar behaviors. We see this meso-dynamics in line with the macro-level findings regarding the drivers of cultural, ethnic and religious relevance.

However, some differences can be stated on the role given to ethnicity at the macro and meso levels. As for the macro-level findings, the dominant optics over the football fan groups in North Macedonia – in the scholarship, media and the general public – is that the major axis of contestation is the ethnic one. We claim, however, that this approach overlooks the intra-ethnic clashes between fan groups which are equally dangerous. The interviewed young members and sympathisers of the two dominant football fan groups in Tetovo are predominantly perceiving the ethnic, cultural and religious identities, but also the territorial inequalities, economic hardship and political influences as major drivers for their – and in general, the others' – participation in city's fan scene. Although differing in nuances, we managed to profile an average contemporary football fan in Tetovo and argued that the profiled fan shares majority of features among the two groups. Even though identity-related issues are not the only drivers for joining a football fan group in the city, we argued that the fan groups' activities in the past, as well as nowadays, contribute to a reinforcement of the symbolic borders between the two dominant ethnic and religious communities in the state of North Macedonia. The most recent episodes of failures

in reconciliation show these dynamics and the impact on the inter-ethnic dialogue at diverse levels, as well as it paves the way for future clashes.

Avenues for further research:

- We noted and argued that there is a certain discrepancy of the fan groups' self-perceived religiosity and their affiliation to the organised religious groups in the state and in the city. More precisely, we noted that even though the main and official religious institutions are having activities that aim at reconciling, the fan groups – arguably, as per the interviews and analysed activities – do not act upon these messages with an increased interest in communicating with the other religious groups. Hence, a more profound analysis of this aspect might allow for a better understanding of the driver of religion for these types of social interactions and eventual radicalisation and violent extremism.
- A similar tendency was mapped regarding the partisan influences and the impact of the cultural norms and ethnic communities in general. In particular, we noted that there is a tendency of self-ascribing meaning of group identity which is not necessarily in line with the identity-markers of the cultures and ethnic communities on a local and national level. These gaps, in turn, might allow for an instrumentalisation and violent behavior at and beyond stadiums.
- Another important aspect is the digital literacy among football fans, as we found that – similarly to the major state trajectories mapped in the macro-level analysis – the young fans might be prone to radicalizing and messages calling for violence and perpetuate such content on various online platforms. This aspect was already emphasised in the literature, but certainly needs a closer research focusing on the local context of Tetovo.

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Interview with a legal practitioner, Skopje, February 2022.

Interview with a CSO expert, Tetovo, February 2022.

Interview with a football coach, Tetovo, February 2022.

Focus group discussion with four participants, Tetovo, February 2022.

Focus group discussion with four participants, Tetovo, January 2022



Prisons and Correctional and Educational Facility Volkovija

Elena Mujoska Trpevska

Introduction

The present report is a study of the radicalisation potentials in the prison system in North Macedonia. It focuses on the correctional-educational facility (CEF) for juveniles exists in Volkovija, in the vicinity of Tetovo, as it provides a good case of meso level context of interactions. In order to get a better understanding of the perceptions of radicalisation in CEF Volkovija, we conducted two focus group discussions – with members of the State Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (8 participants) and children sent to CEF Volkovija Tetovo to serve the “referral to a correctional facility” measure, i.e. children – protégés (15 children) – and three in-depth interviews, with relevant experts. The report commences with a brief overview of the institutional dynamics in North Macedonia, as the major developments are happening against this background. Having in mind that the institutional P/CVE setting was drastically changed in the course of the last years, we present these changes in detail, with a particular stress on the changes related to the prison system, due to the fact that they were not in the focus of the country study on macro-level drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism. The next section is an overview of the prison system of North Macedonia, while the subsequent sections are presenting the findings from the two discussion groups and the interviews.

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STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Radicalisation is serious threat to international peace and security, and it is of outmost importance to be aware of its existence in the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM). Having in mind that radicalisation that leads to terrorism is dynamic process whereby an individual comes to accept violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action, it is crucial to comprehend radicalisation as a legal concept which can lead to terrorism and other forms of violent extremism. It is also important to be aware of existing actions and measures for its prevention. The RNM holds a strategically important geopolitical position that, combined with its complex social structure, presents diverse challenges and opportunities for the nation.¹⁸ Macedonian strategic documents on combating radicalisation, terrorism and violent extremism, are defining the framework of actions, multi-sectorial approach, coordination and cooperation among different state bodies and authorities with emphasizing the role and the activities of the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (NCCVECT).

¹⁸ Based on an agreement with Greece from June 2018, the country, previously known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, has renamed into Republic of North Macedonia. This renaming came into effect in February 2019. Often referred to as FYR of Macedonia; the previous name will still be found in papers, reports and strategies published earlier.

The National Committee, established in 2017, is as a coordinating body to monitor and analyse the situation with the prevention of violent extremism and fight against terrorism and to coordinate the activities of relevant institutions working to solve problems in this area. (more in Kambovski, Georgieva & Trajanovski, 2020; 2021).

In brief, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, in accordance with its commitments to reform the security sector intelligence, adopted the Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). This strategic document states in its preface that “experience shows that different strategies frequently diverge in specific segments, fail to communicate clearly and coherently their intents across institutions and to citizens, and do not provide for effective implementation of the planned strategic goals.” Although the imperatives of countering terrorism (CT) are distinct from countering violent extremism (CVE) in numerous and significant points, both have to be designed and implemented in a coherent, correlated and strategic manner, since the risks and threats of violent extremism and terrorism are intertwined and inextricably related. Thus, the National CT and CVE Strategies of the RNM are substantively aligned, while the relevant action plans (despite being two separate documents) are characterised by harmonised principles and respond to a common set of drivers and factors. The three factors of this important strategic document are: National Common Guiding Principles for CVE and CT, Core Guiding Principles for CVE and CT and Common drivers and factors of CVE and CT. These common factors serve as the contextual and substantive “links” between the National Strategies for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism in the RNM. The strategies are linked further, institutionally and organizationally, under the “four pillars” of the Global CVE and CT Strategies of the United Nations (UN) and the CVE and CT strategies of the European Union (EU).¹⁹

SUPPORT FOR RNMS INSTITUTIONS FOR RADICALISED INMATES AND VIOLENT EXTREMISTS (VEPS)

We postulate that radicalisation as a phenomenon in RNM is taking place in prisons, particularly among young men between the ages of 18 and 24. When they become imprisoned, a variety of groups, individuals and ideologies already present in the prisons could radicalise them, through nationalist or religious ideology, and other forms. The State Directorate for Execution of Sanctions (DES) has joined the NCCVECT to continue working with legal prosecutors and other ministries to design and implement measures to address identified signs of radicalisation in prisons. Among the activities undertaken so far are training of prison staff to prevent and protect convicts from the effects of radicalisation, as well as direct outreach to prisoners who may be radicalised and pose a risk to themselves and other inmates (Republic of Macedonia, 2018, p.27). The National Strategy for Penitentiary System Development, enabled Macedonia’s penitentiary system to move a step closer to modern and contemporary prison systems (2015-2019) (Council of Europe, 2021c). The primary goal of this important strategic document was to ensure an efficient and professional approach to the organisation and supervision of the functioning of penal and correctional institutions, as well as the establishment of the country’s probation

¹⁹ “The European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy,” Council of the European Union, Brussels, 30 November 2005; “Plan Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, Report of the Secretary-General,” United Nations General Assembly, 24 December 2015; “Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy,” Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, The United Nations General Assembly, 2006; as in the National Strategy for CVE, 2018, p. 5-6.

system. The Strategy applies to prisoners serving a prison sentence, people in detention, and juveniles who have been ordered to “transfer to a correctional-educational facility” as a corrective measure.

The drafting of the new National Strategy for Penitentiary System Development (2021-2025) aimed to succeed previous one (Council of Europe, 2021). The new National Strategy on the Development of the Penitentiary System is an important milestone that is expected to contribute to ensuring a more secure and humane treatment of detained and sentenced persons, and to respecting and protecting their fundamental rights, in line with the European values and standards. The new National Strategy for the Development of the Penitentiary System is also a significant step toward ensuring a more secure and humane treatment of detained and sentenced people, as well as respecting and protecting their fundamental rights in accordance with European values and standards. To be more exact, the new Strategy continues to promote and upgrade the penitentiary system in accordance with current standards, by establishing a modern penitentiary system for dealing with persons deprived of liberty in a safe environment, with dignity and respect, proper education and professional training, support for their personal development, constructive use of their free time, and support for their reintegration back into society after serving their sentence. This is one of the main strategic goals of RNM’s current penitentiary policy addressing radicalisation leading to forced extremism in prisons.

The DES recognises that effective implementation of policies in place to combat radicalisation and violent extremism is critical to its success (so does the NCCVECT actors). RNM takes a strong lead in the region by combining the cohesiveness and dedication of two groups to ensure that they are prepared to prevent and protect their citizens from violent extremism. In this regard, DES collaborates with the Council of Europe (CoE) on a number of projects aimed at improving the penitentiary system’s capacity as well as the external police control mechanism in the country. Furthermore, CoE set a goal to assist the authorities in North Macedonia in overcoming identified shortcomings related to the protection of human rights, by strengthening the capacities of the penitentiary system and the External Oversight Mechanism (EOM) over the work of the officers with police authority. This goal is effectuated through the action named: “Enhancing the capacities of the penitentiary system and the External Oversight Mechanism in North Macedonia.” (Council of Europe, 2019). The Action implementation goes through co-operation with the Ministry of Justice (Directorate for Execution of Sanctions), the Public Prosecutor’s Office, the Ombudsman’s Office, and the Ministry of Health. It also involves key partners and stakeholders, including civil society organisations. The broader public is impacted from the Action, which contributes in building a more secure and humane society that respects and protects the rights of detained and sentenced persons in line with the Council of Europe standards (Council of Europe, 2022b).

The Action should contribute to a safer and more humane society by: i) increasing the capacities of prison managers and staff on radicalisation in prisons; ii) improving the treatment and rehabilitation of inmates; iii) strengthening the provision of health care in prisons and iv) increasing the EOM staff capacities on conducting investigations into cases of police ill-treatment (Council of Europe, 2019). For example, in December 2021 selected prison staff from the three largest penitentiary institutions in North Macedonia improved their knowledge on addressing radicalisation in prisons by attending cascade training session. In total 45 prison police officers and rehabilitation specialists from prison

Skopje, prison Idrizovo and prison Štip benefitted from the participation in the training that focused on the application of the existing screening and risk and needs assessment tools, along with the role of the prison staff in identifying signs of radicalism. The participants upgraded their skills and profited from the exchanges of experiences and discussions on specific case studies, highlighting the importance of sharing information through the multi-treatment teams. The expectations are that these training sessions will improve the established internal reporting lines within the penitentiary institutions and with relevant external stakeholders (Council of Europe, 2021 d). Additionally, in February 2022, one-day cascading trainings on radicalisation were held for prison staff and probation officers.

PRISON SYSTEM IN RNM, CEF VOLKOVIJA, AND YOUTH IN THE STATE'S P/CVE

Penitentiary institutions and correctional-educational institutions are the two types of penitentiary institutions in the country. In contrast to other countries from the broader region (Serbia, Austria, Croatia, and other), Macedonian law only allows for imprisonment for criminal acts, but not for misdemeanors (less serious crimes) (Mujoska & Bitrakov, 2020). The penitentiary institutions and correctional-educational facilities are sites where sentences of imprisonment, detention and educational measures can be executed in. There are 11 penitentiary institutions in RNM²⁰, which can be penitentiaries and prisons. They are divided in 4 penitentiary institutions and 7 prisons. The more severe punishments (over 3 years) are served in the Penitentiary institutions. The other penal institutions are prisons (for sentences up to 3 years), as followed: Bitola Prison, Gevgelija Prison, Ohrid Prison for juvenile delinquents, Skopje Prison, Strumica Prison, Tetovo Prison and the open-type Penitentiary facility Struga. The only ward for woman offenders in RNM is located in Idrizovo Penitentiary in Skopje. Even though, the Law on execution of sanctions (LES) stipulates that there are two correctional facilities, one in Tetovo and the other correctional facility for juvenile women in the Penitentiary Idrizovo (Article 33), currently only one correctional-educational facility (CEF) for juveniles exists in Volkovija, Tetovo. The new CEF complies with all international standards for the functioning, operation, and implementation of the correctional-educational process while fully respecting the rights of children. The idea for construction of a new correctional facility exists for more than 19 years and is a long-term solution to the problem of housing juveniles sentenced to correctional measures.²¹ Prisons in the country followed classification according to the level of security, the degree of restriction of freedom of movement, and the types of treatment provided to those who have been sentenced.

When it comes to youth protection and education, both governmental institutions and civil society recognise that children are particularly vulnerable to terrorist associations and groups' messaging, delivered through social media. Even more so, when it comes to children in risk or children in conflict with the law. As a result, in terms of P/CVE, the National Committee placed a premium on youth participation. Representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as the Agency for Youth and Sports, which are the two leading institutions involved in activities with the youth target

²⁰ Penitentiary institutions include: Idrizovo Prison with an open ward in Veles, Shtip Prison, Prilep Prison, the open-type Penitentiary Facility Struga, Bitola Prison, Gevgelija Prison, Kumanovo Prison with an open ward in Kriva Palanka, Ohrid Prison, Skopje Prison, Strumica Prison, and Tetovo Prison.

²¹ See more at: www.pravda.gov.mk, www.msp.org.mk.

group, are members of the Committee. These two organizations' involvement in P/CVE issues is critical because their employees are on the front lines of combating radicalisation and violent extremism: "Their job is to spot early signs of radicalisation in the classroom, organise extracurricular activities for elementary and high school students to keep them from joining suspicious groups, and build and strengthen the link between schools and families" (UN, 2018). A Council of Europe recommendation, adopted in late October 2021 (Council of Europe, 2021b), emphasises the protection of children in a similar vein. Through the involvement of front-line practitioners, civil society, and the private sector, special attention is paid to those who have experienced or witnessed violence and trauma, as well as the need to develop prevention strategies that consider the best interests of the child. Also, the Committee of Ministers calls on governments to draw inspiration from this recommendation when drafting their domestic law and reviewing their practices, and to strengthen international and national co-operation in the field of the prevention of radicalisation in order to intensify the exchange of information and best practices. Why is that the case? So that practitioners on the front line (professionals in schools and other educational establishments, youth workers and professionals in child protection services, closed educational centres, social services, the health sector and in the sports and youth clubs) can effectively prevent the radicalisation of children, they should have clear mandates ideally defined by law, have the necessary resources and be properly trained (Council of Europe, 2021b).

Research methodology

For the case study purposes, we conducted two focus groups with members of two completely different fields, but fundamentally similar and intertwined. These are members of the State Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency,²² as well as children who have been sent to CEF Volkovija Tetovo to serve the “referral to a correctional facility” measure, i.e. children – protégés. These two groups were not chosen at random for analysis. We wanted to see what members on both sides of the “coin” thought and felt about radicalisation. The State Council is independent in performing the tasks determined by the Law on Justice for Children (Official Gazette No. 148/2013; 152/2019 and 275/2019). It has the following competencies among other things, is entitled to adopt a National Strategy for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency; to adopt annual programs and plans for realisation of the program; to provide initiatives to improve legal solutions and opinions on draft laws relevant to the protection of children’s rights and the prevention of juvenile delinquency; to initiate research and studies on the problems of juvenile delinquency etc. Referral to a correctional facility is imposed on the juvenile against whom more permanent and intensified measures for education and re-education should be applied and his or her complete separation from the previous environment. In deciding whether to impose this measure, the court shall consider the gravity and nature of the crime committed and the circumstance whether educational measures or imprisonment of a juvenile were previously imposed on the juvenile. The juvenile stays in a correctional facility for at least one year, and for a maximum of five years. The court does not determine the duration of this measure when it is pronounced, but decides on it additionally. The court reviews the need to stay in the correctional facility every year.

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We chose the State Council as a separate discussion group for a reason. We believe it is critical to assess the level of familiarity with the phenomenon of radicalisation among those whose primary task and goal is to launch initiatives for greater public awareness of children’s rights and discussions in various areas related to the child’s best interests. On the other hand, we chose the second group, i.e. the children – protégés from CEF Volkovija, to find out their opinions and thoughts on specific questions. The two activities were conducted in Skopje (the State Council) and in Tetovo (the children – protégés), both in February 2022. The first focus group had 8 participants, while 15 children were interviewed. All the informants were of different ethnic backgrounds. The three in-depth interviews, on the other hand, present qualitative addition to the argument as they all refer to particular and important aspects which were hinted during the two focus groups. Therefore, after the focus groups, we conducted an interview with a legal professor and president of State Council (no.1), a legal practitioner and head of Treatment department in CEF (no.2), and a representative from the program Office of CoE (no.3). All of them have extensive experience working with children at risk and children in conflict with the law, as well as various radicalism-related phenomena. We do believe that this research design is to provide a better understanding of the meso level dynamics of radicalisation and violent extremism in the given spatial context of social interactions (prison system) in North Macedonia.

²² Web page: <http://dspdp.com.mk/za-dspdp/>

CEF Volkovija Tetovo: focus group findings

The questions for the protégés were formulated in a general tone with a simplified vocabulary that is easily understood by the children. The conversations with the children took place in the presence of the competent person - head of the treatment department.

It is intriguing to see how the children-protégés define extremism and what they consider radicalisation to be. Thus, extremism is described as "going to extremes", "something very bad", "extremely abnormal", "doing something that will achieve what you want, which is very different from what other people do", "to do something different from others", "when something is done that others do not allow", "something strong and excessive", "when one person is different from others", etc. There are several answers from child protégés who have never heard of extremism. In terms of the term radicalisation and whether they can give examples from the environment, the media or the world, the answers are more modest. There are a few that are close to the essence of this phenomenon, such as "to change completely, not to be what I have been until now" or "behavior that others do not do", "when something completely changes", "to change something, to introduce something that did not exist before" and that it is "something that does very badly, I have heard about them from the news and these are people who kill" or "directing to go their own way which is different from ours" and "I've heard of people who have changed their behavior that is different from ours."

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There are more general answers such as, "radical is the one who asks for something and is not given to him", "getting something through protests, I have heard on TV" "to change something", "people who do bad things to others, they hurt them" and all the other answers are that the children - protégés have never heard that word. There is one answer from a child - a protégé who, when he hears the term radicalisation, "thinks of faith and religion, hears it from the media." In addition, the largest percentage of them believe that extremism, violence and radicalisation are related to each other, i.e. that they are related to some extent. Very rarely they answer that they do not believe the terms are connected in any way.

The majority of respondents believe that radicalism and religion are directly linked. Others did not respond that the two terms were unrelated, instead stating that they did not know. Poverty is linked to radicalism and violent extremism as a second driver. The responses of the children-protégés that link these concepts to a territorial aspect are relatively rare.

All, with the exception of children - protégés who did not show willingness to join the focus group, answered in the affirmative, i.e., that they can recognise when someone is radicalised or associated with violent extremism. Given that these are children from vulnerable backgrounds, who come from endangered families and have very little or no education, it is encouraging to see that everyone, without exception, wants to learn more about radicalism and violent extremism.

State Council focus group findings

Due to the limitations and impossibility of a direct meeting with the members of the council, it was conducted online, and a written questionnaire was submitted at the request of some members.²³ The answers and knowledge about the questions of interest can be summarised as follows: Extremism is defined as extreme intransigence in certain ideas, attitudes, and actions, as well as behavior that straddles the line between normal and abnormal, with a proclivity to cross it. They associate it as a general term with something that means going beyond what the majority considers normal, or with intransigence in certain ideas, attitudes, and principles that are on the edge of what is normal and permissible. They, on the other hand, interpret it as acting or moving in order to alter certain policies or practices.

As per the participants, acts of violence are certain activities of individuals or groups that are contrary to the democratic order. Participants view radicalism, on the other hand, as a notion going beyond something that means order or normal behavior in order to achieve a certain goal. For them, radicalisation means disrespecting or violating positive legal regulations in certain cases. In short, it is the action of a certain group or individuals who are dissatisfied with their lives, society or the domestic and foreign policies of their governments or are discriminated against and decide in another way to express their views and opinions. Radicalism is defined as a state that expresses aggression, gets out of control of the system, with a tendency to go beyond the norm. Others describe it as a process that calls for a change in the social order or for certain reforms, often using undemocratic methods or violence that can lead to violent extremism and terrorism. For some, radicalisation is colorfully described: when a person accepts terrorist violence as possible, or even as a legitimate course of action; but as a professional, they are unable to share any examples from the environment that are associated with radicalism.

The link between extremism, radicalisation, and violence is well understood. Extremism and radicalisation, in other words, lead to violence, which can escalate into terrorism. When it comes to extremism, radicalisation, or violence, there are no hard and fast rules, because everyone has violent methods of action for a specific purpose. There is a link, and these are stages of a process that starts with radicalisation, then moves on to violent extremism, and finally to terrorism. People progress from one stage to the next, and only a small percentage of people complete the entire process. Not everyone goes through all of the stages, and not everyone goes through each stage at the same time. Only a few people reach the highest level and commit terrorist attack. They were aware of the arrested foreign fighters (ISIS) in RNM via the media. Their views on whether Macedonian prisons are prepared to deal with this type of inmate are divided. Some believe Macedonian prisons are unprepared to handle inmates of this nature. In terms of steps, special programs, trained professionals to work with them, coordination between all key institutions, and, of course, high-level cooperation with

²³ Following the restrictions imposed by the covid pandemic, members of the state council for the prevention of child delinquency, who come from different cities from all over the state, worked solely online. When we approached them with our request to complete the questionnaire, they agreed to do so as long as it was done online.

governments from which these people come in order to exchange information and knowledge, will almost certainly be required. Others believe that because there are not a large number of such cases at the moment, Macedonian prisons will be able to deal with the situation.

The respondents all agree that the existing strategic national documentation is adequate: as a country, we have good strategic documents and laws, but they lack respect and sanctions for non-compliance. Given that the two strategies (National Strategy to Combat Terrorism and National Strategy to Prevent Violent Extremism) are set to expire in 2022, it is necessary to assess the planned and implemented activities to see if they have achieved the desired outcomes. Based on the findings, develop new strategies that will provide activities as well as the necessary resources (human, material, and human) to carry them out. The National Committee's operation is viewed in a variety of ways. Some are familiar with their responsibilities, which include developing strategies, forming and training multi-sectoral teams to deal with foreign fighter women and children, developing procedures, training, and other activities. Others are unaware of their actions because they do not operate in a transparent and public manner. It is difficult to find risk indicators for radicalisation in the prison system. The most common indicators are the person's age, gender, nationality, emotional and health status; then, disrespect for human rights and humane treatment of prisoners; and finally, a change in how they dress, a change in physical appearance, a change in name, tattoos, symbols, a difference in religious practice, support for people who propagate the "Islamic State," openly expression of extremist views, and more.

The situation is different when it comes to juvenile delinquents and children in risk/ conflict with the law. They may be more vulnerable to the call for violent extremism than adults due to a lack of maturity and judgment. Poverty and displacement, as well as the appeal of gaining a sense of identity and ideological appeal, are all pressure factors. The role of religion and political views in the emergence of violent extremism or radicalism stands out. The informants noted that frustration, a sense of injustice, a desire to belong to a particular group, and dissatisfaction can all contribute to a person's radicalisation, in addition to religion. Only one respondent said there are violent extremist rehabilitation programs: prevention programs to reduce the attractiveness of violent extremism and build resistance to its influence and spread; intervention programs targeting people who are "at risk" and attempts are made to intervene with the person while he or she is moving toward terrorist radicalisation and has not crossed the line into criminal activity, i.e. before committing acts of terrorism. Others are not familiar with this or any other related program. None of the respondents are aware of programs that help extremist offenders reintegrate successfully into society after they are released from prison.

Interviews

We conducted the first interview with a professor at the Faculty of Law, who also serves as a President of the State Council for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency. The interviewee holds the term “extremism” implies the existence of certain behavior, attitudes or beliefs on how to overcome certain conditions are not within the socially acceptable norms. The extremist approach thus runs against to key democratic principles and values. Extremism can also consist of supporting ideas that are advocated by another person, group, etc., and are related to racial, national, ethical, or religious issues. Radicalisation, on the other hand, is not a crime, but rather a dynamic concept in which an individual or group commits to acts of violence and extremist behavior in order to overcome certain situations and solve problems. These people reinforce the belief that without violence, the goal of making changes and realising imagined ideas cannot be achieved. We are informed about the examples of radicalisation from conducted analyses, but also from social media. There are also returned fighters from foreign paramilitary formations in our prisons, who can be a risk of radicalisation if they manage to impose their own motives and beliefs on other people in the institution.

It can be concluded that violence is a common factor of extremism and radicalisation. If radicalisation is not linked to violence, other illegal acts, or incitement to hatred, it is not seen as a threat to society. Radicalisation that leads to violent extremism is a process in which an individual or group considers the use of violence as a legitimate and desirable means of effecting significant social change. Violent extremism does not have to take the form of specific violent acts; it can also take the form of supporting or justifying violent acts in order to defend an idea or achieve a goal. As a professional but also a citizen of RNM, the interviewee is acquainted with convicts in the cases Cell 1 and Cell 2, located in Kumanovo Prison. Regarding the question whether the Macedonian prisons are ready to deal with this type of prisoners, the interviewee believes that some of the educators in the prisons are trained, because they have passed training on Prevention of Radicalisation through the HELP Program of the Council of Europe. But she also emphasises that much remains to be done in order to recognise the early signs of radicalisation, choosing the appropriate approach to combat it. De-radicalisation is an extremely complex process that requires knowledge, skill and an approach that will enable a person to abandon views that justify or support extremism and violence. There are usually three steps: Recognise; Prevent and Act. As a professional and President of the State Council, she participated in trainings with professionals involved in child protection and justice, which included representatives of the National Committee.

As per the particular drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism, the interviewee argued that there are factors that contribute to radicalisation and factors that attract. Factors contributing to radicalisation include the negative social, cultural, and political characteristics of the social environment that help “pushing” vulnerable individuals on the path to violent extremism. Activities that present violent and extremist perceptions in a positive connotation and thus attract vulnerable individuals can be considered as attractive factors. Vulnerability is related to age, gender, social status, etc. Within the framework of the DES, with the support of the Council of Europe, several documents relevant to the work of prison staff, risk assessment have been prepared, and relevant guidelines and documents that

can help have been translated. But of course, the number of trainings related to recognizing risk factors for radicalisation should be increased.

In addition, the interviewee holds that religion is one of the factors used by extremist groups to radicalise individuals. As an example of this dynamics in the world, she mentioned that there are cases showing that there are mosques where radicalisation is carried out, but also mosques where religion is used very successfully for de-radicalisation. However, religion should not be used as a stereotype, because radicalisation and violent extremist behavior was noted in people of different religions. Motives for joining some extremist groups may be lucrative, not the result of some deeper convictions. It is important to know and discover the motives, because dealing with it and de-radicalisation depend on them. It is negative that no activities have been undertaken in the country in post-penal treatment of persons who were returned from foreign paramilitary formations. The fact that no special programs have been developed for the successful reintegration of extremist offenders back into society after their release from prison is also highlighted as negative.

The second interview was with a legal practitioner, project manager, and Council of Europe representative in the RNM. Radicalisation is one of the most important aspects of her profession. It was interesting to observe that she defines radicalism as "extremism" – meaning an individual behavior without considering the others' stances and possible alternative views or, in other words, excluding everything but your own positions. She sees radicalism as a step further from extremism, where certain actions are taken to materialise those. Generating fake news is an example of radicalism, as it tends to shape reality with events that never happened. When asked if there are links between extremism, radicalisation and violence, the interviewee answered affirmatively, as one might lead to another. An extremist view would use violence, combining into radicalism. She is aware that there are cases of arrested foreign fighters (ISIS) serving prison sentences in Macedonian prisons in the mid-2010s but unfortunately, as many other prisons worldwide, this is a relatively new phenomenon, so capacities to handle those inmates are likely to be limited. As a professional, she firmly believes that the strategic documents and tools in North Macedonia are sufficient. The accomplishments of the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism are sufficient, and as of recently, more active in coordinating the state bodies. However, the lack of education is evident and social activities are not sufficient. Also, as a per the interviewee, the country miss perspective, reintegration programs and jobs. The prison administration does not devote enough resources to training and research in this area. When it comes to religion she believes that it might play a role as a factor, but not necessarily crucial for prisoners' extremism, radicalisation and/or violence. The actions and activities toward rehabilitation of violent extremists is important. Her organisation is working on building capacities of national institutions.

The final interview was conducted with an expert who is head of treatment department in CEF Volkovija and who is working with children - protégés and closely monitors their behavior everyday. She defines extremism as behavior that goes beyond what is legal, permissible, and generally accepted. Radicalisation on the other hand, is behavior with the ultimate goal of drastically altering a social process or condition. Radicalisation is portrayed in the media as an example. Extremism, radicalisation, and violence are all linked because radicalisation that results from extremism frequently leads to violent

acts, such as attacks and assassinations, with the goal of changing the social order. She believes that Macedonian prisons are not adequately prepared to deal with this type of prisoner because she is a professional who has worked in that environment. To gain the knowledge and skills necessary to work with this type of prisoner, additional training is required. In terms of national strategic documents, she is unfamiliar with the ones that deal with this topic. She is also unaware of the National Committee's current activities and work. In the penitentiary system, religious affiliation, social risk, illiteracy, and moral immaturity were identified as indicators of the risk of radicalisation. She considers that prison administration does not devote enough resources to training and research in order to identify risk factors for radicalisation. Religion, she believes, is not essential for prisoner extremism, radicalisation, and/or violence, but it does have a significant impact. Finally, she has no knowledge of or experience with programs aimed at rehabilitating violent extremists and successfully reintegrating them back into society after their release from prison.

As a general conclusion from the three interviews, we note that there is a wide understanding of the notions of radicalisation and extremism, as well as the means and drivers that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism. However, all the interviewees agreed that prisons present platforms for radicalisation in North Macedonia. The new state policy was praised, but the failures in translating it in practice were also raised.

Concluding remarks

- The study's preliminary findings indicate that children do not know how to literally define the terms violent extremism and radicalism, but they do know how to describe and recognise the phenomena in a way that is unique to them. With professionals, the situation is reversed. Not all professionals are capable of identifying acts of radicalism. They have heard the definitions of these terms, but not everyone is prepared to recognise them in real-world actions and events. One thing is certain: more education is required.
- It is necessary to increase the number of professionals in prisons who will receive appropriate training to work with foreign fighters. It is very important to deepen the cooperation with the Islamic religious community and to ensure the sustainability of the programs and project activities that are conducted in the prisons.
- The Macedonian government should review educational programs as soon as possible and devote significant resources to raising awareness of the importance of radicalism and violent extremism, as well as the consequences of these trends in our country. It is devastating that a significant portion of the population believes that radicalism is "something that happens on the other side of the world" and does not see RNM as a suitable breeding ground for these phenomena. This is largely due to a lack of knowledge and information. Practitioners, police officers, security service personnel, and other state actors involved in the prevention of violent extremism and terrorism should be educated. In addition, all education professionals should be educated on the issue of radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism. The stakeholders can also use relevant handbooks and guidelines to combat radicalisation.
- The importance of civil society organizations in P/CVE matters. Our Government encourages the involvement of civil society stakeholders in every segment of P/CVE processes. Namely, during the drafting of the CVE National Strategy and Action Plan, the National Committee invited civil society groups to contribute with their expertise through public consultations. The representatives included were from non-governmental organizations, think-thanks, religious and local communities, youth organizations, schools, and women organizations among others.
- It is encouraging that the youth are aware of these phenomena. Even better, the children-protégés, who have already come into contact or been in conflict with the law in some way, want to learn more about the subject and improve their (basic) knowledge.
- The following can be singled out as weaknesses of the research:

The professionals are unsure how to identify risk indicators for radicalisation within the prison system, which is a difficult task. The specialised risk assessment tools of violent extremism for the work of prison and probation services must be developed since it is crucial in supporting decisions pertaining to classification, placement, interventions and re-classification of inmates, when required.

There are no (or very limited) programs or activities aimed at rehabilitating violent extremists, which is a major problem. We studied the existence and efficacy of programs aimed at preventing violent extremism in this report, which typically include two main interventions: disengagement and de-radicalisation. The results are devastating.

Post penal treatment for successful reintegration of extremist offenders back into the society, should be seen as a concern not only for correctional institutions, but also for social agencies and civil organizations that can help significantly. At the moment, there are no post penal programs or any kind of treatment for reintegration of adult or juvenile extremist offenders back into the society.

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

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

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

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



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