



CONNEKT

COUNTRY PAPERS ON MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

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

Tasnim Chirchi (Ed.)



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Consortium Members



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

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Editor: Tasmin Chirchi

Reviewers: Lurdes Vidal

Editorial team: Mariona Rico, Aida Traidi and Melania Brito

Layout: Núria Esparza

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INTRODUCTION

CONNEKT (Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies) is a Horizon 2020 EU-funded research project exploring the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism among young people aged from 12 to 30 in eight countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, Jordan, Kosovo, Morocco, North Macedonia, and Tunisia.

The contexts of the emergence of radicalisation and VE in the MENA region and the Balkans are studied in relation to seven pre-identified drivers: Religion, economic deprivation, political grievances, culture and leisure opportunities, digital literacy, territorial inequalities, and transnational dynamics. The project maps and establishes interrelationships and specific significance of these seven potential drivers within three different levels of analysis (macro-level, meso-level and micro-level). This framework aimed to build a cumulative knowledge of the complex phenomenon of radicalisation: Going from macro-level to meso-level to micro-level, findings are each time included at the next stage as a starting point and their interaction with the next analysis level is studied

The project thus develops innovative research bringing multi-level and multi-disciplinary study of radicalisation by adopting a dynamic approach embracing the complexity of the social/political/economic contexts studied. Moving away from unidimensional and security-centered research on the topic, the project adopts a participatory and inclusive approach engaging communities/youth/women as significant stakeholders in building an accurate understanding of the dynamics of the radicalisation of youth in the Balkans and the MENA regions.

The large geographical scope of the project covering 8 countries necessitated a flexible methodological framework including data collection and analysis of case studies in relation to the subject matter of the research project. Hence the drivers are considered according to each country and each specific social context and taking into consideration the multiplicity of stakeholders and narratives on radicalisation and VE. The case study methodology allows for a more refined and detailed understanding of these phenomena.

The current reports share the findings of the meso-level research activities throughout the 24 case studies. This level of research focuses on the social contexts where the individual relates to her/his family, neighbourhood, school, peer group, religious and ethnic communities, etc.

In this framework, meso-level research tackles two main issues: firstly, how the drivers identified in CONNEKT interact with social entities and local stakeholders and, secondly, how to translate research at the meso level into preventive actions by taking a distinct approach beyond the security-driven approaches. With this aim, the important role of communities is underlined and methodological practices to create meaningful spaces for dialogue and consultation are explored.

Meso-level research necessitates that we deal with and define the concept of community. How did the project partners address and operationalize community? Community as an entity has characteristics that are: physical or non physical, functional and symbolic. In CONNEKT, community is defined as a « social context », « cultural construct » and a « network of individual and collective interrelations ». In these contexts, we observe: Interactions between the members of the community, Interactions between individuals and meso-level institutions that are significant for their lives (family, neighborhood, school, local authorities, etc.) as well as collective practices for achieving common goals: discursive and behavioral.

While community is usually defined and operationalized as linked to a geographical location, the concept of community in our project allows both for a geographical definition when applicable, but also allows for conceptualizing community regardless of physical location, when relevant.

This definition of the social contexts makes them not specifically tied to geographical location in general, although they can be. However, in the contexts where territorial inequalities appear to be a significant driver at the macro-level analysis, geography continues to be a significant defining element of community. As communication technologies are playing a more significant role in today's societies, especially after the Covid 19 pandemic, our project covered some online community (either as a replacement of physical communities or for themselves as part of observing the driver of digitalisation). Undoubtedly, taking into consideration online communities made community detection and analysis more challenging and necessitated special methodological and ethical adaptations.

6 The concept of community has thus been operationalized as a social context (that is not only symbolic or imagined) that allows to observe collective and individual practices (behaviors) for achieving common goals, that is not specifically limited by geography. It has been addressed as a dynamic reality (rather than static). It referred to a relational network focused on interactions, interrelations between individuals, individuals and meso-level institutions, as well to discursive reality: shared perceptions, values and beliefs shared in communicative contexts.

Research activities (in 7 of the 8 countries) included 39 focus groups, 74 in-depth interviews and 2 online observations of public social media groups coupled with Crowdtangle data analysis.

JORDAN

Karak area

Refugees in Northern Jordan

Female preachers in Ma'an





Karak area

Barik Mhadeen, Aisha Bint Faisal, Jadranka Štikovac Clark

Introduction

One of the conclusions of the macro-level analysis in Jordan was to look beyond specific spaces or territories, and to identify relational frameworks between drivers, interventions, and shifting institutional patterns arising in response to violent extremism (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac, 2021). Specifically, that research highlighted that economic deprivation is the most prominent driver impacting dynamics of violent extremism (VE) in Jordan (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac, 2021). Same research confirmed that this driver has caused, among other impacts, a shift from vulnerability-based approaches to prevention of violent extremism (PVE) to the approaches which rely on the resilience of young people. Another change was noted regarding the geographical focus: the majority of early institutional PVE interventions have taken place in areas that were considered “underprivileged” or “hotspots” for radicalisation (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac, 2021).

8 These macro-level findings explain the rationale behind the selection of this case study. The selection of Karak as a location for this case study was not based on the geographic or territorial setting, but rather on the breadth of relational frameworks in this governorate in terms of interplay between drivers, interventions, and social interaction contexts. To do so, this case study opted for understanding what affects vulnerable young people at risk of radicalisation, both male and female. In its conclusion, the case study sheds light on emerging shifts in the local community that offer a fitting venue for understanding micro-path interventions. Overall, the case study tries to explain why this specific community of Karak, with its prominent tribal context, has not been affected more significantly by radicalisation and violent extremism despite the evident presence of key macro-drivers such as economic deprivation and territorial inequalities.

CASE STUDY CONTEXT

The macro-level analysis revealed that a more in-depth investigation of the changing patterns in the understanding of causes and addressing violent extremism in Jordan is needed, specifically in the communities that are under-studied yet are of high relevance to the topic. Different contexts specific to Karak prompted the choice of this location, and a specific sub-community within, for this case study.

To start with, up until 2016, violent extremism literature and research in Jordan did not show Karak as a flashpoint or a location whose population expresses support for violent extremism. Since, the levels of radicalisation have gone up in the country. The available albeit scarce existing data, (Abu Rumman and Shteiwi, 2018) including a nationwide sociological analysis of terrorism in Jordan, has shown Karak on the list of “radicalisation hotspots”, along with the “traditional” locations, such as Ma’an, Zarqa, and parts of Amman (Al-Assaf, 2018). The radicalisation levels continued to rise (Al-Shawabkeh and Ghorabi, 2016),

prompting the need for more evidence-based interventions. Whilst not considered a trigger of radicalisation, the December 2015 incident in which Daesh (ISIS) took Royal Jordanian Air Force Pilot Lt. Muath Al-Kassasbeh as a hostage is worth mentioning, as the widely shared images of Lt. Al-Kassasbeh's brutal murder resounded throughout his hometown of Karak. The 2016 deadly terrorist attack (Deutsche Welle, December 19, 2016) on city's famous Castle, for which ISIS claimed responsibility (MCD, December 20, 2016), revealed that four of the perpetrators were residents of the city, raising concerns about the extent to which radical ideology and extremism implanted itself among the younger population: at the time of the attack, all perpetrators were between 28 to 30 y/o (7iber, December 19, 2016; Al-Shawabkeh and Ghorabi, 2016).

In Jordan, Karak city has long been known for its history of political activism, with politics exercised through the tribes, the most important and powerful social political structure in the governorate (Gubser, 1985). Although the recent years have seen tribal powers, including their voice, decline both geographically and thematically (Alterman, 2019), their pull in Karak is still important, and their input listened to. It is, therefore, a fitting model to explore in the context of Karak, the impact of drivers such as political grievances, or educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities – an impact that might threaten the “social safety net” which has long covered Jordan's tribal South and ensured its stability (Todman, 2019).

Furthermore, Karak has a relatively significant Christian population, with a solid, historical record of Christian-Muslim's peaceful coexistence and interdependence (Luck, 2017). Examining the role of religious reference through the institutions or the activation of religious affiliations as a factor that can enhance or dismantle the processes of polarisation in regard to “other” groups or religious communities, is another reason for choice of Karak as a case study on the meso level. This is in line with the macro-level findings that showed the state's strong focus on the dimension of religion/ideology in its conceptualisation of and response to the PVE.

Likewise, macro-level analysis findings disclosed the state's strong focus on the dimension of security. In this area, too, Karak provides a compelling case to explore, particularly in relation to the traditional state-centred security vs the provisions of human security (economic, political, social, etc) (Bandokji and AlHaj, 2019). The city has been central to the 1989 events in Jordan, as it was the second city to rise and join the protests originated in Ma'an, following the price increase of fuel, other commodities, and of food products (Andoni, 1989). Similarly, the city was occupied by the army in light of the 1996 so-called “bread riots”, and was put under a strict curfew for 11 days, with hundreds of detainees arrested in connection with the protests (Andoni and Schwedler, 1996).

Finally, since the emergence of Arab Spring, Jordan has witnessed an active tribal Hirak—social movement (Economic Research Forum, 2021), and the Hirak in Karak provides an additional venue for investigating the meso-level dynamics relating to political and social participation, with the increasingly difficult socio-economic situation including unemployment and poverty offering a leeway for examining the employment and labour relations. The challenging socio-economic context has left a mark on the city, and has and is manifested through the limited opportunities (Milton-Edwards, 2018) for young people, a prevailing inequality (Economic Research Forum, 2021), and a difficult relationship (Yom and Al-Khatib, 2018) between the state and the citizens.

Research methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The macro-level research noted several studies that highlight the role of economic deprivation as a push factor towards joining violent extremist organisations (VEOs), with state and non-state respondents affirming this as the most prominent driver affecting the radicalisation process of Jordanians (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac, 2021).

Results of the macro-level research also showed that the territorial inequalities are significant driver in Jordan, in particular in the situation which is marked by increasing unemployment rates and public debt that affects the majority of population. A real concern, when coupled with economic deprivation, these inequalities produce effect that is noticed in at least two ways. First, certain areas are being more targeted with prevention or countering of violent extremism (CVE) programming than others, meaning that these territories were also the ones either experiencing more distress due to these inequalities and/or are being categorised as “radicalisation hotspots”. Second, the by-product of the first effect—excessive targeting of territorial inequalities in certain areas—has been the mushrooming of local actors directly linked to the abundance of funds that were channelled to P/CVE efforts in these locations. In turn, this has encouraged the creation of numerous community-based organisations (CBOs) that “neither had the previous PVE expertise nor the level of sensitivity” needed to deal with such an issue (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac, 2021).

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MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

This level of research allows for an in-depth analysis of drivers of violent extremism on a community level. Coupled with data obtained through the previous macro-level research, the resulting scheme helps in building a multi-dimensional map of such drivers. The analysis also provides an opportunity for combining and testing the seven drivers pre-identified by CONNEKT with a set of contexts of social interaction. This combination cements a key premise of the CONNEKT project that relates to the radicalisation and violent extremism being approached and analysed as a social phenomenon that develops from contexts of social interaction and intersections between individuals, ideas, and contexts. The added value of this meso-level analysis can be summarised as follows:

- The study allows for an analysis of VE drivers that affect young people in a community deemed as a “hotspot”. It should contribute to better understanding of territorial inequalities as an important, confirmed driver that is very present and prominent between the central region of the Kingdom, with capital Amman in its heart, and the southern region with the city of Karak which is a focus of this research.
- This meso-level research also enables primary data collection with a young demographic, children and youth 12 to 18 y/o and beyond, which is a real added value not only of this case study and research in Jordan, but of the CONNEKT project in general. Enabling the discussions on drivers of violent extremism with young people who have been on a brink or had crossed the invisible and often hidden boundaries that led them to violence, is a contribution to the field in which the

majority of learning comes from “recycled” secondary data as opposed to a very little direct contact with communities, youth included.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study examines drivers of violent extremism that have affected or are affecting young people in a southern hub of Jordan known for its political activism, multi-religious identity, and since recently, more radicalised views of some of its inhabitants. It specifically looks at youth of certain age and “at-risk”, to gain insights into the drivers that have either pushed them or could be pushing them, and others, towards violent extremism. The research seeks to benefit from the exclusive access the research team has secured by engaging a group of “at-risk” youth, selected based on the level of exposure to or engagement with violent extremism. As these youths have embarked, with different speeds and outcomes, on the radicalisation path, their insights and knowledge on several dimensions: their access to leisure and cultural activities, the impact of territorial inequalities or economic deprivation, or the extent of technological use and digital socialisation, should help us clarify the interlinkages between these different factors.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Building on the findings of CONNEKT’s macro-level research phase, a sensitive framing of the research was applied, and has included looking at the groups of youth between 12 and 30 y/o who were at risk of joining VEOs. The key criteria for their selection were defined as:

1. Having attempted to cross the Jordanian or other borders (towards Syria) to join VEOs,
2. Having been detained in Jordan for expressing support for and/or desire to join VEOs,
3. Having expressed support for and/or desire to join VEOs but faced no detention, and
4. Having gone through informal processes of adopting more moderate religious ideologies.

SAMPLING DESCRIPTION

For this case study, the selection was carried out through a mixture of purposive sampling and snowballing sampling strategy. Applying this strategy meant that the challenge of accessing hard-to-reach youths could be overcome by asking initial research subjects and their personal relations to introduce the research team to other subjects (who meet the criteria and are willing to get involved in the research) through referrals.

The case study’s primary data was collected using various Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The FGDs were conducted with two groups of in total 18 participants, out of which five were female. The first FGD was conducted with eight “at-risk” male youth participants, while the second FGD was conducted with 10 “at-risk” youth with five male and five female participants. In spite of best efforts invested in selecting the research respondents that correspond to the required age bracket, the access to research respondents, as well as the respondents’ willingness to take part in this research in view of its sensibility, limited the representation, resulting in the age range for the first focus group discussion being between 20 to 46 y/o, whilst the age of respondents in the second focus group discussion ranged between 20 to 29 y/o.

The discussions were conducted in a semi-structured manner, giving the respondents the opportunity to freely shape the conversation. Throughout the FGDs, notes were taken and compiled, and then used to identify recurrent and emergent themes and patterns based on the respondents’ answers. Transcriptions

of FGDs recordings were used to compare the notes and confirm the identified themes, both manually and through the Atlas.ti.

Prior to conducting the focus groups, a series of phone call consultations was carried out with the local partners to better understand the local scene and youth who have been exposed to/involved in radicalisation processes in Karak, liaise on research authorisations, communicate the research objectives and the criteria for selection, and generally prepare all aspects of data collection. This initial phase of research served as an insightful mapping exercise in which the primary data collected through several conversations with the local partners helped in dividing of the groups, and choice of key individuals to invite in each group.

TABLE 1. Focus Group Discussion 1 with Youth in Karak

Respondent's Code	Age/ Sex	Criteria
FMR1	37 (M)	Having expressed support for and/or desire to join VEOs but faced no
FMR2	33 (M)	detention
FMR3	43 (M)	Having expressed support for and/or desire to join VEOs but faced no
FMR4	36 (M)	detention
FMR5	26 (M)	Having gone through informal processes of adopting more moderate
FMR6	20 (M)	religious ideologies
FMR7	42 (M)	Having gone through informal processes of adopting more moderate
FMR8	46 (M)	religious ideologies
		Having expressed support for and/or desire to join VEOs but faced no
		detention
		Having gone through informal processes of adopting more moderate
		religious ideologies
		Having gone through informal processes of adopting more moderate
		religious ideologies
		Having gone through informal processes of adopting more moderate
		religious ideologies

TABLE 2. Focus Group Discussion 2 with Youth in Karak

Respondent's Code	Age/ Sex	Criteria
FFR1	22 (F)	Having gone through informal processes of adopting more moderate
FFR2	22 (F)	religious ideologies
FFR3	22 (F)	Having expressed support for and/or desire to join VEOs but faced no
		detention
		Having expressed support for and/or desire to join VEOs but faced no
		detention

FMR4	22 (M)	Having been detained in Jordan for expressing support for and/or desire to join VEOs
FMR5	29 (M)	Having attempted to cross the Jordanian or other borders (towards Syria) to join VEOs
FFR6	28 (F)	Having attempted to cross the Jordanian or other borders (towards Syria) to join VEOs
FMR7	20 (M)	Having attempted to cross the Jordanian or other borders (towards Syria) to join VEOs
FMR8	28 (M)	Having been detained in Jordan for expressing support for and/or desire to join VEOs
FMR9	20 (M)	Having been detained in Jordan for expressing support for and/or desire to join VEOs
FFR10	28 (F)	Having gone through informal processes of adopting more moderate religious ideologies

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

In conducting the research, the main challenge was first identifying then getting access to and acceptance of youth that are deemed to be “at-risk”. This was due to the sensitivity of discussions with youth who were involved with VEOs, and the security access and clearance to conduct FGDs with them. The research team also faced the challenge of presenting the research and its objectives in a simple, neutral, and context-sensitive manner that had to ensure that there will be:

1. No (further) stigmatising of the research participants involved (Do No (More) Harm), and
2. No misunderstanding as to the added value of their participation in this project, without any compensation before offered in return.

RESEARCH INTEGRITY

To ensure confidentiality and privacy of the data, the information and data collected were kept and handled with utmost privacy. The data collected was protected on encrypted digital drives that only researchers have access to. Answers were anonymised and all personally identifiable information from the notes was deleted. The participants’ identity was kept confidential/coded to ensure anonymity, with this treatment/process being explained to the respondents prior to obtaining their consent. To ensure autonomy and voluntariness, a consent form was thoroughly explained and shared with participants ahead of the focus group discussions. The data collectors/researchers explained research purpose as well as the research ethics measures verbally prior to the start of data collection process.

Meso-level dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The findings of this case study point to the two contexts of social interaction that are directly linked to the results of the macro-level analysis. These are:

- **Cultural and leisure activities:** artistic and cultural expressions as mechanisms of intervention and reflection on social realities, and leisure activities of a diverse nature (cultural, educational, sports, artistic, etc.), which constitute specific contexts of social interaction for young people, and
- **Employment and labour relations:** unemployment as a factor that limits access to a decent level of social welfare.

Regarding the first social context, the respondents acknowledged general lack of cultural and leisure activities for youth to get involved with. One respondent recalled how in 1980s and 1990s, Karak used to have the “Sons of Karak Social Club”, categorised as a civil society space in the city centre which youth would join to partake in a host of social and leisure activities.¹ The respondent noted that what used to set this space apart was the fact that it was genuinely a venue open for all, “leftists, Baathists, communists, tribals”,² who would all attend the club regularly, and engage in discussions and sometimes “quarrels”³ about the general situation in the governorate and in Jordan at large. Today, the lack of such physical spaces in the city centre makes it logistically difficult, and costly, for an average young Karaki citizen to commute and participate in activities regularly—and even if such a space was available, the respondents agreed the quality of interactions would not have been the same, as the shrinking and contrived civil space meant the discussions and activities could not be “intellectually stimulating” or “political” as they used to be.⁴ It is not the first time that the research team has heard the mention of the shrinking civil space across Jordan: the macro-level research respondents from the group of non-state actors discussed the compound effects of freedom of speech restrictions and of COVID-19, resulting in an increasingly narrow civic interactions and shrinking space for civic activism.

Discussions about the second context of social interactions, the one of employment and labour relations, were particularly significant. In the macro-level analysis, the economic deprivation was singled out as the most prominent driver affecting the radicalisation process of Jordanians (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac, 2021). But in these meso-level discussions, predominant position was plainly clear as of the beginning: as opposed to the traditional reference to the “culture of shame” (Azzeh, 2014) which links the existing high unemployment rates with the vast majority of Jordanians shying away from non-governmental jobs and handicrafts, the respondents confirmed the existence of “culture of fixed salary”. This, they explained, is people’s preference for a fixed income, albeit small, which is usually provided by the public-sector jobs as opposed to jobs in other fields including non-governmental, the technical, and vocational fields in

¹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

particular, which were considered as risk-taking options that offer a higher but likely unsustainable pay.⁵ In further explanation why these jobs are not sustainable, the respondents referred to the non-profit sector which offers quite a lot of employment opportunities but all short and project-based, which end once the donor funding has been spent.

Additionally, the respondents unpacked the impact of employment and labour relations on the broader individual-society relations. Specifically, they linked the impact of these relations to the high expectations the society places on young people, namely on men. As participants of one of the FGDs said, "youth are placed under the hammer of the lack of employment opportunities and the anvil of their pressuring and demanding families"⁶ who all have high expectations of them. These pressures become higher if the youth are educated. Example was given of the families in Karak which often resort to selling land/property or borrowing money for education of their children, young men in particular, with the expectation of (fast and) positive return.⁷

Reality, however, is different. Their attempts are faced with a frustrating situation in which there is a very few jobs that could employ those young, educated males and females. Every year, based on Jordan's demographics, approximately 160,000 young people attain the stage of entering the employment market.

For an economy of Jordan's size, it will need to grow every year by 7% in order to create 100,000 jobs for young people. Or Jordan's economic growth is at 2%, projected to either stagnate or go below that percentage, and the unemployment of young people is at 52%. Currently, 50,000 new jobs are created each year, which covers only about 40% of university graduates (Challenge Fund for Youth Employment, 2021). This is where *wasta*, or nepotism, further exacerbates the situation according to the participants. One young male shared his experience with the Civil Service Bureau, Jordan's key national entity governing public sector employment, citing that his number on the list of those awaiting employment in Karak was 40 (as in 39 individuals ahead of him), yet it became 60, then 70 over a period of time. That meant that he was moving further down the list, while those with a "strong *wasta*" kept moving up "at the expense of those more deserving",⁸ as he described. To him, the immediate result of this situation was the young peoples' frustration and "strong and long-present lack of hope".⁹

On employment and labour relations, participants added another lens in their discussion: that of "security procedures",¹⁰ which contribute to individuals being denied security clearances for jobs, hence remaining unemployed, due to "their history or the history of their grandparents",¹¹ as one of the participants commented on. Here, "history" refers to the individual's record, or that of his/her relative, in being linked to the violent extremism or violent extremist organisations, or generally being "critical" against the government or its policies.¹²

⁵ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

⁶ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

¹¹ Ibid.

HOW MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS WORK AT THE MESO-LEVEL STUDIED (THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS)?

The findings of this case study have revealed how different drivers work at the meso-level. This includes the VE drivers such as the economic deprivation and territorial inequalities. In the context of the CONNEKT project, these two drivers are defined as the following: economic deprivation is the inequality that is experienced by sectors of the population that lives in precarious social conditions, and that turns them into fragile subjects, while the territorial inequalities refer to being part of a territory that is subject to an evident inequality with respect to other territories and experiencing this situation as a comparative redress.

Regarding the economic deprivation, it is very important to note that this driver has gained great prominence in the macro-level analysis findings (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac, 2021). Specifically, the economic deprivation “carved” a space for itself in the PVE strategies and national action plans discussed in macro-level analysis, meaning that said strategies had a clear call for economic empowerment, which in turn have encouraged both governmental and non-governmental actors to rethink the design of their PVE interventions to ensure that participants are equipped with sustainable employability skill sets (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac, 2021). However, the way this macro-level driver works at the meso-level has been found to be counterproductive. Participants in this case study have cited the inability of government and its policies to address the “culture of a fixed salary” explained earlier, thus seeking to address the question of economic deprivation and unemployment by offering more jobs in the public sector, or the armed forces and security establishment which are two main “traditional” employers.¹³ In turn, research respondents commented that such approach in fact further reinforces the issue of economic deprivation as opposed to addressing it.

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Further, the practice and spread of *wasta* or nepotism was noted as a key issue to account for in how the macro-level driver of economic deprivation works at the meso level. For example, government initiatives such as the Development and Employment Fund (DEF),¹⁴ which was set up to stimulate development by providing lending and microfinancing services for small and medium enterprises in the governorates, are subject to a great deal of *wasta*. Respondents noted how loans are not always given to “real development projects/programmes on the ground”, and people with connections leverage their *wasta* to get loans from DEF which they then use for daily needs or expenses, accumulating more debt that they then cannot pay back.¹⁵ As a result, this ends up creating more poverty, and significant debt and unemployment.

With respect to territorial inequalities, it was notable to hear how this macro-level driver which is typically manifested in people citing the distance from the capital, Amman, to be an impediment to economic growth and development, had its unique meso-level manifestations in and within Karak. In

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

¹⁴ <http://www.def.gov.jo/Pages/viewpage?pageID=3>

¹⁵ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022.

other words, the impact of territorial inequality in Karak was not only felt from outside, i.e., between Karak and Amman, but also from within Karak. The research respondents in the first FGD¹⁶ referred to the large national company dealing with potassium production, known as the Arab Potash Company (APC),¹⁷ as one of the reasons they experience the territorial inequalities. Despite APC being based in Karak, the respondents shared the perception that APC “does not benefit Karak”¹⁸ and only provides “small and pitiful” support to the governorate through its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) scheme, with “no big, sustainable, and real development projects and benefits”¹⁹ for Karak and its residents. For respondents, APC’s largest benefits and profits seemed to go to the central government in Amman and did not reflect positively on the local development and economic scene, hence contributing to the evident inequality the governorate suffers with respect to other territories, Amman in this specific case.²⁰

Overall, the way the two macro-level drivers of territorial inequalities and economic deprivation seem to work at the meso-level is by fuelling the youth’s sense of alienation. One participant explained it through the metaphoric phrase of “the sons of the black swan”,²¹ denoting that due to being denied economic opportunities and residing in an area that experiences territorial inequalities, he feels discriminated against and outcasted.²² Other participants laughed at this expression but nodded in agreement.²³

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND INTERACTIONS AMONG DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

17 The findings of this meso-level analysis show direct intersections between the drivers. As explained in the section above, both economic deprivation and territorial inequality are present in the context of Karak, and combined they produce a strong feeling of injustice and alienation.²⁴ Participants referred to the high spread of unemployment and lack of socio-economic opportunities as a characterisation of the situation in Karak, partially linking this to the strong focus on development in Amman and surrounding areas.²⁵ Additionally, the participants cited low income and the hardships associated with starting one’s own business – including an extraordinary amount of red tape – to be a strong negative determinant of the economic deprivation,²⁶ a situation that has been more difficult due to the negative impact the COVID-19 has had on Karak’s local economy (Aragie et al., 2021)²⁷ Therefore, the drivers of

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ <https://www.arabpotash.com/Default/En>

¹⁸ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

²⁵ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022.

²⁶ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

²⁷ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

economic deprivation and territorial inequality intersect at the point where being distant from the centre of economic focus and activity (Amman) is reflected in lower socio-economic opportunities that feed economic deprivation.

As for the interaction amongst drivers and social contexts, both drivers of economic deprivation and territorial inequality have interactions with the two factors of social context: cultural and leisure activities as well as employment and labour relations. These interactions were captured in the focus group discussions in the following manner:

The impact of the economic deprivation extends to and affects the level and type of cultural and leisure activities provided to youth in Karak. Research respondents in second focus group discussion noted that the lack of spaces for cultural and leisure activities in the governorate also means that there is a “lack of space for generating innovative ideas, initiatives, and opportunities” for employment and economic growth.²⁸ Business incubators and hubs are “unfortunately non-existent in Karak”, added one participant.²⁹ Further, the participants underscored that whilst “males are impacted more negatively by the economic situation than females” as they are expected to be the “breadwinners” in society, the limited employment opportunities for females are also coupled with their low access to cultural and leisure activities due to “societal and material restrictions”, such as societal norms and views around female roles in society as well as the unreliable transportation which makes it harder for females to access said cultural and leisure opportunities outside their immediate local communities.³⁰

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Still, the research has found that whilst territorial inequalities present in Karak do negatively impact the two identified social contexts, cultural and leisure activities as well as employment and labour relations, there seems to be a positive development in recent times. That development is notable move towards digital space, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that has made “more jobs available online”, according to the participants in both FGDs.³¹ The examples of this burgeoning gig economy that thrives in the digital space were of locally produced handicrafts, or of use of social media to market homemade products and organic food, such as locally made yoghurt, milk, and other dairy products. These were all seen by research respondents as a welcomed shift in young people’s attitudes towards employment and economic opportunities. The participants noted that the potential for this shift is important given that “it does not depend on your physical territory”,³² but is rather something that can be done online, hence overcoming the barrier of distance to/from the capital.

²⁸ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

³² Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

The meso-level analysis has revealed several key findings. First, no single driver is present in Karak, rather it is the combination of several drivers that explains the meso-level situation. Namely, the most prominent drivers in Karak are the ones of territorial inequalities and of economic deprivations. In turn, said drivers interact with other contexts of social interactions, such as cultural and leisure activities as well as employment and labour relations and, as a result, seem to produce greater frustration, lack of hope, and a strong sense of social injustice amongst youth.

Second, youth's idle time remains a strong factor limiting the constructive life prospects for young adults in Karak. As a result, they opt for less constructive pathways such as drug use, which was a prominent phenomenon that the overwhelming majority of participants in both FGDs have voiced concerns about, noting its spread in the governorate.³³ Interestingly, whilst participants condoned the use and spread of drugs, they still consider it as a "natural outcome to people's lack of jobs and alternatives".³⁴ They commented that youth's idle time feeds off of both social interactions and the VE drivers, including the lack of cultural and leisure activities, the existing and extended economic deprivation and the lack of socio-economic opportunities, which interact with present territorial inequalities to further limit development opportunities and prospects in the governorate.³⁵

Third, the COVID-19 pandemic has had both positive and negatives effects on the macro-level drivers and meso-level contexts of social interactions. On one hand, prolonged period of the closure of public spaces and limited economic movement and activities (during health-induced curfews and lockdowns) have resulted in a "miserable" economic situation, as described by one participant, further exacerbating the impact of the economic deprivation.³⁶ On the other hand, the pandemic has also carved a new digital space for a modest gig economy activities including e-commerce that overall have been helpful in addressing the territorial inequalities resulting from the geographic distance of Karak in relation to the capital city Amman, which remains the focus of economic activities and development.³⁷ Fourth, *wasta* seems to play a key role driving economic deprivation as it negatively impacts employment prospects and labour relations in Karak and seems to further cement the already-existing lack of development. Additionally, it was interesting to note its impact on the territorial inequalities impacting people, young people in particular, both from within Karak as well as between Karak and Amman.

³³ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

³⁴ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

³⁵ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

³⁶ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

³⁷ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

Prior to discussing the prevention indicators, a note should be made on how the research discussing the prevention indicators was conducted. Technically, the focus group discussions were divided in two parts: in the first part, participants were allowed a room to voice out their concerns and describe the general socio-economic situation in Karak as they perceived it, making it clear that they see as “difficult and deteriorating”.³⁸ In the next part, participants were asked to think and reflect on the potential situations, experiences, or measures they have experienced that might have had an effect on the described harsh reality.

As such, the research team was able to directly solicit the participants’ views on the prevention indicators. The added value of their input stems from the fact that the group was made by young people who have been experienced vulnerabilities and got exposed to different types of VE risks, hence their testimonies are closer to first-hand experiences and not mere opinions. Here, whilst they noted the following three key prevention indicators, the notion of consequences was clear in their calculations, and it seemed to be a recurrent theme across the three notions, as will be explained below.

To start with, family was listed as the first and foremost preventative factor deterring the young people from pursuing the appeal of violent extremism.³⁹ For the research respondents, their families were the “first layer” of defence against pursuing destructive pathways. By speaking of family, they referred to them being part of Karak’s tribal society, therefore as individuals they all had a strong sense of belonging to the tribe. They clearly acknowledged the fact that their personal/individual actions have had “consequences beyond them as individuals”.⁴⁰ As such, the respondents are/were deterred by the thought that their actions might bring shame and discomfort to their immediate relatives, or potentially taint the reputation of their tribe at large.

As important, it is the family that serves(ed) as their social support unit; at least 3 participants mentioned how it is one’s parents in such a closely-knit community who are expected to continue to take care of one’s financial, economic, and social wellbeing “even if you’re married and unemployed at the age of 30”.⁴¹ It was clearly this centrality of the role of family in a tribal society such as the one in Karak that serves as a prevention indicator. In other words, participants confirmed that as long as the family and tribe continue to play this supportive role in their lives, they would “cling to hope”⁴² and push forward. The state was noted as the second layer of prevention. This was put in the context of accounting for the consequences of one’s actions not only in terms of potential imprisonment or individual suffering, but also interestingly in the context of collective consequences. The participants alluded to how not only the state has the power to deny the access to employment opportunities due to a “red flag on your security record”, but is equally able to do the same for one’s relatives who do not necessarily have

³⁸ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

⁴¹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022

⁴² Ibid.

anything to do with choice if one of their family members to join VEOs or harbouring support for VE/VEOs.⁴³

The third noted prevention indicator was religion. Here, participants explained that the strong religious motif (الوازع الديني) serves(ed) as a key prevention indicator to pursuing the VE pathway.⁴⁴ When asked to elaborate, the participants' explanation was that religious ideology was barely a slim part of why violent extremism was appealing to them; rather, it was the narrow socio-economic prospects, the lack of a better alternative, or the marginalisation they felt as individuals.⁴⁵ In fact, "it is religion that asks us not to steal, kill, or do harm to others", as one participant put it.⁴⁶ Another participant echoed this by stating that it is religion that asks one to always "pursue and persist", as this (السعي) is a key pillar of Islamic teachings and philosophy.⁴⁷

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

When asked about the specific micro paths that might be resulting from the prevention indicators mentioned above, participants noted that the micro paths should be derived from the positive shifts they see in their local community. In answering this question, the participants shared those emerging shifts and noted their notable recurrence in the local community, which makes them a fitting venue to look for the micro paths.

The first positive shift the participants noted was the changing, more positive attitude towards community-based organisations (CBOs) and their work in the local community. For respondents, this is a welcomed shift in view of the rising number of CBOs in Karak, with which come new possibilities. In other words, it is possible to now see in Karak increasing number of young adults who are embracing the work of CBOs, initiating their own organisations, or simply cementing the culture of volunteering and active citizenship.⁴⁸

The second positive reaction relates to the role of females in society. Whilst indeed females are still facing "social restrictions",⁴⁹ there is on the other side, increased presence, and activism of females in the local community of Karak. Families are slowly becoming more accepting of females joining the armed forces or police, which has been an exclusive domain for males in Karak.⁵⁰ One participant narrated how during a recent royal visit, tribal figures were asking His Majesty the King to call for female recruits in Jordan's armed forces and police – which is unheard of given the highly patriarchal nature of the community in Karak.⁵¹

⁴³ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022

⁴⁸ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

⁴⁹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Karak on March 7, 2022

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

The third micro path relates to young people's greater embracing and use of digital spaces to generate income by selling homemade and other products and services. Participants mentioned a several of said initiatives, with one of the participants selling wood crafts,⁵² and another female participant selling homemade sweets online,⁵³ while a third attempted to make and sell natural and herbal cosmetics through an Instagram page she created.⁵⁴ Here, the basic premise is to look for and support individual initiatives that seek positive alternatives to the negative socioeconomic situation, which is deemed responsible for pushing young people towards violent extremism and VEOs pathways.

⁵² Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Karak on April 25, 2022.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

General Conclusion

In conclusion, this case study sought to examine the question of resilience in the southern governorate of Karak. Namely, it opted for understanding the resilience factors affecting a group of vulnerable youth (at risk of radicalisation), some of which having a proven past record of an explicit appeal to radical thought or behaviour.

Hence, the importance of this case study stems from what could be described as a first-hand recipe on how radical behaviour was unlearned amongst those individuals. Further, the case study has shed light on the resilience factors to consider in future PVE interventions. The findings presented above are of specific relevance and importance to designing grassroots approaches to the prevention of VE not only in Karak, but also beyond across Jordan. This is based on the fact that most of the identified prevention factors and micro-paths reported are similar to, and found in, other contexts in Jordan. These include the prominent role of family; the wide presence of the tribal culture; the strong regime of punishment put by the state; as well as the strong religious motif. In short, whilst these were revealed during the discussions in Karak, they are not exclusive to this specific context.

As for the drivers and social contexts' factors, the meso level findings point to a direct link between at least two social contexts factors (culture and leisure activities & employment and labour relations) and two macro drivers (economic deprivation & territorial inequalities). The way in which these drivers intersect with the identified factors of social contexts manifests itself in commonly known notions and issues such as *wasta* (nepotism), unequal distribution of development gains, as well as the perceived sense of alienation and marginalisation amongst the young participants.

Consistent with findings from previous case studies, this case study has also shown that no single macro driver is at play in understanding the meso-level situation. Additionally, idle time of the younger population (whether in Karak, in Irbid and Mafraq with the urban Syrian refugees, the in-camp young Syrian refugees at Zaatari; or the young females in Ma'an), remains a prominent factor in understanding the choices these young demographic makes. Likewise, COVID-19 was also a recurrent theme in Karak and beyond; linked to fastening the pace of digital socialisation (with urban refugees), the impact of transnational dynamics (informal preachers), and craving new spaces for economic activities amongst the young, and often vulnerable, youth in Karak.

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Annex I: Questions for Focus Group Discussions

The Annex 1 contains the main set of questions that have been used as a guidance for the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The questions below were used in the course of the FGDs, once the safe space was established, and were asked and alternated as the discussion developed.

1. As you may know, around 3,000 Jordanians have joined armed groups in Syria and Iraq, while an unknown percentage of Jordanians seems to support these groups as indicated by some surveys conducted in Jordan. However, the majority of Jordanians are not radical and do not support these groups. Karak has also seen one extremist attack on its historical castle in December 2016; those involved were Jordanians and some were from areas near Karak. In your opinion, what deters youth in society from becoming radical?
2. Some research findings generally argue that religious ideology can be a factor in radicalisation in addition to other contextual and psychological factors. In your opinion, did religion play a role in the radicalisation of some Jordanians? If yes, how?
3. What socio-economic opportunities are you provided with, or have access to? If little to none, how does the absence of such opportunities might impact/is impacting you?
4. How do youth perceptions about the economic situation in Jordan affect their worldview and the options they take in their lives?
5. Regarding the Karak terrorist attack, what are your reflections about that incident, almost 5 years after it has happened? Do you think the way we now know the incident was handled could have been different, or even better?
6. What do you think is the impact of the issues you have mentioned on females in your community? Do you think the (same) issues play out differently for females? If so, how?

1. ربما تعلمون أن ما يقارب 3000 أردني التحقوا بالجماعات المسلحة في سوريا والعراق، وتشير بعض الاستبيانات في الأردن إلى أن هناك نسبة من الأشخاص الذين يدعمون هذه الجماعات. ومع ذلك، فإن معظم الأردنيين ليسوا منطرفين ولا يدعمون هذه الجماعات. وشهدت الكرك واحدة هجوماً متطرفاً في قلعتها التاريخية في شهر كانون الأول 2016، وكان بعض المتورطين في الهجوم أردنيين ومن مناطق قريبة من الكرك. برأيكم، ما الذي يمنع الشباب/المجتمع من السير في مسار التطرف؟
2. تقول بعض الدراسات بأن الايديولوجية الدينية عموماً قد تشكل عاملاً دافعاً للتطرف مع غيرها من العوامل النفسية والعوامل المتعلقة بالسياق العام. برأيكم، هل لعب الدين دوراً في تطرف بعض الأردنيين؟ إذا كانت الإجابة نعم، كيف تم ذلك؟
3. ما هي الفرص الاجتماعية والاقتصادية المتوفرة لكم ويمكنكم الوصول لها؟ إذا لم يكن الأمر كذلك أو كانت قليلة جداً، فكيف يؤثر غياب هذه الفرص عليكم؟

4. كيف تؤثر آراء الشباب حول الوضع الاقتصادي في الأردن على نظرتهم للحياة وعلى خياراتهم فيها؟
5. فيما يخص الهجوم الإرهابي في الكرك، كيف تنتظر للهجوم الآن بعد مرور حوالي 5 سنوات عليه؟ هل تعتقد أنه كان من الممكن التعامل معه بشكل مختلف أو بطريقة أفضل بعد ما نعرفه اليوم عن الهجوم؟
6. ما أثر جميع القضايا التي تناولناها اليوم على الإناث في مجتمعك؟ هل تعتقد أن هذه القضايا تتبلور بشكل مختلف بالنسبة للإناث؟ إذا كان الأمر كذلك، كيف؟



Refugees in Northern Jordan

Barik Mhadeen, Aisha Bint Faisal, Jadranka Štikovac Clark

Introduction

This case study examines radicalisation drivers among urban and camp-based Syrian refugees in the two northern cities of Irbid and Mafrq. The focus on refugees stems from conflicting findings about radicalisation among refugees, generally, and among Syrian refugees, more specifically. Available literature shows, for example, a policy brief which warns the EU actors about Daesh (ISIS) members infiltrating Syrian refugees in the EU, (Funk and Parkes, 2016) whereas a different study argues that Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan have no desire to migrate to the West, particularly those who hold radical worldviews (U.S Department of Homeland Security, 2018). Another study argues that 46.7% of Syrian refugees in Jordan hold radical views. (Al-Badayneh, Alshawy and Alhasan, 2017). However, field work in Jordan negates any strong correlation between Syrian refugee youth and violent extremism (VE) (Bondokji, Wilkinson and Aghabi, 2016).

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Most studies that generalise radicalisation among Syrian refugees measure radicalisation based on respondents' agreement to vague sentences about religious practices and value systems that cannot be specifically associated with radicalisation.¹ These generalisations stigmatise the refugee population. Therefore, this case study examines the radicalisation drivers that may affect Syrian refugees in Jordan within the general framework of the seven drivers of radicalisation identified by the CONNEKT project. CONNEKT's macro-level analysis of drivers of radicalisation and VE in Jordan revealed the need to reconceptualise VE in Jordan based on the reality of contextual grievances, rather than ideology to understand dynamics of VE at the meso-level (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal. and Štikovac, 2021). Selecting Syrian refugees for this case study highlights how contextual grievances of Syrian refugees shape drivers of VE, and the work on the case study has identified the most prominent drivers and social contexts of VE in Jordan.

The analysis reveals the prominence of three drivers of VE: educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities; transnational dynamics; and digital socialisation. These drivers interact with two social contexts identified by CONNEKT project: education/socialisation, and cultural and leisure activities.

This case study argues that educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities are in shortage, particularly for Syrian refugees in camp, Za'atari camp in particular. The only available opportunities are in schools

¹ For example, one survey with 840 residents in three cities in Jordan in 2017 had measured radicalisation against indicators such as wearing a headscarf (in a conservative city in south Jordan), and the frequency of praying at a mosque. Both indicators are common practices among Muslims, and are practiced due to various social and religious beliefs or conviction, thus do not necessarily signify radicalisation. In this specific example, the pollsters were advised against publishing it.

that are overcrowded. In contrast, urban refugees have better access to these opportunities, but they are not always affordable either due to the fees required to be paid to access the opportunities or the high transportation costs. The limited access to these opportunities makes the family the key provider of informal educational opportunities and sometimes leisure activities. The role of the family is mainly shouldered by female members, making them a key agent of prevention efforts. Families also shape the identities and cultural references adopted by young refugees.

The findings also reveal that digital socialisation attains prominence among refugees as a potential driver of VE due to the lack of educational, leisure, and cultural activities, and due to difficulties of accessing work opportunities. Having nothing else to do, many refugee youth spend considerable hours every day using their mobile phones. This makes them vulnerable to the influence of narratives circulating online, including extremist ones. Although refugees did not directly refer to radical online context, and since there is no evidence of radicalisation among Syrian refugees in Jordan, the finding on this driver points to an important prevention of violent extremism (PVE) entry point to protect against radicalisation among refugee youth.

Likewise, the significance of transnational dynamics as a driver of VE stems from the impact of digital socialisation and the identification of Syrian victims of the war. Digital socialisation increases the potential impact of transnational dynamics because of widely spread narratives of victimisation, the views of injustice regarding fellow Syrians and Muslims, and the news about atrocities in Syria that are communicated online. In addition, Syrian refugees are proud of their Syrian identity and culture, identify with relatives and friends who are still in Syria, and are empathetic to their plight, in addition to their sense of frustration with their status as refugees.

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The findings highlight the intersectionality between drivers of VE: that between the transnational dynamics and digital socialisation on one level, and between educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities and digital socialisation on another level. These three drivers also interact with social contexts identified in this case study (education/socialisation, and cultural and leisure activities) mainly in how socialisation takes place in the family and through limited leisure activities available to urban refugees.

CASE STUDY CONTEXT

Jordan hosts over 1.3 million Syrian refugees—nearly 20% of the country's population (UNHCR, 2022b). As of March 2022, there were 674,268 Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR, with Amman, Mafrqa, and Irbid governorates in the north of the country hosting the largest numbers (UNHCR, 2022c). Of these, 130,000 live in Za'atari, Emirates Jordanian Camp, and Azraq Camp (UNHCR, 2022c). The rest live in urban areas, so called host communities. In addition, not all Syrian refugees register with UNHCR, hence the discrepancy between figures for registered refugees and their total number in Jordan. Syrian refugees live across the Kingdom, although there is a higher percentage in the North due to the geographic proximity to Syria.

There is no data on the number of refugees who have joined Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs), and no concrete evidence on radicalisation among Syrian refugees in Jordan. However, Jordanian

authorities have captured members of a Daesh cell that attacked Jordanian army post near Rukban camp in 2016 (Al-Khitan, 2017). The Rukban Camp is located inside Syria on the Syrian-Jordanian border. Although the camp is inside Syria, the attack and the uncovering of the cell members sparked concerns regarding whether Daesh members have infiltrated Syrian refugees in Jordan. But these fears lack evidence.

The conditions in which Syrian refugees live in Jordan is widely documented. Despite significant efforts of the international humanitarian sector, some service provision is in shortage. As the Syrian conflict enters its eleventh year, the situation of Syrian refugees in Jordan is still a source of concern for the international community and Jordanian government.

For the purposes of this case study, we limited this overview to available educational, cultural, and leisure opportunities for Syrian refugees. A 2017 UNICEF report documents the shortage of these opportunities and how that shortage impacts on educational and employment prospects for Syrian refugees in the future, despite the eagerness of refugee children (as defined by the UN) to have access to these opportunities (UNICEF, 2017). Financial difficulties, including copying mechanisms such as children being forced to work to help their families, and the cost of access to recreational opportunities are found to be one barrier to the social development of refugee children (Al-Sarayrah and Al Masalhah, 2019). Therefore, this case study believes that unpacking this driver (cultural, educational, and leisure opportunities) will be important for CONNEKT's contribution to examining the threats of VE.

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Jordan's response to the Syrian refugee crisis was framed through the concept of social cohesion as a response to early concerns about social tensions between host communities and Syrian refugees. As a result, refugee participants in this case study are familiar with the terminology of social cohesion, as opposed to VE. The participants mentioned a few of such programmes, including a programme that was provided by Generations For Peace on life skills,² another provided by a local community-based organisation (CBO) targeting young Syrians to enhance their entrepreneurial skills,³ a third by a local religious organisation on integration with host communities,⁴ and a fourth provided by an International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) to teach music, drawing, and football inside the camps.⁵

Social cohesion offers a familiar umbrella for discussions on social dynamics of drivers of VE and is far less stigmatising than VE. This substantiated the evidence from the macro-level findings on how social cohesion is increasingly seen by PVE actors as a more acceptable term for local work on PVE programmes and measures (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2021).

² Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

³ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁴ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁵ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za'atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

Research methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The macro-level analysis showed that the state conceptualisation around the violent extremism threats and dynamics is heavily viewed through an ideological lens, with little consideration for the contextual grievances. In the macro-level phase of the CONNEKT project, the sub-national community of Syrian refugees was mentioned 'in passing', despite refugees constituting a significant component of the population and of Jordan's demographics.

This case study focuses on Syrian refugees because research findings indicate that militants – in general and VEOs – attempt to recruit youth from refugee camps (Sude, B.H, 2022). While there is no evidence of this in Jordan, the findings in the literature globally warn that this is worth examining. Likewise, a study in 2017 has argued that 46.7% of Syrian refugee youth in Jordan hold radical views. This was measured against statements such as "Muslims feel grievance in this world", "I consider the offense to a man of my religion, is offense to my father", and "In my country, women must be prevented from traveling to foreign countries alone". These first two sentences apply to many Muslims as a denominator of shared Muslim identity and do not necessarily indicate radicalisation. Similarly, the sentence on women being able to travel, although problematic in several aspects, is not necessarily an indicator of radicalisation per se.

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Despite the findings of this article and on recruitment in refugee camps in general, and in view of the percentage of Syrian population in Jordan, this case study opted to indirectly examine drivers of VE that might affect young Syrian refugees in Jordan. Within the framework of CONNEKT project, this will allow the research team to develop inclusive PVE analysis where Syrian refugees are considered in suggested designs on PVE measures at a later stage of the project.

Further, macro-level analysis also showed stark absence of an effective coordination mechanism that ties the different state and non-state PVE and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts within a common vision. As will be explored below, the situation of Syrian refugees presents one manifestation of this lack of coordination, as refugees in general are treated with high sensitivities among state actors. Furthermore, there are real difficulties in accessing groups of refugees, particularly the ones residing inside the camps, as was experienced by the team of researchers working on this case study.

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

The added value of this meso-level analysis can be presented in three different ways, as follows:

1. This meso-level case study allows for an in-depth analysis of drivers of VE that affect refugees in a camp setting compared to refugees in urban areas, or to other settings examined in the CONNEKT project.
2. The analysis contributes to comparative knowledge on how Syrian refugees experience the seven drivers pre-identified by CONNEKT, and how these drivers manifest in social contexts.

The case study offers analytical insights into understanding how Syrian refugees in the EU might be affected by drivers of VE.

3. Lastly, research participants in this meso-level analysis include a rarely accessed demographic, that is: children from 10-18 years old. Although the sample is not representative of all diversities among refugee children, it sheds light on the experiences of this age group.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This case study examines drivers of VE that can affect or are affecting Syrian refugees in the two northern cities of Irbid and Mafraq. The case study also examines discrepancies between urban refugees and those living in Za'atari Camp to analyse the impact of life in a refugee camp on drivers of VE that affect refugees.

The research sought to solicit insights and knowledge on a number of dimensions: the accessibility of services available to them, how they compensate for lacking leisure and cultural activities, the discrepancies in access to these activities between urban refugees and those in the camp, the extent of technological use and digital socialisation they experience, the impact of digital socialisation on refugees, refugees' relation with the host community, as well as the life prospects they identify for themselves.

By exploring these dimensions, the research clarifies the interlinks between these factors. This will in turn translate into analysing the interaction between different drivers of VE and the specific social contexts they operate in within the framework of CONNEKT project.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Building on the findings of CONNEKT's Working Package 4, a sensitive framing of the research was applied, and has included looking at the full life-experience of young Syrian refugees in select community/ies. The key criterion for selection was defined as being a Syrian refugee in the age bracket of 12 to 30 y/o living in the two northern cities of Irbid and Mafraq, where the majority of urban Syrian refugees live in Jordan today (UNHCR, 2022b). Additionally, the research team sought to engage Syrian refugees of the same age living in a refugee camp, for the purpose of this research in the Za'atari Camp. With a total population hovering around 80,000 individuals in the last few years, Za'atari has 32 schools serving nearly 21,000 children (76% of which are enrolled at schools), and registers some 6,500 average weekly health consultations (UNHCR, 2022a).

As a result, the research engaged a group of Syrian refugees, females and males, living in host communities and in the Za'atari refugee Camp, of the combined age groups ranging from age 10 to 23 (see details below).

The criteria were established based on the macro-level findings, which highlighted the impact of transnational dynamics in the work with Syrian refugees and their inclusion in numerous programmes delivered in the north of Jordan. The common threads among the groups that were interviewed were their long residency in the cities of Irbid and Mafraq, as well as their perspectives as young people living inside the Za'atari Camp.

SAMPLING DESCRIPTION

For this case study, the selected sample was composed of young Syrian refugees attending public schools in the cities of Irbid and Mafraq along with an additional group living inside the Za’atari refugee Camp. The selection was carried out through snowball sampling mixed with purposive sampling, meaning the recruitment of research respondents corresponding to select criteria described in the previous section. For the reasons of access and time constraints, the selected respondents were within the category of young Syrian refugees between the ages of 10 to 23 y/o.

Then, the empirical research employed focus group discussions (FGDs) to ensure consultations with the relevant identified participants. Primary data was obtained by consulting with two groups: a group of Syrian refugees living in urban settings, aged 13 to 18 y/o, and a group of young Syrian males living inside the Za’atari Camp aged 10 to 23 y/o. For the urban group, four focus group discussions (FGDs) with 18 young Syrians (nine males and nine females ensuring a 50:50 gender balance) were conducted and data collection took place during February 2022. For the group living inside the camp, one FGD was conducted with six males, age 10 to 23 y/o. Total number of participants engaged from inside and outside the camps was 24, nine females and 15 males. The research team was unable to engage females from within the Za’atari Camp due to logistical reasons and local gender sensitivities. Data collection for the in-camp group was carried out during April 2022 (during the month of Ramadan).

Specifically, FGD 1 engaged five urban male Syrian refugees, FGD 2 engaged five urban female Syrian refugees, FGD 3 engaged four urban male Syrian refugees, FGD 4 engaged four urban female Syrian refugees, and FGD 5 engaged six male refugees living inside Za’atari. Two FGDs engaged only male participants and two FGDs engaged only female participants. The discussions were conducted in a semi-structured manner, giving the respondents the opportunity to freely shape the conversation. Throughout the FGDs, notes were taken and compiled, and then used to identify recurrent and emergent themes and patterns based on the respondents’ answers. Table 1 below presents a breakdown of the research participants in terms of average age, location, gender, and total number:

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TABLE 1.

	FGD1 (Urban: Mafraq)		FGD2 (Urban: Irbid)		FGD3 (Urban: Irbid)		FGD 4 (Urban: Mafraq)		FGD5 (Za’atari)	
	Sex/ Age	Date	Sex/ Age	Date	Sex/ Age	Date	Sex/ Age	Date	Sex/ Age	Date
1	(M) 13	9 Feb 22	(F) 17	10 Feb 22	(M) 13	10 Feb 22	(F) 15	13 Feb 22	(M) 10	25 Apr 22
2	(M) 14	9 Feb 22	(F) 17	10 Feb 22	(M) 13	10 Feb 22	(F) 15	13 Feb 22	(M) 12	25 Apr 22
3	(M) 16	9 Feb 22	(F) 15	10 Feb 22	(M) 16	10 Feb 22	(F) 14	13 Feb 22	(M) 15	25 Apr 22
4	(M) 14	9 Feb 22	(F) 10	10 Feb 22	(M) 14	10 Feb 22	(F) 15	13 Feb 22	(M) 16	25 Apr 22
5	(M) 10	9 Feb 22	(F) 10	10 Feb 22					(M) 21	25 Apr 22
6									(M) 20	25 Apr 22
Avg. Age	13.5 y/o		13.8		14		14.75		15.6	
Totals	(M) 5		(F) 5		(M) 4		(F) 4		(M) 6	
	18 (urban; nine males and nine females)									6 (camp; all males)
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Prior to conducting the focus groups, a series of phone call consultations was carried out with the local partner to better understand the scene of young Syrian refugees and how to engage them, liaise on participants consent and parental or caretaker/guardian assent, communicate the research objectives and the criteria for selection, and generally prepare all aspects of data collection. This initial phase of research served as an insightful mapping exercise in which the primary data collected through several conversations with the local partner helped in dividing of the groups, selection the areas they represent, and choice of the schools they attended.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

In conducting the research, the team faced two key challenges. First, the challenge of ensuring the research respondents were of the age required by the CONNEKT project. Given that the participants are in the below-18-y/o age bracket, parental/guardian assent was needed in accordance with the CONNEKT research ethics procedure. Gathering the assents required time, in addition to requiring additional information sessions to explain the purpose of the project, why the assent is needed, provide reassurances about the data being anonymised, and generally get the “buy-in” of parents/guardians of minors involved in the research. Second, the research team faced the challenge of presenting the research and its objectives in a simple, neutral, and context-sensitive manner that had to ensure the following:

1. Not stigmatising the research participants involved (Do No (More) Harm)
2. Not exposing the young respondents to the (significance of) appeal of VE, and
3. Explaining the added value of their participation without offering something tangible in return.

Additionally, the research team faced several technical challenges as the five FGDs were conducted via Zoom, while the fifth was carried out late in the evening given the month of Ramadan, with poor internet connection experienced particularly during the call with the in-camp refugees. In fact, the participants limited access to the internet has led to the postponement and rescheduling of two FGDs.

RESEARCH INTEGRITY

To ensure confidentiality and privacy, the information and data collected were kept and handled with utmost privacy. All data collected through the focus group discussions was protected on encrypted digital drives that only researchers had access to. Answers were anonymised and all personally identifiable information from the notes was deleted. The participants’ identity was kept confidential/coded to ensure anonymity, with this treatment/process being explained to the respondents and their parents/guardians prior to obtaining their consent/assent. The young participants were then asked for their oral consent on record. To ensure autonomy and voluntariness, a consent/assent form was thoroughly explained and shared with the parents/guardians of the participants ahead of the focus group discussions. The data collectors/researchers explained research purpose as well as the research ethics measures verbally prior to the start of data collection process.

Meso-level dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The findings of this case study point to a direct relation between three drivers of VE:

- educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities,
- transnational dynamics and digital socialisation;

and two social contexts:

- cultural and leisure activities, and
- socialisation/education.

The social context of socialisation/education is defined by the CONNEKT as the educational contexts in society, both formal and informal, which are mechanisms of transmission of ideas, values, and identities. Educational, cultural and leisure activities, as a social context, are defined as the artistic and cultural expressions as mechanisms of intervention and reflection on social realities. Leisure activities of a diverse nature (cultural, educational, sport, artistic, etc.) constitute specific contexts of social interaction for young people. Both social contexts interact closely, particularly in how informal education occupies a grey area between the two social contexts.

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These two social contexts interact with the three drivers of VE among young Syrian refugees in Jordan: 1) educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities; 2) transnational dynamics; and 3) digital socialisation. The following sections of this case study will elaborate on the relations between these; this section explains the two social contexts of relevance to this case study.

Socialisation/education

The macro-level analysis of VE drivers in Jordan recognises the role of female family members. This is indirectly addressed through the institutional measures regarding the informal religious education of mothers. This case study clarifies why this focus on female family members is crucial. Young participants have heavily cited their female family members as the foremost channel of formal/informal education. This can be presented in the form of informal religious education and teachings at home, or by assisting young refugees with their formal education when helping them in subjects like math and English.⁶

Notably, the family plays a prominent role in shaping the social context of socialisation/education.⁷ However, in urban settings, support in formal education is gender segregated. That is: the female in the house, be it their mother, aunt, or the older sister, support young females in their study of "math

⁶ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022; Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za'atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

⁷ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022; 2, Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

and English”⁸ whilst the relevant male figure, be it a father or an older brother, support young males in the same subjects.⁹ Inside Za’atari Camp, the female figure is responsible for formal or informal education.¹⁰ Informal education mainly relates to religious education at home. Female family members shoulder this responsibility more than men.¹¹ Female participants said their mothers or older sisters have the most “influential” role in shaping their religious beliefs and practices, whether by encouraging them to “learn, study, and memorise the holy Quran”,¹² or by making sure that they commit to the “five daily prayers”.¹³ This was true of both groups, urban refugees and those in refugee camps.¹⁴ The role of males is limited to male-only domains such as when “fathers take their sons to the Friday prayer at the mosque”.¹⁵

Therefore, when it comes to education/socialisation “family is the first and foremost religious reference”¹⁶ for the participants, and they enjoy “good and positive relations with them”.¹⁷

Cultural and leisure activities

The macro-level analysis of drivers of VE and social contexts in Jordan has revealed that the state’s institutional response to VE has not prioritised the driver of educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities. The only exception to this negligence was the recognition of the potential role of female members (mothers, sisters, wives) in (de-)radicalisation efforts, where previous research finding has highlighted the role of mothers in religious informal education, and in instilling cultural norms in their sons.

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This prominent role of mothers in the analysis of VE and PVE in Jordan derives from the fact that mothers compensate for the absence of educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities that are either non-existent or unaffordable. As one participant puts it: “... whilst [formal] educational opportunities are offered through school, and through schools only, you have to look for your own cultural and leisure activities outside school”.¹⁸ This in turn places the burden of finding these scarce opportunities on refugees themselves, instead of these being provided widely and free of cost to refugees and host communities as part of the institutional PVE efforts. Participants made little to no mention of cultural and leisure activities being sponsored institutionally.¹⁹

⁸ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

¹⁰ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za’atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

¹¹ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

¹² Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

¹³ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

¹⁴ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za’atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

¹⁵ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za’atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

¹⁸ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

¹⁹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022; Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

The participants noted that such opportunities are modestly available. “There are opportunities”,²⁰ as one participant notes, yet they are inadequate not in the sense of quantity, but rather affordability. The participant added that opportunities are usually “geographically distant”, therefore, the “transportation costs that are usually needed to get to those opportunities are not affordable to most Syrian refugees”. Whilst participants from Mafraq echoed the same concern, participants from Irbid were more vocal about this factor, which was attributed to Irbid’s size and geographical spread compared to Mafraq. For the refugees from Za’atari Camp, educational opportunities were nearly “non-existent.”²¹ Apart from “overcrowded classrooms”²² which suffer from frequent “electricity cuts”²³ that make it “hard for us to see the board [no proper light]”,²⁴ the participants made no reference to any other viable educational alternatives. As a result, “families do not send their kids to school”.²⁵ They prefer their children to “go and find a job”.²⁶

When the Camp was first established in 2012, families decided not to enrol their children from schools, “because we did not have caravans yet, and all families were living in tents, with few schools scattered across the large areas of the camp. Families did not want their kids to be lost whilst on the way to school as the camp was too crowded and did not have clear streets or pathways”.²⁷ The situation described here changed gradually as more schools were opened, and the camp went through the urbanisation during which the tents were replaced with caravans, as two participants commented.²⁸ Nevertheless, educational opportunities focused, and still largely focus on “basic literacy”.²⁹

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Refugees in urban areas access educational opportunities for “learning English”,³⁰ “computer skills”,³¹ or leisure opportunities related to “sports, football, or arts”.³² Participants in one FGD referred to a variety of in-school activities such as “drawing lessons, arts, and sports”,³³ while the rest of the groups mentioned mainly out-of-school activities, in what could reflect a discrepancy in the provision of leisure and cultural opportunities between the different schools. This confirms the lack of institutional support in providing these opportunities as part of the PVE efforts.

The findings regarding the social contexts of socialisation/education and cultural and leisure activities highlight the failure of different institutional structures in Jordan to recognise the significance of these social contexts in PVE efforts. Socialisation/education relies heavily on the family. The identities and

²⁰ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

²¹ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za’atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

³¹ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

³² Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

³³ Ibid.

worldviews of Syrian refugees are mainly shaped through their interactions with their female family members. The experience of refuge itself, with the sense of victimisation, injustice, and frustration be it with the war at home or with their situation as refugees in Jordan are all transmitted to refugees who carry the trauma and continue to perpetuate that trauma. While this reliance on family members strengthens family ties and offers a reference point for refugees helping them consolidate their emotional sense of security, it leaves refugee women very much alone in shouldering a remarkable responsibility.

However, this reliance on family members and the lacking opportunities for engagement in cultural and leisure activities deprive refugees from widening their perspectives and worldview, engaging with peers in joint activities that can shape their identity through sports or arts for example, and not through the frustrations and hardship of the refugee experience. Cultural and leisure activities can help refugees develop inclusive worldviews that help guard and protect them against radicalisation. More importantly, cultural and leisure activities offer hope, which is a crucial factor that encourages refugees to look forward to a positive future away from war and destruction.

HOW MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS WORK AT THE MESO-LEVEL STUDIED (THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS)?

The broader framework of CONNEKT's multi-level analysis establishes that VE cannot be attributed to one single driver. This stage of meso-level analysis has shown that certain drivers are more prominent in a given context than others. Often, this means that delving deeper from one level of analysis to another (in this case from macro to meso) reveals lower/greater prominence of drivers as they are combined with specific factors of social contexts.

The findings of this case-study confirm this trajectory. Digital socialisation did not emerge as a major driver of VE at the macro-level analysis in Jordan. However, the results clarify that digital socialisation attains equal significance as a driver of VE in spite of the fact that it did not attain a prominent place in the macro-level analysis in Jordan (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2021). This section discusses how these three drivers of VE operate in the social contexts discussed above.

Educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities

In the CONNEKT project, the driver of educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities refers to the lacking opportunities for youth to express frustrations, grievances, and expectations, which can drive people to radicalisation. Among Syrian refugees in Jordan, this driver is captured at the meso-level through the form/type of opportunities offered. Three points deserve highlighting in relation to this driver: the prominent role of the family; these (educational, leisure, and cultural) opportunities as a key prospect for social mobility; and freedom of movement.

The family provides the main support system for access to informal education, and controls access to cultural and leisure activities. Participants distinguished between the three types of opportunities, noting that educational opportunities are, for instance, made available to them mainly through

schools, with the family playing a secondary role in the provision of their educational opportunities.³⁴ The “teachers”³⁵ provide and deliver these opportunities, and “we are lucky to have teachers that love us and deliver those opportunities to us in the classroom”,³⁶ noted one female participant from Irbid.

In contrast, family seems to be the key source shaping their leisure and cultural opportunities by “allowing us to engage with other peers and Jordanian friends in the neighbourhood”.³⁷ This applies to artistic and cultural expressions that are accessible to young Syrians. But the family gains prominence in this sphere as well, due to the role of “parents in building the character and enhancing our awareness, especially when it comes to daughters”.³⁸ This finding places the family in a central position in forming identities of their children and of youth, and as a key target for PVE efforts to ensure that the phenomenon of radical(ised) families that has been confirmed in Jordan, is not at play among Syrian refugees. Research on sociology of radicalisation in Jordan has demonstrated that radicalisation is a family phenomenon with three generations of radicals within these families (Abu Rumman and Shteiwi, 2018). Although there is no such evidence among Syrian refugees, it is important to design PVE efforts on a family level instead on the level of individuals or a community.

Refugees perceive educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities as a vehicle for social mobility. The place of residence for refugees determines the likelihood and success of social mobility, and affects levels of despair and hope among refugees. Nearly 78% of male participants (seven out of nine) in two FGDs³⁹ expressed that “more educational, leisure, and cultural activities are offered to young Syrians living outside the camps [in urban settings]”,⁴⁰ attributing this to having access to “better lives outside, better medical services, and more availability of educational opportunities”,⁴¹ and concluding that the refugees in host communities have greater “social mobility” compared to the refugees living inside the camps.⁴² The 22% who disagreed (two out nine males) referred to the “higher costs of living outside camps, as we have to pay rent and food”,⁴³ whilst at camps “the aid”⁴⁴ is provided, in a higher amount, and youngsters are “provided with free opportunities and trainings”.⁴⁵ In spite of these claims, the respondents based in the Za’atari Camp referred to the “non-existent”⁴⁶ opportunities and life-prospects. They placed special emphasis on their limited social mobility.

³⁴ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022; Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za’atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

³⁵ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

³⁹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022, and Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

⁴⁴ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za’atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

Social mobility attains this significance in the eyes of refugees, regardless of where they are based, because it offers hope. Reintegration efforts of former extremists focus on social mobility in order to enable individuals to break away from a group they identify with (Jense and Simi, 2021). However, in the context of refugees, and given the several pressures and traumas they experience (Al-Badayned, Alshawi and Alhasan, 2017) social mobility offers hope by widening one's social network, enhancing creativity, and improving existing or helping acquire new skillsets. For refugees, access to educational, leisure, and cultural activities is a vehicle for social mobility and for a career aspiration.

In describing their life-prospects ahead, the participants reported several pathways/careers they wish to pursue. Those in host communities listed studying medicine "so that I can help people in need, Syrians specifically",⁴⁷ law "to be able to defend the weak",⁴⁸ fashion design as "she is passionate about drawing and clothes",⁴⁹ and economics to better understand "investment in digital currencies".⁵⁰ Interestingly, three females (out of nine; 33%) have expressed a desire to join the "police" but regrettably admitted that this is not possible as they are not allowed to join the force without having a Jordanian citizenship.⁵¹ Significantly, no specific life-prospects were provided by those inside the camps.

Young urban female refugees overwhelmingly commented that "these [educational, leisure, and cultural] opportunities are more available outside camps",⁵² as one is able to "visit libraries, public gardens, local youth centres, and so-on"⁵³ when living in an urban setting. Importantly, they have noted that this discrepancy creates "tension" between the two groups, especially when it comes to formal education. One female participant explained:

"In camps, the schools do not offer the scientific direction of Tawjihi [Jordan's high school degree, which determines the university majors one is allowed to pursue], whilst we who are living outside camps can choose to go in a school that offers the scientific stream if we wish".⁵⁴

The same respondent added that at times such schools are distant from where they live, and are difficult to afford in terms of daily costs of transportation, "yet at least we have the option and access... in the camps they don't".⁵⁵ Participants in the Za'atari Camp confirmed this situation but refused to acknowledge that this is a cause of tension, commenting that "everyone has a different life",⁵⁶ exhibiting what could be described as a high level of self-awareness and being reconciled with the situation they are in.

⁴⁷ Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁴⁸ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁴⁹ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁵⁰ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

⁵¹ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁵² Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za'atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

Refugees above 18 y/o living in the Camp focused more on procedural/normative limits of social mobility. To leave Za'atari Camp, these refugees need first to secure exit permit. "The procedure takes long and one have to pay high fees [10 Jordanian Dinars JODs equals 14 US Dollars USD] to get issued permit".⁵⁷ In the case of work permits, certain professions require paying higher fees: the fees for a work permit in the agricultural sector, for example, are 10 JODs, whilst in construction sectors the fees are 60 JODs, and "both are expensive" as two participants noted.⁵⁸ Work permits are valid for one year, before they need to be re-issued (through payment of same fees).

Although work permits are not a focus of the discussion here, the exit permits signify the financial burden of access to opportunities, whether for work or leisure. This security and administrative procedure in Syrian refugee camps entrenches the feeling of entrapment the refugees feel, and increases their frustration levels. Measures such as this one limit access to opportunities outside the camp, and increase feelings of injustice, which can in turn lead to radicalisation. Access to leisure and cultural opportunities should be mainstreamed as a PVE strategy applied to refugees across Jordan first and foremost, and ideally, applied to all Jordanian citizens, who are equally experiencing limited access to free leisure and cultural opportunities (UNESCO, n.d).

Transnational dynamics

Transnational dynamics, as a driver of VE in CONNEKT project, refer to flows of people, information, and ideas that are shared between groups of similar membership despite being in different national contexts. The findings of this case study reveal that this driver works at the meso-level in two forms.

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First, the young Syrians interviewed in both settings (urban and camp) have all expressed a pride and an allegiance to Syria despite having been in Jordan for most of their lives. As they stated, "we have lost many relatives and friends in the war in Syria, and we always remember them",⁵⁹ expressing gratitude for having come to Jordan whilst "other people could not leave and still have a difficult life [back home]".⁶⁰ One of the participants summarised it with the following words: "I don't feel like a refugee. I am living as if I am in Syria".⁶¹ For others, it is not difficult to maintain this transnational link between Jordan and Syria: "... we have the same close family relations, without many differences... we have the same religion, the same values, and the same social norms".⁶² Other respondents have also acknowledged that this is especially the case between those who arrive to Jordan from bordering districts between Syria and Jordan, such as Dara'a and Ramtha. However, "if you come from other Syrian cities [that are not geographically close to Jordan], you start noticing cultural differences".⁶³

Second, the young participants cited close family relations and visits between the Syrians inside and

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za'atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

⁶² Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁶³ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

outside camps.⁶⁴ The clear transnational solidarity and bonds were captured between those inside and outside the camps, as well as between those living in Jordan and their Syrian counterparts and relatives who are still in Syria.⁶⁵ Additionally, participants noted that “camps are more diverse”⁶⁶ in terms of being a community that brings together Syrians “from all Syrian backgrounds, cities, and regions”⁶⁷ to live in one place, whilst outside the camps, in the host communities, most of the Syrians who live in urban settings come from geographically close cities, or have even had prior family relations with Jordanian families.⁶⁸

This offers the following key take-away: the transnational dynamics shaping the identities, motivations, and solidarity among Syrians in Jordan are not exclusively governed by the geographical proximity to Jordan and/or the degree of prior exposure to Jordanians (through familial links or kinship). Rather, these are also shaped by the backgrounds, origins, and circumstances amongst Syrians themselves. The meso-level findings from the urban settings give evidence of the former, whilst the meso-level findings from within the refugee camps such as Za’atari provide evidence on the latter.

And, in spite of lack of clear evidence, the current findings about this driver point into transnational dynamics being able to increase the risk of radicalisation among refugees. From a prevention perspective, services offered to the refugees settled in urban settings and those in the refugee camps should identify pathways for helping them express their identities, vent the feelings related to them being survivors of the Syrian war and being displacement affected, and offer the opportunities for expressing support and channelling support to fellow Syrians. Refugees carry their own trauma caused by displacement. They live under the extreme uncertainty, in conditions of economic hardships and despair, and are faced with severe prolonged stress. The constant flow of stories from Syria portraying violence and daily hardships of fellow Syrians increase levels of powerlessness.

PVE interventions can guard against potential radicalisation through establishment of safe and transformative spaces in which carefully selected behavioural and cognitive tools are applied to enable refugees to express themselves, and express their support to fellow Syrians. Such interventions can be inspired by findings which testify of Syrian refugees overwhelmingly voicing positive sentiments and views regarding their relationship with Jordan. For most of them (at least 15 of the 18 participants engaged; 83%) they have been residing in Jordan for more than eight years, in some cases even 10 years. One participant in the fifth FGD explained how he was born in the Za’atari Camp, therefore for him Jordan and Syria are “one nation”, not two.⁶⁹ Case study participants, younger ones in particular, consider Jordan to be a “second home”,⁷⁰ noting that they have not been “bothered by anyone”,⁷¹ and have “many

⁶⁴ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁶⁵ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022

⁶⁸ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁶⁹ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za’atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

⁷⁰ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁷¹ Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

Jordanian friends, sometimes even more Jordanian than Syrian friends... and we exchange visits and share the same classrooms".⁷²

The group of participants living outside the refugee camp offered more insights on their views towards Jordanian hosts given their more frequent interaction with Jordanians. In describing this, they attributed the positive relations to different factors ranging from being able to share the same language, values, religion, and culture⁷³ to having the geographical proximity between where they are currently living (Irbid and/or Mafraq) and where they hail from originally (mainly the neighbouring Dara'a and Hama districts in Syria).⁷⁴ For the young participants from inside the Za'atari Camp, the positive relations with Jordan are attributed to "having been born and raised here",⁷⁵ and not having known other home elsewhere.

Digital socialisation

The driver of digital socialisation refers to the impact of digital tools in shaping narratives, which in turn demonstrate the influence of transnational dynamics on receiving audiences. In the macro-level analysis in Jordan, digital socialisation did not gain prominence. However, the meso-level analysis in this case study shows a notable role for digital socialisation in the potential radicalisation of Syrian refugee youth in Jordan, as it is explained in the section below.

First, technology and the internet occupy a sizable portion of refugee youth's time in both urban and camp settings. While urban setting refugees clearly admitted that technology plays a significant part of their daily lives, the same was less applicable to Syrians living inside the Za'atari refugee Camp.⁷⁶ Urban participants commented on that situation explaining that technology is lacking inside the Camp not only due to the available poor infrastructure, which is captured in having "less phones, very few stores to purchase devices or technicians,"⁷⁷ but also in how the key priority for those inside the Camp is in meeting basic daily needs. The frequent "cuts in electricity inside the camps"⁷⁸ are, for instance, a contributing factor to the poor technological infrastructure, as noted by one of the participants.

Findings about the use of internet inside the Za'atari Camp however, refute the opinions of urban setting refugees. The majority of respondents (83%; five out of six) said they excessively use technology on a daily basis. "Because we lack other things, I am on my mobile all day playing games, checking social media, or browsing the internet".⁷⁹ Participants living in the Camp confronted the point mentioned by the urban group regarding the "lack of stores and technicians inside the camps," arguing that there is rather an "abundance of" stores and technicians; yet, the key issue they face is the "poor

⁷² Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

⁷³ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁷⁴ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁷⁵ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za'atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

⁷⁶ FGD1, Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; 3, and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁷⁷ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

⁷⁸ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

⁷⁹ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za'atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

connection, unreliable network coverage, and the high cost of the communication services in general".⁸⁰

Second, female participants conceptualised and discussed digital socialisation through a safety lens. They were concerned that as the role of technology is becoming "more present and prominent in one's life", a parallel attention should be made to how children are "being brought-up" by parents; what "teachings and convictions" should be very carefully instilled in children and young people by their parents, to make sure that technology does not become a "source of moral and ethical deception".⁸¹ Third, video games increased social isolation and feelings of anger among urban setting female refugees, but video games were not mentioned by refugees living in the Camp. Interestingly, some females (at least three out of nine engaged through this case study) have explicitly shared several testimonies of their wide use of technology and video games, citing personal experiences of their "addiction" to games like Pokémon-GO and PUBG, which had caused them "to withdraw and isolate socially", and/or have made them more "angry and violent".⁸² For others, these video games have caused their poor academic performance and attainment, and thus have negatively impacted their self-esteem and personal lives.⁸³ No testimonies from those living inside the Za'atari Camp were given regarding this point of view.

Fourth, urban refugee youth acknowledged the risks of digital socialisation in radicalising youth. In one focus group discussion, young respondents made a clear reference to "an uncontrolled digital space presenting an open door for youngsters being misled by Daesh and other groups".⁸⁴ The reference came in the context of the discussion about technology and its widespread use, and the participants confirmed that the way to ensure that one is not "lost [to said groups]" is by having a "firm upbringing and a more solid religious teaching and beliefs".⁸⁵

In the Za'atari Camp, respondents were very cautious in the discussion about extremist groups and the risks of radicalisation. The research team used the phrase "extremist groups" to solicit direct insights and opinions. However, the participants did not react to the term and did not repeat it. They expressed their opinions indirectly referring to "groups". The Camp respondents were short and cryptic in their expression following the mention of "extremist groups" by the research team, which was interpreted as them being intimidated by discussions, as well as living in a highly securitised and surveyed environment within the Camp.

Jordan's P/CVE response strategies are security focused. This approach is understandable given the security challenges in the country, particularly the extremist attacks that took place in 2016, in Karak (Husseini, 2016), Irbid (BBC, 2016a), and Balq'aa (BBC, 2016b). However, the risk of radicalisation

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁸² Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

through digital spaces among Jordanian citizens and refugees alike necessitates a preventative approach that leans more towards digital awareness, and safe opportunities for self-expression and self-development through educational, cultural, and leisure opportunities.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND INTERACTIONS AMONG DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

The data collected through this case study shows intersections between three drivers: educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities; transnational dynamics; and digital socialisation. The following discussion clarifies the intersections between these drivers and how they interact with the two prominent social contexts of education/socialisation, and leisure and cultural activities.

Educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities, and digital socialisation

As discussed earlier, Syrian refugees have limited access to educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities due to the lack of institutionally sponsored opportunities. A few available opportunities are also not largely accessible to Syrian refugees due to their geographical distance (in the case of urban setting) or limited freedom of movement (in the case of living inside the camps).⁸⁶ In addition, the transportation costs and financial fees that need to be paid to access these opportunities makes them de facto inaccessible.

Refugees consider these opportunities as a key element to their own social mobility. To compensate for this shortage, they spend more time online, accessing educational or leisure opportunities, filing their time in latter case. This in return makes digital socialisation the most prominent factor when examining the potential impact of VE drivers on radicalisation of youth in two ways.

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First, respondents seem to have a positive view of technology when it comes to accessing educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities. Access to internet allows them “to google” and look for opportunities that are not offered in-person or are not accessible due to the obstacles mentioned earlier.⁸⁷ Participants illustrated this point with some examples: four female participants (44% of females engaged) mentioned that they take free English lessons online to improve their language skills which they consider absolutely necessary for their personal and professional development,⁸⁸ two male participants (22% of males engaged) mentioned taking online courses on coding programmes such as C++, and learning about bitcoins and digital currency investment,⁸⁹ while a mixed group of males and females (five; 27% of total research sample) cited YouTube channels and online courses as source of their non-academic learning.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022; Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁸⁷ Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁸⁸ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁸⁹ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁹⁰ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

Examples on the impact of technology by respondents from the Za’atari Camp were not offered, and there seems to be little to no usage of technology in making educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities widely available to Camp residents,⁹¹ which in turn creates a notable discrepancy in the role of digital socialisation based on place of refugees’ residence.

This lack of access however, seems to stir a shared sentiment amongst the refugees, confirming their belief that they have limited life prospects as a result of sharing the same identity (as Syrians), despite living in different sub-national contexts within Jordan.⁹² In extension of the same transnational dynamics at play, the urban setting refugee respondents still saw their lives to be better than those living within camps, or those living in Syria who, according to participants, do not have this access to said opportunities at all.⁹³

Second, the internet is “there” to fill the free time of refugees – and there is an abundance of free time, particularly for refugees in Za’atari Camp. Idle time mostly means using mobile phones for all educational and recreational options. This makes refugees vulnerable to radicalisation, if they are specifically targeted. As noted earlier, militants generally tend to recruit youth in refugee camps (Sude, 2022). This deserves particular attention in PVE efforts, and the institutional responsibility of the government and the international community to provide recreational and cultural activities in the camp settings should be a priority for the PVE purposes on three levels: to protect young refugees based in the camps against the recruitment; to enhance refugees’ self-esteem and hope; and to offer avenues for self-development and skills development and attainment.

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Digital socialisation and transnational dynamics

Heavy reliance on the internet as a medium used to fill idle time as well as a tool that helps to access educational opportunities, increases the influence of transnational dynamics as a potential driver for VE among Syrian refugee youth. Narratives of victimisation of Syrians in general, information about extreme conditions of life experienced by those who remain in Syria, and the plight of Syrian refugees in general are all transmitted daily to refugee youth via internet. Participants in this case study were all proud Syrians who identified with their country, culture, and history. Their identification with the (in)group, when combined with a heavy sense of victimisation, might lead to radicalisation, if other radicalisation factors are at play (Falkowski and Lang, 2015). The transnational dynamics therefore, when influenced by digital socialisation, might potentially lead to radicalisation among Syrian refugees.

However, the findings of this case study also point to a high level of social cohesion and positive perceptions about Jordan and Jordanians among Syrian refugees. This in turn protects to a certain extent from radicalisation, particularly in that the refugees the research team spoke to continuously compared the difficulties they experience to the difficulties of those who remain in Syria. Despite the struggles they face, all research participants acknowledged by far better situation they are in compared

⁹¹ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za’atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

⁹² Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022; Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁹³ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

to Syrian refugees in other countries in the region or to Syrians still in Syria. This balances the influence of transnational dynamics as a VE driver, therefore reinforcing the strengthening of social cohesion as a present, and future, PVE strategy in Jordan.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS OF VE AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

The interactions between the two social contexts: of socialisation/education, and leisure and cultural activities, cannot be discussed within the clear dividing lines. The discussion below will summarise these deep interactions that were explained in detail in previous sections of this case study.

First, the refugee family units compensate the shortage in educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities. The families support young refugees in their formal education, and female family members in particular bear the responsibility of informal education of refugee youth. This makes females the single most important agent in any potential radicalisation or in preventing the radicalisation of refugee youth. Females shape the identity, the worldview, and modes of self-expression of refugee youth. The implied risk here is that if females in the family are radical, they will in turn radicalise youth. The opposite is true, if females in the family are equipped with tools of critical assessment, and are exposed to de-radicalisation narratives, they will be the most influential actor able to prevent radicalisation among refugee youth.

Second, the potential impact of digital socialisation as a driver of VE can be controlled if wider educational, leisure, and cultural activities are provided in the camp, or if they are affordable and accessible in urban areas in which refugees reside. This finding does not reveal any potential radicalisation role the cultural and leisure activities might have, simply because they are not easily accessible. When available, these are cherished as opportunities for recreational purposes, and for social development and mobility. In fact, the provision of these activities will control the impact of digital socialisation and transitional dynamics. In this way, these activities (could) become a key approach to prevention of violent extremism among youth.

The above summary of the intersections and interactions between the drivers of VE and social contexts clarify the complicated web of factors that can radicalise refugee youth, and illustrate how digital socialisation, prominently featured at the meso-level, can activate other drivers of violent extremism.

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

The analysis of meso-level VE drivers has revealed that three drivers are at play amongst young Syrian refugees: educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities; transnational dynamics; and digital socialisation. The third driver of digital socialisation offers a new window for understanding this sub-national group as it seems to have gained increased prominence that has not been captured in the macro-level analysis.

Overall, educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities seem to be available in principle, yet hard to access in practice due to different factors. Some of these factors are institutional, such as the opportunities not being widely offered in schools or being offered via formal channels of education,⁹⁴ while other factors point at logistics, such as living in remote urban areas distant from the city centre where these opportunities are concentrated⁹⁵ or residing in refugee camps,⁹⁶ or uncover the financial hardships as one of the reasons, in that the young refugees (or their families) are simply not being able to afford these opportunities (a price of a course and/or price of transportation fees, for example).⁹⁷

Further, the meso-level analysis shows that the family plays a primary role in shaping informal education amongst the young refugee respondents.⁹⁸ Families, therefore, can help instil and develop views and values that could protect youth against radicalisation, but there is no evidence that they encourage or harbour radical views. Mainly, the informal education the respondents mentioned was related to religious education, and it had revealed an interesting gendered dimension: female figures within the family were the ones undertaking this role more prominently than males; the role of males was exclusive to domains that are male-associated, such as attending the prayers at the mosque.⁹⁹ In contrast, the role of family in fostering and supporting the young participants' formal education reflected a gender-consistent trajectory, whereby older males supported the studying of younger males, and older females supported the studying of younger females.¹⁰⁰ This challenges the stereotypical understanding of the role of older females, typically the mother, being the one exclusively supporting the formal education of the children (both males and females).

Digital socialisation attains prominence among refugees as a potential driver of VE due to the lack of educational, leisure, and cultural activities, and due to the difficulties of accessing work opportunities.

⁹⁴ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁹⁵ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022.

⁹⁶ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za'atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

⁹⁷ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

⁹⁸ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

⁹⁹ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

The digital space has the potential to radicalise refugees. Youth in general has easy access to internet and can select the content they want to view. With the absence of alternative activities that will help youth fill their time, and with the lacking life skills such as critical thinking, fact-checking, etc, young refugees become as vulnerable as other youth to radicalisation through digital means. The frustrations refugees face due to the struggles they are facing can make them potentially more susceptible to radicalisation. However, this area of research requires further examination.

In this context, transnational dynamics become more prominent because narratives are easily transferrable in the digital space. Refugees already hold emotional connections with fellow Syrian survivors of the civil war, and empathise with them because of what they feel are the injustices Syrians are faced with. This, alongside the stigma of being the refugees, and the contextual grievances related to their economic and social position, can attract refugee youth to extremist narratives.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

In the context of this case study, prevention indicators are understood as areas of engagement at the meso level that could help hinder the appeal of VE. Yet, in the case of refugees in Jordanian urban settings, these were withheld from the discussions, as the terms of violent extremism, prevention of violent extremism, or countering of violent extremism had intentionally been avoided by the research team due to the sensitivity of the group, its young age, but also as a means to verify whether the participants themselves will voluntarily refer to any of these terms.

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Our analysis points to four prevention indicators implied by research respondents that could be capitalised on in situations where an engagement is deemed positive to PVE efforts, or in opposite, to limit the appeal of VEOs.

The first prevention indicator is the notable positive relationship with and perception of Jordan(ians) amongst young Syrian refugees. As one participant noted, “most of the young Syrians today are now speaking with the Jordanian dialect”,¹⁰¹ using this to acknowledge how integrated – or included – the young Syrians feel in the Jordanian society. This social capital should be tapped into when discussing PVE efforts amongst urban Syrian refugees. The young generation of Syrian refugees in Jordan have known no other home but Jordan, and their positive interaction with their local host communities is a key dimension of future PVE efforts or research.

Second, as demonstrated earlier, parents and families play an integral role in shaping the formal and informal education of refugee youth, be it religious, academic, or personal development skills. This provides another key avenue for effective PVE efforts by intentional engagement and working with parents, male and female figures alike, to encourage the use of and build competence in applying tools that instil transformation skills, critical thinking, and empowerment of refugee youth and children. One female participant noted a welcomed development for women, saying “... there is a growing

¹⁰¹ Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

positive role for and acknowledgment of the female [young girls or daughters] amongst Syrian families".¹⁰² This is a development that should be equally capitalised on in any efforts focused on prevention of violent extremism. Another research participant spoke of a personal experience with her family providing her with support in dealing with addiction withdrawal symptoms, "anger, rage, and violence" as she was going through that process after having been an intensive user of destructive video games for a longer period.¹⁰³ This reflects the significant influential role parents might have in relationship with their children, which could offer an effective PVE investment. Although females have a more prominent role in this regard, efforts should target both male and female family members.

Third, given the positive view of the police and the expressed desire by some female participants to join the force, one might deduct that an effective prevention effort could be in having more frequent and sustained engagement between young Syrian refugees and the Community Police Unit of Jordan's Public Security Directorate. The finding of this case study revealed a positive outlook and wide acceptance of the local police among some participants, so this can be attributed to the Community Police Unit's local and communal outreach. PVE efforts could focus on institutional participation of Syrian refugees inside and outside the camps. This should not be limited to PVE goals but could also enhance social cohesion, respect for law and order, and local ownership of security local efforts.

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Fourth, the enhancement of basic services inside the camp(s) should be a PVE priority. Participants living in the Za'atari Camp were overwhelmingly occupied with the provision of services. Referring to the "frequent electricity cuts", installing "AC units inside the caravans", building a public "swimming pool for youngsters", extending "the duration of the exit permit" (currently an exit permit to go out for visits or for seeking leisure opportunities outside the camp which is granted for seven days only, while the refugees are asking for it to be valid 15 days or more), and "forgoing the fees for issuing a work permit", have all seemed possible intervention measures that would "enhance the quality of our life and keep us busy", as opposed to the current situation in which residents "spend the entire day on their mobile phones", and do not contribute positively to society.¹⁰⁴

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

This case study focused on two distinct groups of Syrian refugees in Jordan: urban refugees in Irbid and Mafraq, and those settled in the Za'atari Camp. It was expected that micro-paths would not be identical. The data generated through this case study clarified how urban refugees have a sharper understanding of their individualised paths ahead when compared to those living inside the Camp.

Urban refugees in Mafraq and Irbid named specific professional pathways they wish to undertake, such as "becoming a petroleum engineer in the UAE", a "lawyer", a "doctor", a "fashion designer", an

¹⁰² Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za'atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

“economist”, a “policewoman [although not possible in Jordan for Syrian refugees]”, or an “English teacher”.¹⁰⁵ Their micro-paths were outward looking using the “I” single pronoun.

In contrast, those living inside the Camp have displayed a genuine struggle to name one specific professional career goal. In fact, the question seemed to have taken them by surprise as something they have not thought about or considered before. After a short silence, they timidly shared thoughts about what “they” – in the plural pronoun – wish to have, not to be, to enhance their life-prospects. Options included “a swimming pool”, “AC units”, “having electricity at school”, or “extended duration of the exit permit” when they go outside the camp for leisure or family visits. At best, the most personal articulation of all was a “lowered fees for issuing my work permit”.¹⁰⁶ The micro-paths of Camp refugees were defined by their group identification as refugees in Za’atari, using the “we” plural pronoun.

It is unclear whether these insights on micro-paths are driven by the greater possibility of realising one’s ambitions outside camps in the case of urban refugees, or by the stark contrast of limited opportunities and social mobility for those living inside the camps. However, it was clear that micro-paths amongst young Syrian refugees are determined by the role of the individual’s relationship with their immediate social environment and the individual internalisation of the conditions, drivers, and messages which are of relevance to one’s life-prospects.

¹⁰⁵ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 9, 2022; Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 3, conducted in-person in Irbid, on February 10, 2022; and Focus Group Discussion 4, conducted in-person in Mafraq, on February 13, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Focus Group Discussion 5, conducted in-person in Za’atari Camp, on April 25, 2022.

General Conclusion

In conclusion, this case study sought to examine the case of young Syrian refugees in Jordan, inside and outside the refugee camps. This sub-national group provides a fitting case for understanding a community-level context that allows for testing the social factors that could potentially feed patterns of violent extremism amongst this group, and determine relations between the national, community, and individual dimensions of the CONNEKT research project. With Syrian refugees constituting nearly 20% of Jordan's population, it was simply impossible to overlook the PVE/VE dynamics amongst this group. Yet, the case study considered the notable sensitivities that are typically associated with this topic, and sought to carefully avoid stigmatising the refugee population or feed the prejudices and stereotypes around refugees in Jordan, particularly Syrian refugees.

The insights solicited from the respondents clarify that the family is the first and most prominent "shaper" of their identities and growth opportunities. Captured across the three macro-level drivers examined in this case study (educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities; transnational dynamics; and digital socialisation), the family supports formal and informal education of youth refugees. Notable gender variations were also revealed. Family support in formal education is gender segregated, whereas female family members take full responsibility of informal education of children and youth.

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Additionally, a clear variation was noted in the availability, quality, and nature of educational, cultural, and leisure activities provided to young Syrian refugees, inside and outside refugee camps. Opportunities are more abundant for urban refugees. Inside the camps, cultural, leisure and informal educational opportunities are very limited or not widely available, therefore, the respondents indirectly alluded to their feeling of entrapment. However, the refugees inside the camp exhibited a level of self-awareness and reconciliation – or unspoken despair – with the situation they are in, which would require further research. Generally though, Syrian refugees voiced positive views about Jordan, and this positive outlook should be a key area to capitalise on in PVE efforts to strengthen social cohesion.

Finally, as drivers of violent extremism, both digital socialisation and transnational dynamics offer a clear channel for shaping the identities, motivation, and solidarity amongst young Syrians in Jordan. Transnational dynamics are evident from the sense of victimisation of Syrians, feelings of sympathy and identification with the plight of Syrians still living in the conditions of war, and the pride in their own shared Syrian identity. This case study provides no evidence on radicalisation due to transnational dynamics, but these might be at play if and when a Syrian individual develops radical ideas. Likewise, digital socialisation is a determinant factor in examining drivers of VE among Syrian refugees, not because of concrete evidence on this, but rather due to the high level of consumption of digital media. This is apparent from testimonials of young refugees spending long hours using their mobile phones as they cannot pursue other educational and leisure activities, or the lack of and difficult access to work opportunities – abundance of free time increases the risk of radicalisation through digital socialisation.

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Annex I: Questions for Focus Group Discussions

The Annex 1 contains the main set of questions that have been used as a guidance for the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The questions below were used in the course of the FGDs, once the safe space was established, and were asked and alternated as the discussion developed.

1. In your opinion, are the refugees inside and outside the camps (in the host communities) exposed to the same opportunities for religious education? If yes, can you give some examples? How does this affect the role religion plays in the lives of both groups of refugees? Do you think this affects polarisation in any form?
2. Are the refugees inside the camps given the same life opportunities as the ones outside the camps (host communities)? Do they experience more economic deprivation within the camps? If so, does this create tension for between urban refugees and those in the camps?
3. [You referred to a number of differences in daily lives between refugees inside the camps and those who live outside it.] How do these daily inequalities (due to different geographical locations) exacerbate/enhance the appeal of groups that uphold different ideologies or armed groups in Syria?
[Daily inequalities: education, health, transportation, income/jobs, internet connectivity, leisure activities, etc. Which inequalities were common and felt by the majority.]
4. Is the quality and frequency of access to, and use of, technology the same for the refugees in the camps as it is for urban refugees?
[Confirm what is the situation in and out of the camps, assumption being that the ones outside the camps have access to and use freely the technology (within the economic limitations, that is).]
5. Can the collective experience of deprivation of services and/or psychological frustration of refugees inside the camps be identified as a contributing factor to creating more conducive context to radicalisation?
6. In your opinion, are there better prospects outside the camps? What are they? What opportunities exist inside the camps? What impact do they have on people's sense of belonging and inclusion (in the host communities)?
7. [Based on input from participants on access to goods/ services/ opportunities/ ideas/ leisure and cultural activities for those inside and outside camps.]
What is the impact of these opportunities on the life-prospects of refugees? What do those who do not have that sort of access do? What are their life prospects? Do they compensate for that lack of (goods/ services/ opportunities/ ideas), and if yes, how?
[What do they turn to instead?]

1. برأيكم، هل اللاجئون داخل المخيمات وخارجها يحصلون على نفس فرص التعليم الديني؟ إذا كانت الإجابة نعم، هل يمكن إعطاءنا بعض الأمثلة على ذلك؟ كيف يؤثر هذا على الدور الذي يلعبه الدين في حياة اللاجئين داخل المخيم واللاجئين في المجتمعات المضيفة؟ باعتقادك هل يؤثر هذا على الاستقطاب بأي شكل من الأشكال؟
2. هل يُمنح اللاجئون داخل المخيمات نفس الفرص المتاحة للاجئين خارج المخيمات؟ هل يعاني اللاجئون داخل المخيمات من المزيد من الحرمان الاقتصادي؟ إذا كان الأمر كذلك، فهل هذا يخلق هذا التوتر بين من هم في المخيمات وخارجها؟
3. [لقد ذكرتم بعض أوجه الاختلاف في الحياة اليومية بين اللاجئين داخل المخيمات وخارجها]. كيف تؤدي أوجه التفاوت اليومية (بسبب الموقع الجغرافي) إلى تفاقم/تعزيز جاذبية الجماعات التي تعتنق إيديولوجيات مختلفة أو الجماعات المسلحة في سوريا؟
[أوجه التفاوت اليومية، التعليم والصحة والمواصلات ومصادر الدخل/العمل وخدمات الانترنت والأنشطة الترفيهية وغيرها. أي من أوجه التفاوت هذه كانت سائدة بين أغلبية المشاركين]
4. هل اللاجئون في المخيمات قادرون على الوصول إلى التكنولوجيا بنوعية وتكرار مثل اللاجئون الذين يعيشون خارج المخيم؟
[تحقق من طبيعة الوضع داخل وخارج المخيمات حيث أنه من المقترض أن يكون لدى اللاجئون خارج المخيمات وصول وحرية أكبر في استخدام الانترنت (وفق ما تسمح به ظروفهم الاقتصادية).
5. هل تعد خبرة الحرمان الجمعية للاجئين داخل المخيمات و/أو ضعفهم النفسية عامل مساهم في خلق سياق أكثر ملاءمة للتطرف؟
6. برأيكم، هل هناك آفاق أفضل خارج مخيمات اللجوء؟ ما هي هذه الفرص؟ وما الفرص الموجودة داخل المخيمات؟ ما هو تأثير هذه الفرص على شعور الناس بالانتماء في مجتمعاتهم وبالاندماج في المجتمعات المضيفة؟
7. [بناءً على إجابات المشاركين حول الوصول إلى السلع والخدمات والفرص والأفكار والأنشطة الترفيهية والثقافية داخل المخيمات وخارجها]، ما هو أثر هذه الفرص على آفاق حياتهم؟ وبالنسبة لأولئك الذين لا يصلون لمثل هذه الفرص، ما الذي يلجؤون إليه بدلاً من ذلك؟ وما هي آفاق حياتهم؟ وهل يعوضون عن النقص في السلع والخدمات والفرص والأفكار والأنشطة الترفيهية والثقافية؟ إذا كانت الإجابة نعم، كيف يقومون بذلك؟
[ما البديل الذي يلجؤون إليه؟]



Female preachers in Ma'an

Barik Mhadeen, Aisha Bint Faisal, Jadranka Štikovac Clark

Introduction

The CONNEKT project's macro-level analysis of drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) in Jordan (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2021) revealed a gap in the acknowledgment as well as in the understanding of the role women and girls play in violent extremism (VE). In that specific phase of CONNEKT project completed in 2021, which examined drivers of VE on a macro level, the research participants seldom referred to the gendered dimension referring in passing to the role of ideology/religion. This has emphasised the lack of acknowledgment regarding the role of women and revealed a limited understanding of the role of a particular segment of female population—the one of female preachers (Grieve, 2016).

This case study examines the drivers of VE that affect female preachers in the governorate of Ma'an. The evidence here is based on field research with two groups of preachers: first are formal preachers who are employees of the Ministry of Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places. These are formal government employees who abide by the operational structures and discourse authorised by the Ministry. The second group are informal preachers who operate on a voluntary basis without state regulations or monitoring structures.

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Undoubtedly, religious institutions and preachers have been engaged in several state-led and voluntary efforts to prevent and counter radical ideologies through capacity building and self-education endeavours to be able to counter radical narratives they encounter in local communities. However, this case study examines how female preachers can potentially contribute to radicalisation of youth in Ma'an. It is important to warn against taking this research question out of proportion since there has been no concrete evidence of this. Instead, the case study sought to examine how radicalisation drivers identified at the macro-level and social contexts in Ma'an as a meso-level- can influence or contribute to radicalisation through female preachers. The conclusions are inconclusive and speculative of potential causal relations.

The underlying assumptions in this case study are, first, that if female preachers are radicalised, they will radicalise youth in the ages of 12-30 years due to preachers' relations and access to families and youth formally and informally. Second, if female preachers are not radical but reach a climax of frustration with socio-economic conditions in Ma'an and institutional negligence of their role, this frustration with the state will be transferred to their audiences, which in turn leads to alienation and radicalisation.

We argue that the loose structure in which informal preachers operate can encourage extremism in two distinct ways. First, informal preachers can receive their Sharia degrees from institutions outside Jordan, and they maintain contact with loose networks of preachers in the region. The teachings they

disseminate and the ideology they carry is not monitored or institutionalised in terms of their teachings or religious opinions they disseminate. Therefore, if some preachers are radical, they will easily affect the radicalisation of their audience, which includes youth of 12-30 years old and their families.

Second, informal preachers feel discriminated against in two ways. First, as citizens of Ma'an governorate, they suffer the marginalisation of all Ma'anites in level and reach of services, and availability and accessibility to employment and educational opportunities. Second, they are discriminated against as informal preachers in terms of access to facilities, regular income, and operational support that formal preachers enjoy. Although there is no concrete evidence on this, this frustration with the state and security agencies can be transferred to their audiences. With no avenues for political or social protests in Jordan, this frustration might find an outlet in radicalisation for the preachers themselves and their audiences.

These findings highlight the intersections of territorial inequality, digital socialisation, transnational dynamics, and religion/ideology as specific radicalisation drivers examined in the CONNEKT project. These drivers interact with three social contexts as defined by the CONNEKT project: socialisation/education, employment and labour relations, and urban and peri-urban spaces.

Some readers might assume that the focus on female preachers in this case study is to argue for religion as a main driver of VE. Although Jordan as a state has focused its response to VE on ideology and religion, this emphasis does not reflect findings on VE in Jordan which point to both ideology AND structural grievances as drivers of VE. The state's emphasis on religion reflects government's officials' attempt to avail their responsibility in the rise of VE in the country.

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Nevertheless, informal religious education, especially by female preachers deserves attention to understand factors that may lead to the radicalisation of female youth between 12-30 years. The case study examines the role of female preachers as potentially one factor among many others that can lead to the radicalisation of youth.

CASE STUDY CONTEXT

The broad context of women and VE in Jordan can be described as difficult and undisclosed. Women's role is both underestimated and under-investigated, and scarce local knowledge resulting from high sensitivities related to VE at large does not help improve that understanding. Our previous macro-level research confirmed this stance: the research respondents, including female ones, did not acknowledge how the radicalisation process affects women—they simply dismissed the subject of women in general.

Several factors deepen the impact of drivers of VE on women in Jordan, with the male-guardianship system being particularly important in the socio-economic sense. The male-guardianship system implies that a woman must have a male guardian, normally a father or husband (but in some cases a brother or even a son) who will make all critical decisions on her behalf. Women are subject to the ill-treatment if they disobey their male guardian or transgress gender norms, with measures ranging from imprisonment, detention, to separation of the women from her children (Amnesty International, 2019).

Further, current data shows low rates of Jordan's female economic participation and imbalanced gender dynamics (Abu Shamma, 2019), leading to an unequal access to power and opportunities between women and men. In fact, Jordan has one of the world's lowest rates of women's economic participation, with only 14% of women being engaged in the formal economy, and an additional 15% engaged in the informal economy, according to recent estimates (Jacobs-Anderson, 2020). While the evidence on the relation on unemployment and radicalisation is inconclusive at best, dissatisfaction about one's income compared to their employment and education is found to contribute to radicalisation in Jordan. Although this evidence is drawn from research subjects that are mainly male, there is no reason to assume this affects men only (See for example Abu Rumman, Gouda and Bondokji, 2022).

Very few studies have examined radicalisation specifically among Jordanian women, but two studies have cautioned against women being more vulnerable to extremism and recruitment via social media (Bagenal, 2016). Local evidence points to the influence of partners and despair as factors behind Jordanian young women joining or attempting to join Daesh (ISIS).¹⁰⁷ The male-guardianship system mentioned above contributes to both factors. Some Jordanian women left to join Daesh with their husbands who were extremists and their wives simply joined. However, there is also evidence of women who refused to join their husbands.¹⁰⁸ Thus, different levels of women empowerment have led to the decisions women took in this regard even when the wives were ideologically radical. Like other women in the region, Jordanian women who joined extremist groups have been influenced by the empowerment agenda of Daesh. Although it seems contradictory with the overall ideology of Daesh, it has provided women agency and leadership roles compared to extremist groups like Al-Qaeda that limited the role of women in caring for households. Extremist women across the region were attracted by this unique place for women in an extremist group (Abu Hanieh and Abu Rumman, 2017).

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This evidence encourages further investigation of radicalisation drivers affecting women. We examine how drivers of VE affect women preachers in the governorate of Ma'an, as a unique segment of women actors in the radicalisation process. However, it should be noted from the outset that this case study does not assume preachers contribute to radicalisation. In fact, the findings shed more light on their role in PVE efforts. But since this will be the focus of another CONNEKT report, this case study focuses on VE drivers and the role of female preachers in Ma'an.

Female preachers

Female preachers operate in two parallel structures in Jordan resulting in two types of preachers:

- A 'formal' type that is part of the official state structures through its affiliation to the Ministry of Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places. Also considered as a formal type of female preachers are the ones appointed by security and military agencies, within the military and security ranks, who are typically part of the Women Police Unit, (Jordan Times, 2017) and

¹⁰⁷ Three Focus Group Discussion with females in Rusayfeh, 14-20 July 2016 for an unpublished study on Radicalisation Drivers among Jordanian Youth (Amman: WANA Institute, 2017).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

- An 'informal' type that exercises preaching and Islamic missionary role voluntarily, often affiliated with Islamic groups such as the Salafi stream or the Muslim Brotherhood. This also includes Sufis and other groups active in Jordan, most notably the all-women preaching group of Al-Qubaysiat (Al-Qubaysiat (2017)). This group is neither appointed nor acknowledged by formal structures – civil or military.

These structures affect two aspects of the female preachers' work.

First, this context gives the former –formal– group a greater access to the existing state structures, such as schools, youth centres, hospitals, etc.,¹⁰⁹ whilst it pushes the latter –informal– group to operate outside said structures and take on a more personalised, communal role based on their own relations and networks.¹¹⁰

Second, due to their relationships with the Ministry of Awqaf, the formal group of female preachers operates in a more transparent hierarchical model, and being paid by the Ministry, reports their weekly and monthly activities to the Ministry.¹¹¹ The individual female preachers belonging to this group are appointed through the Civil Service Bureau based on qualifications and relevant degrees in Islamic studies or Sharia (Islamic Law System). The most recent data indicates that the number of formal female preachers in Jordan is 506 across all 12 governorates (Ministry of Education of Jordan, 2022). Completely opposite to this group, the 'informal' female preachers operate in a decentralised model, with unreported/unknown, but what looks like diverse channels of funding, with their numbers not being captured in any official statistics, and their qualifications, geographic distribution, or any other characteristic being scarcely, if at all, documented.¹¹²

Ma'an

The southern governorate of Ma'an makes up just over one-third of the land mass in Jordan, with nearly half of its population residing in rural areas. In 2016, unemployment rate in Ma'an was 19.10% and poverty was 26.6%. Both were the highest in the country at 26.6% (national average 14.4%). (Governorate Development Plan 2016-2018, n.d). In 2007, a new Ma'an Development Area was launched to create an economic, social, and scientific hub to address the rampant unemployment and poverty. The initiative unfortunately did not produce desired results, further plunging the city and its surroundings into economic deprivation. The governorate shares a long border with Saudi Arabia, where smuggling and illegal activities are not rare.

Gender divisions are also pronounced: as of 2020, the illiteracy rate among women in Ma'an is nearly 5% higher than the national average – and twice the rate of Jordan's capital city, Amman. Unemployment for women in Ma'an is also nearly 3% higher than the Kingdom's average (Perrin, 2021).

¹⁰⁹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹¹⁰ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹¹¹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on December 6, 2021.

¹¹² Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

There are widespread perceptions of marginalisation in Ma'an. Not all of which stand to scrutiny. For example, 83.2% of Ma'an citizens are covered by health insurance compared to the national average of 87%, and 26.7% of students pass the national secondary exam Tawjihi compared to the national average of 36.6%. (Perrin, 2021). Although lower than the national average, Ma'an fares better than other governorates in Jordan.

But the south of Jordan has historically seen active social movements, opposition, and anti-government protests. The famous 1989 'April's Uprising' started in Ma'an as a result of the economic recession. Fast spreading across the southern region, a series of protestors' demands resulted in resignation of the then-Prime Minister, lifting of martial law in force since 1957, restrictions on freedom of expression and of press removed, reinstatement of parliamentary elections that had been paused since 1967, and an appointment by His Majesty the late King Hussein of a royal commission that drafted the National Charter, a document that set a timetable for reforms and democratisation of Jordan—a move that was not well received amongst Jordan's neighbours in Arabian peninsula. The city played a similar role in subsequent protests and social movements (bread riots in 1996, 1998 protests, 2002 (Tell, 2015) and 2014 protests during the Arab uprisings). According to the city's (Al-Fadilat, 2015) inhabitants, little to nothing has changed since then, and a difficult relation with the state and security actors (Elizabeth Williams, 2018) has characterised Ma'an, in which a significant security forces' presence is palpable.

Finally, on top of the anti-government protests, Ma'an is also known across Jordan as a city with strong historical presence of an active Salafi-Jihadist movement (Osborne, 2017a). Home of the leader of the movement in Jordan, Mohammad Al-Shalabi (Abu Sayyaf), and a base for his activities, (Katulis, Awad, and Lang, 2014) the city is one of five major Jordanian cities where the Salafi-Jihadist movement has 'the greatest concentration and expansion' (Combaz, 2015). In 2014, its citizens actively rallied in support of Daesh (Ghboun, 2014), raising its flag (Su, 2014) and encouraging tens of individuals to join the violent extremist groups (VEOs) in Iraq and Syria.

The geographical relevance of the city of Ma'an for this case study stems from this unique socio-political context and relation with the state. Unsurprisingly, the city of Ma'an within the governorate is a key radicalisation hotspot in Jordan. A nationwide study conducted to explore factors impacting propensity and influence of pathways toward violent extremism in Jordan had alarmingly shown high quantitative scores in the south of the country in general and in Ma'an in particular. Factors include boredom, drug abuse, negative impression of authorities, inequality, social injustice, etc. (MSI, 2017).

Research methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

Four results from the macro-level analysis provide the broader context to understand the findings of this case study. First, state conceptualisation around violent extremism threats and dynamics are heavily viewed through an ideological lens, with little consideration for the contextual grievances. In the macro-level phase of the CONNEKT project, the role of female preachers was mentioned 'in passing', in spite of them being established as an important grassroots level PVE actor in the existing literature (Jordan Times, 2017) and only viewed through an exclusive religious/ideological lens. Macro-level state efforts sought to provide female preachers with various capacity-building workshops and trainings aiming to "enhance their religious knowledge and their capacity/competency at addressing religious questions and concerns." (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2021).

It should be noted, however, that the state's focus on religion and ideology in its PVE measures does not reflect findings on radicalisation in Jordan. Instead, it reflects the state's unwillingness to admit that structural grievances have led to the rise of VE in Jordan. Research points to both ideological and structural factors. The emphasis on ideology reflects government's officials' attempt to avail their responsibility in the rise of VE in the country. Therefore, this case study does not examine the role of female preachers as key actors within the realm of religion NOT as the main driver of VE. Instead, it examines this understudied role as potentially one factor among many others.

It was also noticed that the efforts that address VE have moved from individuals to family cells (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2021): radicalisation within intricately linked family networks, as opposed to lone individuals, was an emerging trend in Jordan (Abu Rumman and Shteiwi, 2018). Yet, response to this trend regarding the actors who have access to and influence over families has been limited to ad hoc family PVE sessions, and occasional capacity building courses to Imams and preachers, according to the results of our macro-level research. Female preachers are one such actor whose role is gaining more prominence as radicalisation and violent extremism patterns shift towards families, not individuals. They interact with families and children in closed off locations and shape religious orientations and behaviour in local communities. Preachers shape how religion is understood and practised in local communities.

Third, macro-level analysis has pointed to the prominence of territorial inequalities in the rise of VE in Jordan, where not only perceived and actual marginalisation of certain governorates by the central government. This pertains to the quality of services provided, employment and educational opportunities in local communities, and available infrastructure. Together these factors limit the prospects of youth to attain satisfying employment opportunities. As a result, economic deprivation becomes a direct result of territorial inequalities giving rise to antagonism towards the state. Similarly, most PVE initiatives in Jordan have focused on radicalisation hotbeds which are marginalised. This further stigmatised the local communities and contributed to their alienation from and anger towards the state (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2021).

Finally, digital socialisation was not directly linked to recruitment for extremist groups. Instead, social media played a role in disseminating other forms of radicalisation in Jordanian society like mutilation crimes. However, given the international evidence on online radicalisation, state institutions supported and led several initiatives to encourage digital literacy. Despite this marginal role digitalisation attains in the discussion of drivers of VE on the macro-level in Jordan, digital socialisation -as will be discussed later- is probably the most prominent factor to be examined in relation to female preachers, particularly informal ones who attain their education online and maintain direct and diverse contact with loose regional networks of preachers.

Together, these, as we called them in the previous report, 'shifting' patterns of violent extremism make a compelling case for examining the specific role of female preachers given their centrality to different societal and familial dynamics. The findings highlight what factors can contribute to the radicalisation of female preachers, who, if radicalised, can contribute to the radicalisation of their audiences. There are no concrete findings on this causality. But the case study pinpoints potential links between VE drivers and social contexts as defined in the CONNEKT project.

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

The added value of the meso-level analysis can be presented in four different ways, as follows:

- First, the meso-level case study allows for an in-depth analysis of context and drivers of VE on a community level, as identified by the results of macro-level research. In short, it is another block in building a multi-dimensional map of drivers of violent extremism.
- Second, it allows for using of a new analytical tool, the case study, in investigating local communities to better understand the violent extremism scene.
- Third, the analysis provides an opportunity for combining and testing the pre-identified seven drivers with a set of social interaction contexts. This combination cements a key premise of the CONNEKT project that relates to radicalisation and violent extremism being approached and analysed as a social phenomenon that develops from contexts of social interaction and intersections between individuals, ideas, and contexts.
- Fourth, the meso-level analysis is considered a stepping-stone into implementing a pilot intervention on preventive measures against violent extremism, which in other words moves the CONNEKT project one step further from research to action.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Overall objective of this case study is to examine the role of female preachers in the radicalisation process affecting youth in Jordan. Specifically, the research sought to solicit insights and knowledge on three factors:

- The informal religious educational role played by female preachers;
- The impact of socio-economic factors such as marginalisation, and whether this has a stronger impact on females than males;

- The role of technology and digital literacy in the work of female preachers, as well as to enhance/diminish radicalisation prospects;
- The impact of transnational dynamics and links on the role of female preachers in the rise and or prevention of VE; and
- The self-assessment of female preachers on the effectiveness of their preaching role.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Building on the findings of CONNEKT's Working Package 4, this case studies focuses on female preachers as a significant and often overlooked segment of the female population to explore their role in the radicalisation process of youth.

Although the focus in CONNEKT project is on youth of 12-30 years old, female preachers attain this role after completing a level of higher education in Sharia. Therefore, the youngest possible age in this research sample is 22 years old. Likewise, many female preachers, especially the more experienced and trusted by the community, are older than 30 years. Therefore, the age group for this case study is 22-30+ years old.

Primary data was obtained by conducting two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 23 female preachers. The first FGD 1 engaged 12 formal preachers and the second FGD 2 engaged with 11 informal preachers (one last-minute cancellation in the latter group). The age group for FGD 1 ranged from 27 to 42 y/o, whilst FGD 2 participants ranged from 22 to 60 y/o. (See Annex II for age details). However, it should be noted that female preachers usually work with families and children that include those between 12-18 years, thus, this case study indirectly examines the influence of female preachers on the radicalisation of this age group. The other case studies on Jordan will examine the desired age group of 12-30 years.

All selected female preachers live and operate in the governorate of Ma'an, whether through the formal structure of the Ministry of Awqaf or informally by volunteering to preach in the community amongst females. The two groups were split according to their (lack of) alignment with the Ministry of Awqaf.

SAMPLING DESCRIPTION

A snowball sampling method mixed with purposive sampling was used to select research participants. The participants in the formal group of female preachers were selected through consultation with the local directorate of Ministry of Awqaf in Ma'an, whilst the informal group of participants was selected through the personal access and trusted relationships of the local partner who was engaged in this research.

The local partner was Charity Lights Association (Jam'yet al-Anwar al-Khayreyya). This association is a social and charity women CSO working in Ma'an since 2010 to provide psycho-social and financial support to women. It also has a record of working with families of extremists and returnees from Ma'an. It was deemed the most appropriate and trusted CSO actor in Ma'an to approach women generally and

families and/or individuals with proximity to families of fighters and returnees. The partner helped in dividing the groups, selection of the geographic areas they operate in, and the choice of key to invite in each group.

TABLE 1. Formal preachers

Participant Number	Age	Area of Residence
1	28	Shoubak
2	38	Shoubak
3	38	Jafar
4	38	Ayle
5	37	Petra
6	37	Petra
7	29	Petra
8	42	Ma'an
9	29	Ayle
10	42	Ma'an
11	28	Ma'an
12	30	Ma'an

TABLE 1. Informal preachers

Participant Number	Age	Area of Residence
1	60	Ma'an
2	56	Ma'an
3	27	Ma'an
4	29	Ma'an
5	23	Ma'an
6	52	Ma'an
7	40	Ma'an
8	22	Ma'an
9	20	Ma'an
10	44	Ma'an
11	50	Ma'an

RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

For the discussion with formal and informal female preachers, two FGDs were arranged. The discussions were conducted in a semi-structured manner, giving the respondents the opportunity to freely shape the conversation (See Annex I for the questions). Throughout the FGDs, notes were taken and compiled, and then used to identify recurrent and emergent themes and patterns based on the respondents' answers. Prior to conducting the focus groups, a series of phone call consultations was

carried out with the local partner to better understand the scene of female preachers in Ma'an, liaise on authorisations, communicate the research objectives and the criteria for selection, and generally prepare all aspects of data collection.

The discussion addressed informal education in Ma'an, the role of female preachers in informal education. The discussion explored issues related to digital literacy, skills of female preachers in using online platforms and their usage patterns. In the process, references were made to narratives and type of content female preachers engage with. In investigating the preachers' role and access with family members, the discussion sought the self-assessment of preachers on their role and influence on individuals on family patterns and dynamics in Ma'an. Direct questions on radicalisation of female preachers were avoided to maintain a trusting and open discussion with respondents, but the discussion generally referred to VE in Jordan and in Ma'an.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

In conducting the research, two key challenges were faced.

First, the challenge of ensuring the research respondents were of the age by the CONNEKT project. Female preachers are typically older women who do not necessarily fall within the 12-30 age bracket sought by the project. Furthermore, the most influential female preachers tend to be older in age as this is associated with one being more knowledgeable and respected in the community. The FGDs were therefore composed of female preachers between 22-60 years old.

Second, the project faced challenges with securing official clearances due to the high sensitivity regarding both the group being selected to take part in the research, and the topics being discussed. By utilising local partners and existing relationships with the Ministry of Awqaf, the research was conducted in a familiar-for-respondents setting provided by one of the local partners, with locally trusted female facilitators engaging respondents in the discussions. As a result, the selection of participants was influenced by the knowledge and relations of the local partner with some of the respondents. This did not affect the quality of the discussion or findings, but an element of bias in the selection of respondents is probable although not objectively established.

RESEARCH INTEGRITY

To ensure confidentiality and privacy of the data, the information and data collected were kept and handled with utmost privacy. All data collected from the discussions was protected on encrypted digital drives that only researchers have access to. Answers were anonymised and all personally identifiable information from the notes was deleted. The participants' identity was kept confidential/coded to ensure anonymity, with this treatment/process being explained to the respondents prior to obtaining their consent. To ensure autonomy and voluntariness, a consent form was thoroughly explained and shared with participants ahead of the focus group discussions. The data collectors/researchers explained research purpose as well as the research ethics measures verbally prior to the start of the data collection process.

Meso-level dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The findings of this case study point to two social contexts directly linked to the drivers of violent extremism that were identified at the macro-level in Jordan. These are: socialisation/education, and urban and peri-urban spaces. These are related to two drivers of VE identified on the macro-level: religion and territorial inequalities.

Socialisation/education and religion:

Socialisation/ (informal) education attains a prominent focus among Salafis generally in Jordan and beyond. The most extremist of Salafi groups reject state educational curriculum and opt to educate their children informally in social and locally familiar groups and centres. In previous field work in Ma'an, this was highlighted by several research subjects who are proximate to families of radical individuals.¹¹³ The social acceptance and acknowledgement of the informal educational structure facilitate the flourishing of informal religious education circles for both male and female children. Informal female preachers attain this responsibility among females. In Ma'an, 3.25% of children are at risk of dropping out of school for various reasons compared to 1.84% in Karak, for example (UNICEF, 2020). There is no data on the number of children of Salafi families who drop out of school for ideological reasons, but field research activities point to a sizable percentage.

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Ideology/religion as a driver of VE is transmitted to individuals through the formal religious educational structures managed by state institutions like the Ministry of Awqaf and the Iftaa' Department. More importantly, ideology/religion is communicated in several informal channels like religious preaching gatherings run by preachers at homes or CSOs, WhatsApp and social media, and limited group channels on Telegram and the like. Regardless of the ideology they hold, female preachers are active agents in these domains partly responsible for the religious views harboured by youth of ages 12-30 years by preaching to this age group directly or to their family members, and mothers in particular.

Furthermore, links were found between socialisation and close familial dynamics and the spread of religious ideology,¹¹⁴ in that the socialisation serves as a vehicle for transmitting religious ideas, values, and practices. Female preachers operate in intimate family circles, among mothers, grandmothers and daughters. It is in these unmonitored and close environments that religious informal education shapes behaviour. This becomes problematic since as the Working Package 4 confirmed, there is a lack of institutional coordination governing the work of informal preachers who operate outside any national framework/institution.¹¹⁵ This poses a risk if female preachers are disseminating radical ideas or if they are contributing to confusion about religious ideas without actively and effectively countering extremist views that are harboured by female family members.

¹¹³ Two Focus Group Discussions with Male and Female Youth in Ma'an, 20 August 2016 for an unpublished study on Radicalisation Drivers among Jordanian Youth (Amman: WANA Institute, 2017).

¹¹⁴ Focus Group Discussions 1 and 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021

¹¹⁵ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021

The results of the macro-level analysis have further highlighted the lack of a clear and officially adopted roadmap for both governmental and non-governmental actors involved in the fight against VE, including on the definitional issue of what VE and PVE efforts are (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2021): This macro-level finding relates to the issue of 'conflicting fatwas', which, according to the female preachers, refers to the presence of several religious references each issuing different fatwas, or religious rulings, all on similar subject matters.¹¹⁶ This, according to the respondents, causes conceptual concerns around the same issues and weakens the effectiveness of preaching as people hear different rulings on the same issues.¹¹⁷

Additionally, the results of the macro-level analysis have revealed the state's strong focus on (ideology/security), paying little heed to other dimensions such as contextual grievances. The informal preachers reported greater security scrutiny they are subjected to as opposed to their colleagues from the formal group: they reported difficulties acquiring visas for travel abroad or having been asked to close local associations and organisations due to not being able to get required security clearances. This poses another threat whereby female preachers feel discriminated against and treated as a threat rather than an asset to fill a gap in the preaching domain since the Ministry of Awqaf lacks the required numbers of preachers to serve local communities in Ma'an. This frustration leads to anger towards the state. If female preachers are indoctrinated into extremist views or are overwhelmed by their rejection of the official religious narrative, which will be intensified by these frustrations, these frustrations will be transmitted to their audiences and, thus, lead to radicalisation.

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Urban and peri-urban areas and territorial inequality:

The social context of urban and peri-urban areas refers to areas where daily interactions and relations take place. The findings in Ma'an on this social context highlight the impact of territorial inequalities as one driver of VE. As mentioned earlier, Ma'an has a history of perceived and actual marginalisation by the state and heavy stigma related to crimes and VE. This means that availability of urban spaces where female preachers operate is limited by the number of schools, centres, and mosques available for official preachers, on one hand. On the other hand, poor quality and availability of safe and reliable transportation limits the access of both formal and informal preachers to peri-urban spaces where they can form relations and links of influence positively or negatively with local residents. This shortage of services affects the work of preachers and adds additional physical and financial burdens on them.

In addition, most preachers, formal and informal, engage in charitable work in their communities to address socio-economic gaps that are a consequence of state's policies and territorial inequalities. On one level, preachers are helping address serious shortages in service provisions. On another level, these same preachers suffer from the lack of services as citizens residing in Ma'an, and state marginalisation of their role as preachers. This leads to dual forms of frustrations of female preachers. In this way, socialisation/education and urban and peri-urban spaces interact with religion and territorial inequalities as drivers of VE identified at the macro-level analysis of Jordan.

¹¹⁶ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on December 6, 2021

¹¹⁷ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on December 6, 2021

HOW MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS WORK AT THE MESO-LEVEL STUDIED (THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS)?

In the previous section, the relation between specific social contexts and drivers of VE as identified at the macro-level were discussed. In this section, we elaborate on two other drivers on which the findings in this level diverge from findings on the macro-level. These are digital socialisation and transnational dynamics. Digital socialisation was not identified as a major driver on the macro-level but is the main crucial driver of VE in this case study. Similarly, transnational dynamics as a driver of VE were found to impact state response to VE. Interestingly, in this case study the direct potential impact of transnational dynamics on individuals is established. We, therefore, focus here on these two unexpected findings at this meso-level.

Before delving into this interlink, it is important to remind readers that in this case study we are examining a potential but unestablished causal relation between female preachers and the radicalisation of youth of 12-30 years. It is unfair to stigmatise preachers since the conclusions are inconclusive. The research assumptions are that if female preachers are radical, they will disseminate radical views to female youth between 12-18 in schools or in informal activities, and to older female youth through interactions at mosques, CSOs, or homes. Similarly, if female preachers are not radical but reach a climax of frustration with socio-economic conditions in Ma'an and institutional negligence of their role, this frustration with the state will be transferred to their audiences, which in turn leads to alienation and radicalisation. This section examines these assumptions in relation to digital socialisation and transnational dynamics.

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The question of digital socialisation did not attract great prominence in macro-level research. In fact, the Working Package 4 findings revealed no significant mention of digital socialisation or its impact on radicalisation. In contrast, the meso-level analysis in this case study sheds a bright light on the notable use of technology amongst female preachers (more prominent amongst informal preachers), and the deployment of several digital platforms, such as Telegram, TikTok, and Facebook in their daily activities.¹¹⁸ This finding is consistent with the emerging literature on the shifting patterns of online Salafi activism and the increased prominence of technology, social media platforms, and use of encrypted messaging applications to their activism (Ayad, 2021).

Additionally, the use of technology by female preachers brings another dimension into play: transnational dynamics. More than half of the female preachers from the formal group have indicated a reliance on technology to coordinate preaching lessons and reach out to other females in the community, notably through WhatsApp.¹¹⁹ Likewise, at least four female preachers from the informal group (37%) have indicated that they are part of Telegram/WhatsApp groups that are composed of counterparts from across the region – other female preachers from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Focus Group Discussions 1 and 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹¹⁹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021

¹²⁰ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021

For the informal preachers, these online groups are typically used to exchange knowledge, trainings, and even enable their users to take part in reciting competitions and book reviews with other female preachers, in this case, with female preachers from outside Jordan.¹²¹ Some Jordanian participants interviewed for this case study have even received certificates from Saudi-based Islamic centres and organisations, such as Al-Maerefah Organisation in Medina (Maerefah, 2022). Others have indicated that the curriculum they follow is that of the Saudi cleric Saleh Al-Usaimi, who is a member of the Saudi Council of Senior Scholars, and is known for his prolific work on Quranic and Sharia studies (J-Eman, 2022).

In this context, it is important to note that the interaction with female preachers' counterparts outside Jordan was only present amongst members of the informal group. The preachers from the formal group had no similar interactions, as this form of transnational cooperation is carried out through the official structures of the Ministry of Awqaf, and is not something the female preachers are authorised to do on their own.¹²² In contrast, the fact that the informal group sits outside official structures seems to have given it a greater freedom in being exposed to, and interactive with, other schools of Islamic thought and literature.¹²³

Four concerns clarify the potential role of female preachers in radicalisation in this regard. First, the expansion of the informal networks of preachers in the region and access to educational and informal religious spaces outside the formal structures in Jordan can potentially lead to the radicalisation of female preachers through the religious curriculum they study, the ideological views they grapple with, and the peer groups they form through digital spaces. It is true that this wider horizon of interaction can lead to their empowerment as constructive actors more knowledgeable and more skilled in the PVE domain. However, this digital space keeps the door wide open to receiving and interacting with extremist ideologies and ideologies, the results of which are unknown.

Second, this wide digital space strengthens the impact of transnational dynamics. Two authors argue that all extremist activities in Jordan are influenced by transnational factors (Nesser and Gråtrud, 2019). Therefore, interaction with informal or formal religious groups in the region will build on a shared identity and Sunni Muslim grievances in the region. This will bond female preachers in Jordan with their counterparts who may have extremist ideological views. These peer groups, albeit online, can facilitate radicalisation as established in several studies on peer influence (ARTIS, 2009).

Third, territorial inequalities play out in a very unique way in this case. As mentioned earlier, Ma'an is a marginalised governorate with a turbulent history with the state and security forces. There are high perceptions of victimisation and anger among Ma'an residents due to the inadequate services provided by the state. In addition, informal preachers across Jordan do not receive the support, training, or acknowledgement of their voluntary efforts from the Ministry of Awqaf. Most informal preachers expressed their anger and frustration at this negligence of their role. They feel unappreciated and discriminated against in denied access to schools and mosques, and in security measures that place them under scrutiny

¹²¹ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021

¹²² Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹²³ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

affecting their daily lives and choices.¹²⁴ It is not surprising that they feel victimised, first, as citizens in Ma'an, and second, as informal preachers.

The digital space they engage in offers a refuge where their knowledge and efforts are acknowledged and where they are treated as equals with other peers of online groups. In addition, absence of state patronage makes female preachers vulnerable to protection and support of, and affiliation to, other entities -ideological or not- that offer acknowledgement, validation, and appreciation. "It is as if we do not exist," exclaims an informal preacher about the state's neglect of their efforts.¹²⁵ This is identical to the experiences of individual radicals who felt alienated and joined extremist groups to satisfy these psychological needs. State marginalisation of informal preachers is creating the potential for their radicalisation, which in turn will radicalise youth.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has given an advantage to informal preachers. Formal preachers indicated that the physical spaces they have had prior to the pandemic were limited to mosques and other official channels such as schools,¹²⁶ whilst informal preachers have always been denied access to such spaces.¹²⁷ Thus, when restrictions on mobility and physical gatherings were imposed, informal preachers were ready to fill the void. They were already more familiar with the use of digital space, and thus the pandemic has fostered the presence and use of technology in their daily activities, making digital interactions and online activism more central to their work.¹²⁸ Consequently, informal preachers were able to solidify their contact and interaction with young females in more attractive mediums compared to traditional face-to-face lecturing. This increases the acceptability of ideas communicated by preachers, which has the potential to increase radicalisation IF the preachers are radical or frustrated with their own circumstances as discussed above.

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These factors clarify how digital socialisation of female preachers has expanded their reach locally to their audience and have also expanded their networks, peers, and educational sources in the region. The networks they formed, the shared identity they developed, and the unknown religious education they attain leave speculation wide open on the potential radicalisation of female preachers in the absence of state formal recognition of their role and patronage of their local efforts. This digitalisation of the preaching sphere also expands the influence of translational dynamics on preachers due to the different ideologies and socio-political conditions other Islamic political and preaching groups are experiencing in the region.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND INTERACTIONS AMONG DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

The data collection that informed this case study points towards intersections of at least four drivers: religion, digital socialisation, territorial inequalities, and transnational dynamics and three specific

¹²⁴ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021

¹²⁷ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021

¹²⁸ Focus Group Discussions 1 and 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

contexts of social interaction (socialisation/education, employment and labour relations, and urban and peri-urban spaces). We discuss here the intersections between drivers and then the interactions between specific drivers and social contexts.:

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS

The findings reveal specific intersections between drivers of VE in Ma'an. The intersections are multi-dimensional, and the findings point to four intersections:

1. Digital socialisation and transnational dynamics (discussed in section 3.2)
2. Digital socialisation and territorial inequalities (also discussed in section 3.2)
3. Religion and transnational dynamics
4. Religion and digital socialisation

The interaction between religion and transnational dynamics is similar to findings in other studies on VE. Regional political dynamics that have led to a political Sunni power vacuum in the region has led to the rise of Shia-Sunni sectarianism, which includes radical elements that justify extreme violence against the religious "Other." Likewise, the protracted Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the sense of deep injustice and humiliation of Arabs and Muslims has led to the search for alternatives away from the political diplomatic track (Sean and Sammour, 2017). Similarly, the failed experiences at representative and fair governing systems in the region after Arab Spring revolts has led to the conviction among youth that violence is the best tool to attain political power for one's ideology (Ashour, 2015). These dynamics affect individuals across the region, and female preachers examined in this study are no exception. They grapple with these ideas, search for answers and questions from religious thinkers across the region. The influence pathways between these ideas and the radicalisation of preachers is not openly discussed, but like other findings in this study, it leaves the door wide open for radical ideas to influence preachers.

Religion offers a sense of purpose for individuals in their quest for justice and good in the cosmic battle between good versus evil.¹²⁹ Who and what is evil gets shaped by ideology. When frustrated or alienated individuals search for alternate worldviews away from their daily misery (whether due to structural grievances or psychological/ideological factors) (Seul, 1999) religion offers a way out. Religion, of course, can influence constructive modes of action to instil good and forge constructive relations with the "other." But religion can also be used to justify violence against the religious other.

These factors become more probable with the digitalisation of the preaching space for female preachers in terms of access to educational knowledge and networks of peers. In this way, religion, or more accurately specific religious ideologies- intersect with digital socialisation as drivers of VE potentially affecting female preachers in Ma'an. The limitations imposed on field research for this case study, and the several sensitivities associated with it, hindered asked direct questions on the intersections between religion and transnational dynamics and religion and digital socialisation. Therefore, the findings are indicative at best.

¹²⁹ For a discussion of this in Islam, see Richard C. Martin, "The Religious Foundations of War, Peace, and Statecraft in Islam," in *Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Tradition*, eds. John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 104.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Religion and socialisation/education:

The findings point to central interaction between religion as a driver of VE and the social context of formal and informal education as a mechanism for transmitting ideas, values, and identities, and influencing behaviour. Accordingly, the relation of female preachers to this specific factor is captured in the significant role they play in providing different forms of informal education. Religious education connects individuals' beliefs to a world view of good versus evil, whereby the parameters of defining good and evil and prescribing desired behaviour towards fighting evil are shaped. This gives preachers in general a central role in influencing worldviews and behaviour. Religious education impacts the various stages of radicalisation in, for example, reinforcing alienation from society, offering alternative worldviews, defining role models, and providing new criteria for selecting one's peers. All these factors can shape the radicalisation process, if the religious ideas being offered to audiences are radical. It goes without saying that these same factors in religious education can influence moderation and constructive social roles for individuals.

Thus, and as mentioned earlier, if preachers are radical or frustrated with the state, they can communicate radical ideas and feelings to their audiences and thus facilitate directly or indirectly the radicalisation process, whereby individuals seek alternate worldviews and socio-economic realities that are offered by extremist groups.

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Notably, there is a discrepancy in the areas of informal education provided by formal and informal preachers. Because the former operate within the official sphere of the Ministry of Awqaf, they have the official cover to address legal or economic issues beyond worship and religious rulings. This group of preachers cited the "lack of legal awareness"¹³⁰ as a key gap they try to fill in their local outreach efforts, elaborating that this legal awareness extends to issues of marriage and divorce, alimony, and a host of other civil status issues.

According to respondents from this group, women in their community are generally unaware of their legal rights, which contributes to their disempowerment. The respondents gave a few examples: for instance, the marital relationships are rarely (officially) documented in a way that protects women, leaving them at a greater vulnerability when issues arise between the two partners. Or women's decision in parliamentary and local elections is still to a large extent dictated by their husbands or male guardians. In another example, women are frequently hassled by their first-degree relatives to give special power of attorney or a form of a proxy to their male relatives, consequently giving up their rights to land and/or property ownership.¹³¹

These examples highlight the broader socio-educational role (beyond purely the religious one) this particular group of female preachers—supported by the governmental structures—play in households of Ma'an's urban and peri-urban spaces. This role contributes to women empowerment and agency, and does not have a direct impact on radicalisation, but it points to the trust-building impact of these

¹³⁰ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹³¹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

informal activities. This is an important asset for PVE efforts but can also contribute to radicalisation if preachers are radical.

In contrast, informal preachers (not acknowledged by the Ministry of Awqaf), seem to focus mainly on religious issues like jurisprudence, ethics, heaven and hell, and worship. Their outreach and activities are all centred around cementing their interpretation of Islamic texts and practices, teaching different Quranic citations and underscoring issues such as the importance of daily prayers and Islamic uniform.¹³² They have also reported their extensive efforts invested at correcting what they described as the 'conflicting Fatwas scene' amongst females, and at unifying the religious references according to [their] one school of Islam. [Fatwas are simply defined as Islamic rulings that are part of the Islamic legal system; they legally define what could and could not be done from a point of Islamic law.] This religious mandate is exercised in social settings, such as women gatherings after funerals, or celebrations to welcome the birth of babies, or attend graduation celebrations.¹³³

The interaction between religion and informal education is the most prominent link in this case study, whereby the role of female preachers takes place entirely through informal religious education.

Economic deprivation and employment and labour relations:

Within the CONNEKT project, this social context of employment and labour relations refers to unemployment as a factor that limits access to a decent level of social welfare. The intersection between this social context and economic deprivation as a driver of VE is an intriguing finding in relation to the role of female preachers. It also points to the connection between informal religious education and this social context.

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On one hand, it was interesting to learn that both groups of female preachers were leaning towards women's unemployment. They see "harm" in women's employment,¹³⁴ and encourage religious views of traditional female roles as housewives. Their rationale is linked to access to their female target group which drastically changes if the local women are not available for the visits and consultations the preachers provide due to women's employment. Because the 'unemployed female who sits at home' has more time to attend or organise religious gatherings and interacts with preachers, both groups viewed the greater levels of female empowerment, employment included, as adversely proportional to their role, limiting their mission and results. Having younger women at work means that the preachers can only reach out to, and interact with, elderly women who have more availability, and who are, for the good part, already receptive to the messages of these preachers.¹³⁵

But this view critically challenges the conventional wisdom around the PVE efforts and the role of female preachers. The interactions between the drivers and social contexts point to an even situation in which one of the PVE traditional actors, female preachers in our case, deems addressing one of the key VE drivers, economic deprivation/unemployment, as counterproductive to its mission and mandate. Additionally,

¹³² Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹³³ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹³⁴ Focus Group Discussions 1 and 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021

¹³⁵ Focus Group Discussions 1 and 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

both groups of female preachers have used the same argument in relation to unemployment, commenting that it has a greater impact on 'males than females'.¹³⁶ For the respondents, society places greater expectations on males and views them as the breadwinners for their families, hence they suffer more various psychological, social, and economic consequences when being unemployed compared to women.¹³⁷ This is expected in a socially conservative setting like Ma'an.

On the other hand, it shows poor assessment among preachers of how economic deprivation affects radicalisation. Female unemployment contributes to economic deprivation of households in general, leading to more frustrations about socio-economic status of individuals, which in turn contributes to their radicalisation. In addition, the views preachers hold on this unintentionally makes Daesh's narrative more attractive for young women searching for active social/political agency. It is worth noting that the documented cases of Jordanian women attempting to join Daesh are all of young university educated women (Wattan, 2015). Therefore, it is worth offering women empowerment avenues through, among other things, employment.

But both groups of preachers, cited cases of 'educated and employed' youth who have joined violent extremist organisations (VEOs). In their opinion, it is the lack of religious education that pushes young people to join VEOs, whereas evidence in Jordan generally points to structural drivers like dissatisfaction with income levels and corruption as well as peer influence.

Territorial inequalities and urban and peri-urban spaces:

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The social context of urban and peri-urban spaces refers to urban areas where social interactions take place in daily relationships, which are a key aspect of the role of both groups of female preachers: they operate within circles of personalised interaction and close relationships. Yet, the formal, officially recognised group of preachers benefits from their institutional cover to access peri-urban spaces in addition to the urban ones in the city of Ma'an, whilst the other, informal group lacks similar access and thus operates in a close circle within the urban settings.

The first group uses their institutional links to engage in official structures such as schools, mosques, youth centres, and hospitals, often in remote places and areas outside the boundaries of the city of Ma'an.¹³⁸ The second group deploys their personal connections and relationships to engage in social/private gatherings and carry out their outreach activities in local neighbourhoods within the city of Ma'an, without being able to operate outside these geographically and socially closed communities.¹³⁹ Not being recognised by the Ministry of Awqaf means the latter group is not granted the authorisations to enter such premises, thus they must operate with resources and within limits imposed by their own status.

Consequently, findings highlight the notable inactivity of female preachers in the peri-urban spaces, which fall outside the centre of Ma'an city. They attributed this inactivity to several factors, including the smaller

¹³⁶ Focus Group Discussions 1 and 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹³⁷ Focus Group Discussions 1 and 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹³⁸ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹³⁹ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

demographic size of those living in remote areas as well as the overall low number of active female preachers in Ma'an, which, as a result, makes it difficult for them to cover peri-urban spaces in the governorate and outside the city centre.¹⁴⁰

Two factors explain how this social context relates to territorial inequalities as a driver of VE. First, the lack of institutional cover for informal preachers has led to frustration and anger towards the state, because they feel that despite their voluntary efforts and services to the community, they are unappreciated and are subject to scrutiny. This felt injustice is dangerous. Perceptions of victimisation and marginalisation leads to radicalisation, whereby individuals feel alienated, and search for ideologies and worldviews that satisfy their self-esteem, pride, and self-worth (Wiktorowicz, 2004). Communities enter a very critical stage when state institutional measures radicalise preachers because they can radicalise others and use their religious knowledge to shape religious beliefs and behaviour towards extremism.

Second, territorial inequality translates into shortage of services. In particular, the unavailability of safe transportation for women significantly limits their access to education and employment opportunities across Jordan (Bondokji and AlHaj, 2019). This increases the frustrations of informal preachers and places difficulties for formal ones. Given the shortage of preachers at the Ministry of Awqaf, the territorial inequality is evident even in the lack of formal preaching services that are not compensated for by informal preachers who can access peri-urban communities. As a result, there is a segment of residents in peri-urban spaces that rely on unknown methods for their religious education that might be available from unqualified or radical individuals either online or in-person.

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On another level, the COVID-19 pandemic expanded the provision of services in digital space unthinkable just two years ago, and by extension, access to new audiences that are in geographically remote areas that were out of reach before COVID-19.¹⁴¹ As the pandemic expanded the audience of female preachers, it has also widened the gap in provision of services due to varying degrees of digital literacy among female preachers, raising the question of much needed capacity-building of female preachers, whether through the Ministry for formal preachers, or by outside groups for the informal preachers.¹⁴²

These distinctions between informal and formal preachers in relation to urban and peri-urban spaces and territorial inequalities affect the radicalisation of youth between 12-18 years. As mentioned earlier, informal preachers feel discriminated against both as residents of Ma'an and as informal preachers. If they become radicalised either through their own frustrations or through religious education they are attaining online or the influence of online peer groups, they will communicate radical teachings to youth and their families. On another level, and since informal preachers are more skilled with online formats of preaching and reaching their audiences, the COVID-19 pandemic gave them a comparative advantage in filling gaps in the preaching space. Since these online spaces are neither monitored nor regulated, it poses threats of radicalising female youth and their families ONLY IF the preachers themselves are radical.

¹⁴⁰ Focus Group Discussions 1 and 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹⁴¹ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹⁴² Focus Group Discussions 1 and 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

Analysis conclusions

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

The analysis of meso-level drivers has revealed the prominence of three drivers: digital socialisation, transnational dynamics, and territorial inequality in relation to the work of female preachers in Ma'an. In addition, religion as a driver of VE directly intersects with these drivers because of the informal religious educational role the preachers play. These drivers interact with three social contexts in the governorate: socialisation/education, employment and labour relations, and urban and peri-urban areas.

The focus on female preachers in this case study goes against the state's presumption of religion as the main driver of VE in relation to preachers and highlights how structural and even regional dynamics can affect the radicalisation of female preachers, who might then influence the radicalisation of their audiences, whether these are youth between 12-30 years or family members of youth.

Radicalisation is a family phenomenon in Jordan (Abu Rumman and Shteiwi, 2018). Therefore, the relations that female preachers have with female family members are crucial to radicalisation dynamics, and equally to PVE efforts. The assumptions underlying the case study are that, first, the informal loose structure in which informal preachers work can lead to their radicalisation due to their wide online reach and access to peer networks and educational opportunities. Second, if female preachers are frustrated and antagonistic towards the state as citizens of the marginalised governorate of Ma'an and as informal preachers ignored and side-lined by the state, these frustrations can be communicated and transmitted to their audiences. Frustrations lead to radicalisation as individuals search for different avenues to meet their material and psychological needs. This can lead to the frustration of youth.

The focus on the potential radicalisation of female preachers should not stigmatise the group. In fact, our findings point to important roles preachers have in PVE. These will be the focus of another report within the CONNEKT project. Our findings here should not be exaggerated or decontextualized.

The main findings can be summarised as follows:

1. The discrepancy between the formal and informal structures in which female preachers operate in Ma'an, and the informal preachers' limited access to services and capacity building and educational opportunities, as well as the security scrutiny they are subjected to, are deeply frustrating to informal preachers who feel unappreciated and neglected.
2. Formal and informal preachers stand at different points of the digital socialisation spectrum. For the informal group, they have had an early start at using/integrating technology into their preaching and missionary work, as they have been denied access to official state structures and have simply adopted to this non-existent physical access by utilising technology. In contrast, the formal group has indicated a more recent engagement with communication technologies. The degree of digitalisation of their work is low but has seen notable improvement as a result of the

COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴³ But it does not, yet, extend to engaging with social media and internet narratives relevant to the radicalisation process, or gets used in capacity building and knowledge sharing with other female preachers.¹⁴⁴

3. The marginalisation of informal preachers as well as their digital literacy have expanded their contacts, reach, and interaction to educational online opportunities offered by entities and/or Islamic groups in the region as well as allowing them to build networks of peers in the region. The influence of these peer networks and the curriculum they receive remains unexamined. But this digital space can lead to the radicalisation of female preachers, who can radicalise their audiences. The same applies to formal preachers who expanded their online activities during and after COVID-19.
4. This online access and reach of female preachers make them susceptible to the influence of transnational dynamics in identifying with religious groups, building peer networks, finding empowerment and appreciation denied to them by state structures. The greater the degree of digitalisation (such as with the informal group of female preachers),¹⁴⁵ the greater the degree of transnational dynamics at play. The opposite holds true, as evident in the case of the formal group.¹⁴⁶ The wider the digitalisation of preachers, the more they are influenced by feelings of disempowerment of Sunni groups, and exposed to narratives of various Salafi groups, including extremist ones. Extremist narratives that build on religious interpretations or political Muslim grievances can attract female preachers and indoctrinate them.
5. Perceptions of territorial inequalities are evident among preachers, but more pronounced among informal preachers who feel alienated by state structures as preachers in addition to the general marginalisation of Ma'an. This contributes to their frustration and anger towards the state. Lacking infrastructure and educational centres seriously limits their access to residents of different areas in the governorate and costs them extra time, effort, and resources to reach target audiences. These territorial inequalities shape the extent and content of relations in urban and peri-urban spaces preachers operate in.
6. Economic deprivation was not discussed widely by female preachers. But it was interesting to note the relation between the informal religious education they deliver on women employment and employment and labour relations in Ma'an. Preachers encourage women to be housewives. In their estimate, unemployment is more dangerous to male members. Women should focus on traditional roles and on the religious education of family members. These views contribute to economic deprivation of households, which overall contributes to radicalisation. It also indirectly reinforces Daesh's empowering narrative for women, whereby Daesh offers unique active agency for women.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

Given the nature of the group involved in this phase of CONNEKT research project and the findings of this case study, we believe potential entries for prevention indicators are mainly centred around digital socialisation, and territorial inequality. Considering the notable use of technology and digital

¹⁴³ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹⁴⁵ Focus Group Discussion 2, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

¹⁴⁶ Focus Group Discussion 1, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 6 December 2021.

communication amongst both formal and informal female preachers (albeit more advanced with the latter group), digital socialisation provides a relevant entry for prevention. Namely, prevention indicators in terms of populating the digital space with alternative narratives to combat radical thought/ideology and using digital communication platforms to build the capacity of female preachers.

In addition, any form of regulating/institutionalising or recognising informal preachers will help assess and understand the nature of how digitalisation is affecting female preachers and to offer alternate avenues for capacity building, empowerment, and developing trusted peer networks. This is not to call for strict state monitoring of the preaching space. Instead, forging trusting and acknowledging environments between informal preachers and state institutions will curb the interest and attraction of radical narratives on their online educational and peer networks.

Territorial inequalities are a main structural aspect of state relations with Maan residents that require attention and should address the contribution of this driver to the radicalisation of individuals in Ma'an. Several studies and reports addressed this, but so far -and despite state efforts- perceptions on inequalities and stigma of Ma'an prevail. More serious long-term efforts are required in this regard.

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

Given the sensitivities regarding the respondents and the subject matter, respondents were not asked to directly comment on micro-paths of radicalisation. However, four micro-paths can be identified: digital socialisation, transnational dynamics through online peer groups, and territorial inequalities felt by citizens of Ma'an, as well as informal religious education that can promote interpretations justifying violence against the religious "other." These micro-paths can directly affect female preachers in their current operational conditions and through them can indirectly influence radicalisation pathways of individual youth they preach to or the families of youth.

General Conclusion

The case study has examined the role of female preachers in the governorate of Ma'an in south Jordan as a meso-level investigation of radicalisation drivers affecting youth between 12-30 years. Female preachers access female family members and youth formally through schools, mosques and other state institutions, or informally in CSOs and houses. Two groups of preachers operate in Jordan, and in Ma'an: formal preachers affiliated with the Ministry of Awqaf and informal preachers who voluntarily preach and are affiliated with various religious groups. The marginalisation of informal preachers by state institutions has placed them in a unique position where they are alienated by the state but who volunteer in various charity and preaching roles, thus allowing them to build direct and trusting relations with audiences.

The findings in this case study showcased the intersections between four drivers of VE as identified by the CONNEKT project: digital socialisation, transnational dynamics, territorial inequalities, and religion. These interact with three social contexts of CONNEKT: socialisation/education (particularly informal religious education), employment and labour relations, and urban and peri-urban areas.

Compared to state response to radicalisation identified in Work Package 3 of this project, where state response focuses on religion as a driver, this case study places more importance on territorial inequalities, digital socialisation, and transnational dynamics. Interestingly, and contrary to findings in Work Package 4 on macro-level drivers of VE, digital socialisation stands out as the most crucial driver that can radicalise female preachers, compared to all others. It was hardly addressed or identified by respondents on macro-level drivers as a concern.

If female preachers are radicalised, through the identified drivers, or through their frustrations due to state marginalisation of their role and contributions, the preachers can radicalise female youth and their families. The findings do not establish a direct causality but points out plausible casualties in this regard.

Research findings also point to several pathways and contributions of female preachers to PVE. These will be addressed in later reports. The focus in this case study is limited to radicalisation of youth potentially through female preachers in Ma'an.

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Annex I: Questions of FGDs

The Annex 1 contains the main set of questions that have been used as a guidance for the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The questions below were used during the FGDs, once the safe space was established, and were asked and alternated as the discussion developed.

1. Icebreaker: can you tell us more about yourself, about your work in preaching?
[To tease out how long they have been at it, formal/informal, and possibly which geographical areas within Ma'an they cover; to build a general profile about the preachers.]
2. Our previous research in Jordan has indicated the important role of females in the family. But this remains an under-studied area. What role do female preachers play in shaping family patterns and communal relations?
3. What role does informal (religious) education play in your society? Is it, for instance, a primary, a secondary, or perhaps a marginal source for shaping female awareness on controversial issues like radicalisation dynamics, for example?
[Investigating the informal (religious) educational role played by female preachers who offer religious advice and awareness to other females (who might be sisters, mothers, wives of young people vulnerable to radicalisation or other forms of destructive choices among youth).]
4. Does the lack of access to formal education that girls and women experience enhance the role/importance of female preachers (who are already present and visible in the community)?
[Explore how the lack of economic opportunities and safe transportation for women affect women's access to education (both formal and informal).]
5. Do the female preachers in poor/underdeveloped areas have a more or a less active role in providing religious education? How receptive are females in remote areas to the teachings of preachers? How do your female audiences receive your preaching ideas and style? Are they receptive generally? Or do they challenge your ideas, and cross-examine your teachings? Does the lack of access to education that females in remote areas experience affect their critical thinking and analysis skills?
6. What digital literacy programmes/initiatives are made available to women in the communities in Ma'an?
7. Are the preachers aware of specific social media narratives tailored to women's recruitment
[If existing, did these digital literacy programmes and initiatives try to build females' capacity to detect/ deal with the radical narratives.]

8. To what extent are female preachers digitally literate? What forms of online learning and preaching tools they use? and to what purposes? How has access to the internet and their wider use of it influenced their preaching efforts?
9. What links exist between local and cross-national family networks (family and blood relations)? Do these links influence the worldviews of women and youth in matters like radicalisation processes and drivers (of VE), for example?

1. تقديم: هل يمكنك إخبارنا أكثر عن أنفسك؟ وعن عملك في الوعظ؟

[لمعرفة مدة عملك في الوعظ، وهل هو بشكل رسمي أم غير رسمي، والمناطق الجغرافية التي يعملون بها داخل معان، بهدف خلق تصور عن سيرة عملك في الوعظ].

2. عملنا السابق في الأردن يشير إلى أهمية دور النساء في العائلة. لكنه مجال يظل غير مدروسًا بالشكل الكافي. ما الدور الذي تلعبه الواعظات في تشكيل العلاقات الأسرية والمجتمعية؟

3. ما الدور الذي يلعبه التعليم (الديني) غير الرسمي في مجتمعنا؟ هل هو مثلاً دور أساسي، ثانوي، أو هامشي في تشكيل وعي الإناث حول المواضيع الإشكالية مثل ديناميكيات التطرف مثلاً؟

[للتحقق من الدور التثقيفي غير الرسمي (الديني) الذي تؤديه الواعظات اللواتي يقدمن المشورة الدينية والتوعية للإناث الأخريات (اللائي قد يكونن أخوات وأمهات وزوجات للشباب المعرضين للتطرف أو غيره من السلوكيات الهدامة)].

4. هل تؤدي صعوبة وصول الفتيات والنساء إلى فرص التعليم الرسمية إلى تعزيز أعمية ودور الواعظات (الموجودات والملاحظ حضورهن في المجتمع)؟

[التحقق من أثر الافتقار إلى الفرص الاقتصادية وسبل الواصلات الآمنة للنساء على حصول المرأة على التعليم (الرسمي وغير الرسمي)].

5. هل تحظى الواعظات في المناطق الفقيرة/ والأقل تنميةً بدور أكثر نشاطًا أو أقل نشاطًا في توفير التعليم الديني؟ لأي مدى تتقبل الإناث في المناطق النائية المحتوى الوعظي من الواعظات؟ لأي مدى تتقبل الإناث من جمهوركن لأفكاركن وأسلوبكن في الوعظ؟ هل يتقبلن ذلك بشكل عام؟ أم هي يتحدن أفكاركن ويتوثقون من المعلومات التي تزودنهن بها؟ هل يحد نقص الوصول إلى فرص التعليم في المناطق النائية من مهارات التفكير النقدي والتحليل؟

6. ما هي برامج/مبادرات محو الأمية الرقمية المتاحة للمرأة في معان؟

7. هل الواعظات على علم بأية سرديات اجتماعية في الإعلام تسعى تجنيد النساء؟

[إذا كنا على علم بها، هل قامت برامج ومبادرات محو الأمية الرقمية ببناء قدرات الإناث للتنبه لهذه السرديات المتطرفة والتعامل معها؟]

8. إلى أي مدى تعد الواعظات مثقفات رقميًا؟ ما هي أشكال التعليم والوعظ الإلكتروني التي يستخدمونها؟ ولأي غرض؟ كيف أثر استخدام الإنترنت الواسع على عملك في الوعظ؟

9. ما هي الروابط القائمة بين شبكات الأسرة المحلية وعبر الوطنية (علاقات الأسرة والدم)؟ وهل تؤثر هذه الروابط على نظرة النساء والشباب للعالم في قضايا مثل دوافع التطرف وعملياته؟

MOROCCO

Amal Organisation

Ultras Siempre Paloma football supporters

Adl wal Ihsane association





Amal Organisation

Amina Errifaiy, Khalid Mouna

Introduction

To understand the reasons for radicalisation among young people at the community level, it is important to study the young actors in the social field to understand how they construct their discourse around violence, their active participation in the fight against violent acts and their reactions to situations of violence in a specific territory. This report aims to understand the collective interpretation of violent extremism by an associative group and the impact of the local space on their perception of the phenomenon, adding their strategy of fight and/or prevention.

We selected this organisation because of its activism in the fight against violence, especially violence against women and its cooperation with other organisations in the promotion of human rights. The association has involved young people as main actors in the implementation of its activities at the level of the region of Fez-Meknes, as well as at the national level. This allows us to understand how these young people manage to transform situations of violence to new discourses of tolerance and acceptance of different social categories.

Research methodology

We conducted a qualitative method through the use of focus group techniques and in-depth interviews with three members of the group. According to the philosophy of the CONNEKT project, we respected the gender approach in the choice of participants. This method allows us to analyse the discourse of the youth, their reactions in the discussion around the issue of violent extremism and the interactions within the group during the collective discussion.

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

After our work in WP4 on the discourses and presence of institutions in the treatment of violent extremism in Morocco, we have therefore found that associations follow a different approach, such as the training of young people on the values of citizenship and the protection of human rights, vis a vis the role of the state aiming at the prevention of violent radicalism, as well as the need to penetrate the associative actors in the integration of youth in social and cultural life. In this sense we can mention the following elements:

- The importance of creating free activity spaces for young people.
- Developing a participative territorial approach.
- Creating a virtual space of productivity and creativity.

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Our case study responds to several of the aforementioned elements: the role of young people in the creation of socio-cultural spaces, and in the fight against the types of violence (physical or symbolic), and the cooperation with the different associative actors at the national and international level. It is an example of the actors who operate at the regional level despite the absence of a state policy integrating young people in social life.

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

This phase is a continuation of the analysis to observe the role of drivers among the communities of young people in territories having different characteristics, the level of participation of young people in decisions and their social role within associative participation. Besides, this research allows us to analyse other meso-level factors that may impact youths' pathways to radicalisation.

The meso analysis is also useful to highlight the different aspects of the interpretation of radicalism made by young people from the same community and sharing the same territory. Besides, it will help us to identify signs of the individual interpretation of the phenomenon and evaluate the impact of the discourses and community interactions on the vision of the individuals and their own perceptions.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Our objective first and foremost is to link the macro and meso analysis from the treatment of the functioning of the drivers leading to VE in the local context and precisely the social dynamics of the region in which our study group is active, as well as to identify the impact of public policies aimed at young people on their

social, economic, cultural and political situation. In another line, we aim at questioning the different roles that this social category plays in the implementation of strategies and in the process of resilience-making in front of the threats of violent extremism, especially in their direct contact with the digital tools of propaganda.

The goal is therefore to shift the analysis from the macro to the meso level in order to understand the process of youth radicalisation at the bottom of social, cultural interactions, and underline how youth see the phenomenon of violent extremism in its regional dimension.

DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS

Among the three case studies of this WP5, we have selected an associative group represented in the association Amal which operates in the field of the fight against violence. This association does not only work at the local level, but it has created synergies at the Maghreb level. Its activities focus on the issue of violence against women. The members of the association frequently organise activities at the level of the Fez-Meknes region, and also at the national level by creating a network of synergies with other organisations in the Maghreb. The omnipresence of the association Amal in events at the international level is part of the participation in events related to human rights and security. It is an association based on an approach and orientation for women victims of violence, which gives us the opportunity to see how communities organise themselves to manage states of violence and their reactions to the Moroccan laws that protect victims of violence. The active members of this association are young people from the Meknes-Fes region who have a different level of education and who develop their creativity in the process of social action.

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We also noticed that other institutions involved in the regional setting are: the University where some participants continue their studies, the professional training centers, and the international associations with which the Amal association coordinates to organise activities at the Maghreb level.

CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION (OF PARTICIPANTS)

The Amal association operates in the city of El Hajeb, a small town in the region of Fez-Meknes. The associative work occupies an important place for young people, and it has an impact on their insertion in the socio-cultural activities in the absence of the cultural and artistic centers in the city.

The selection criteria are based on gender and age, the nature of the role that each member occupies within the association, as well as the level of education and professional training of each of them. These varied criteria give us a broad vision on the understanding of this group of the facts related to violent extremism, through the collective experience lived in the field of fight and prevention against violence. During the focus groups, we led the discussion around violence as a break with a normative framework, and a notion that describes the different daily situations of these young people, and of their social and professional environment.

After the selection of the case study we contacted the president of the association directly and explained the general framework of the project, the interest of the research and the ethical

considerations of the research, as well as the criteria of the participants we needed for the focus groups and the individual interviews. During the focus groups, we took note of the participants' reactions through observation. This tool allowed us to select the relevant profiles for individual interviews. Then, we contacted the targeted participants directly in order to conduct in-depth interviews, and completed them after their agreement in good conditions. The meeting places were decided in common agreement with our interlocutors.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The focus group sample

The members selected to participate in this survey are adherents of the Amal association in the city of El Hajeb located in the region of Fez-Meknes, aged between 19 and 26 and who have different education levels. The participants are from the same city, they are active in the association and occupy several activities such as listening sessions, artistic activities, and cultural events organised in the region or at the national level. In this case, it was not possible to include minors under 18 years old because the association, Amal, does not integrate this population segment of under 18 in its activities.

Characteristics of the participants

We included five members of the association: 2 young females and 3 young males aged between 19 and 26. Some of them are in higher education and others are in professional activities.

Individual interviews sample

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| Amal Association | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young women, 23 years old, student in law degree and residing in the city of El Hajeb. She is a member of the association and active in all the events organised. • A young male aged 26. He is a technician, member of the association, and active in the planning of activities at the local or national level. He also participates in artistic and cultural activities aimed at fighting against violence. • A young male aged 24 years. He is in a situation of reduced mobility. He manages the computer and technical tasks of the association. |
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RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

We followed the qualitative methodology in this phase of investigation. After direct contact with the president of the association and obtaining permission to set up interviews with his group; we first conducted a focus group composed of 5 participants within the premises of the association, we took into account the gender approach through the participation of two young women of the association. Throughout the focus group, we noted observations about their interaction with the questions asked: their discussions with each other and how they reacted to the issue of violence. Based on our observations, we were able to select participants to conduct in-depth individual interviews lasting between 1.5 and 2 hours. We conducted the interviews in Darija (Moroccan dialect) to simplify the communication with the participants.

We asked questions related to the definition of violent extremism, the types of violence identified during their activities, and their experiences in the city of El Hajeb, as well as the factors explaining radicalisation from their experiences and interpretations. We also dealt with the social and cultural opportunities present in their surroundings and how these socio-cultural spaces impact their life paths.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

With the Amal Association, we observed that the participants have difficulties in expressing themselves, which guided us to develop a suitable linguistic approach (use of easy notions in *Darija*) and also to use examples to properly guide the interview according to the context of the group, especially in the case of the participants who have a low level of education. Their descriptions of social facts were oriented by daily observation and their own interactions in the family environment and in social life. We adapted to the difficulties encountered by the flexibility in conducting the interviews, and the use of interactive communication. Furthermore, conducting the focus group within the premises of the organisation was an asset for the participants to be comfortable.

Meso-level dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The context of the region of Fez-Meknes, the city of El Hajeb located in the region of Fez-Meknes is characterised by the socio-cultural diversity and the presence of the Amazigh of the Middle Atlas who speak Amazigh language and the *Darija* dialect. The youth of the region live in a situation of socio-economic inequality and lack of opportunities to integrate into the labour market. This is reflected in the unemployment rate in 2020 being 16.6% with a percentage of 26.2% for women and 14.1% (Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2021) for men. The region presents an absence of investment projects for young people compared to larger regions such as the region of Casablanca, and economic activities are limited in the two areas of agriculture and trade. This situation is considered as a territorial gap that increases the risk of young people to become radicalised and produce violent acts or join a path of delinquency¹.

Despite the situation of precariousness and poverty that these young people experience, they have inscribed in an approach of social action as a strategy of struggle and resistance to create a space of expression and exchange, and to protect themselves from the acts that they consider them to be delinquent.

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HOW MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS WORK AT THE MESO-LEVEL STUDIED (THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS)?

To complete our analysis on the drivers of violent extremism, we will present an analysis of the seven drivers at the community level in interaction with the local and regional context in which the participants register and produce their response.

Religion

The participants first described violent extremism using specific terms such as *tashadud* in Arabic, they also gave definitions of the concept from the religious discourse containing the term *jihad* as mentioned by one of the participants:

*“In my opinion violent extremism is defined by jihad for Islam»². But they consider that *mutashadidin* (those who embrace *tashadud*, the Arabic term used by participants to describe violent extremism) people have become accepted by their family circles because the family members do not want to enter into a circle of conflicts. Others among them see that the norms of religious references are the determinants of the private life of each family, as it is the case of the organisation of the couple’s relations - namely the obligation to wear the *hijab* (veil) which has become normal practice and acceptable by the society³.*

¹ In-depth interview, male respondent.

² Focus group.

³ Ibid.

We found that some participants in the group do not know the concept of violent extremism, while the terminology is for them related to clothing or appearance styles such as the beard for men and the veil for women: *“in our family there is an extremist man, he has a beard, and when we organise a wedding ceremony, he does forbid many things such as participating together in the reading of the Quran, women must be hidden away from men, it is not necessary to use music in the wedding parties”*⁴.

The participants confirm that the obligation to respect some religious practices such as wearing the *hijab* represents a form of violence exercised by the family and by the society. They add that each religious practice must remain a personal aspect.

However, religious socialisation plays a key role in the radicalisation of young people as one of our interlocutors pointed out: *“people who move more towards radicalism are people influenced by religious socialisation and who follow the rules and practices of the Sunna”*⁵. In this sense, from the individual interviews, we can point out the difference between men and women in their perception of violence, for example: girls consider that women must be free in their clothes and religious practices, while men consider that the *hijab* is a religious value that must be accepted and protected by the social environment. The norms and practices that frame attitudes and lifestyle are interpreted as violent practices that determine the life of the woman. On the other hand, men consider that this normative framework is accepted and normal to keep the privacy of individuals.

The political driver

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The political driver for our interlocutors is represented in the lack of security. They referred to the attacks that Morocco has experienced as a result of the lack of security in public spaces. On the other hand, the participants see that the issue of security is a problem in large cities that are out of state control, specifically large cities like Casablanca and Tangier, but a city like El Hajeb is secure because it is easier to be under control⁶.

Participants expressed that citizens are responsible for the disadvantaged situation of the city, because they choose the elected officials of the local authorities through their vote. Our interlocutors defined violent acts as a form of claiming social rights, a way of expressing the socio-political situation of their territory⁷.

Economic deprivation, territorial inequalities and situations of social injustice

The territorial inequalities estimated as a major factor in the path to violence. Participants expressed such idea through a comparison between large cities and small towns. In their opinion, small cities like El Hajeb do not present a space of investment for young people, for them, it is a form of territorial marginalisation translated by the centralisation of power and economy in the large monopolies like the city of Casablanca. The absence of the construction of social and cultural spaces for young people

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In depth-interview, male respondent.

⁶ Focus group.

⁷ Ibid.

in the city also plays a role in the emergence of violence and the risk of radicalisation. The interlocutors translate the passage to the violent act as a reaction of the absence of a space of expression and the absence of social rights, which provides to the radical groups with the possibility to present tools for the propaganda and to recruit an important number of marginalised young people who feel excluded from society: *“as the professor said, the socially excluded young person finds a group which allows him to feel better, then it takes part in the plans of these radical groups”*⁸. But they consider that the violent answer to a situation of social inequality is limited in the individual attitude and does not take a collective form.

On the other hand, the participants confirmed that spatial inequalities do not represent a driving force of radicalisation, they justify it by the example of the social success of several young people who come from working class neighborhoods: *“there are people who live in working class neighborhoods and who have become senior executives”*⁹; whereas violence is not a fact linked to social status or a specific standard of living, but it is a product of multiple personal reasons¹⁰. Our interlocutors added that the association is a way to face violence; their activities have helped young people, and women especially, to become aware of social rights and to protect themselves from violence in the public and private sphere.

Education, culture and leisure opportunities

The socio-cultural extracurricular activities are absent in the schools of the city of El Hajeb, but young people seek to attend local places such as youth centers to participate in cultural workshops namely theater and music. In this sense, the participants have chosen to join the association to defend the rights of women and become aware of social changes and have the opportunity to adapt with the different situations. However, within the University, the cultural activities are presented and that replaces the role of public spaces in the listening and sharing of ideas: *“in the University for example, there are several activities as the theater of which the young people must be adhered to receive the information, because we do not have a communication with the administration, we need the activities to give us the opportunity of exchange and sharing”*¹¹.

The members of the association have expressed the absence of cultural clubs in schools, or the lack of youth centers in some neighborhoods. In this situation they have sought a cultural alternative to participate in social and cultural life by joining the association. We can say that young people are not sufficiently integrated into social and cultural life, which can be explained by the failure of the implementation of integral public policies in the small cities compared to the larger ones, the lack of interaction between the citizens and the representatives of the territorial communities which can reinforce the risk of radicalisation of the young people who do not have access to socio-cultural activities.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ In-depth interview, male respondent.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ In-depth interview, female respondent.

Digital socialisation

Our interviewees showed that they frequently visit the virtual space and that they are knowledgeable of the different digital platforms. From the individual interviews, the participants gave examples of the violent contents they find in social networks. They explained that the digital space has an important impact on young people and teenagers especially¹². From the participants' point of view, the role of technology is to facilitate communication, but they observed that the content published in social networks is violent content, namely torture, and the young people's comments on these videos show the possibility of taking this violence seriously and reproducing it later.

The interlocutors confirm that the impact of the violent content is a result of the lack of family control and parental guidance¹³. During the individual interview with one of the participants she presented concrete examples of violent content published on social networks: *"lately I saw videos on Taliban, they show a lot of violent practices and behaviors towards others, images that transmit implicit messages. When you see someone who has killed a person, or a child, and if a child looks at this kind of content in social networks, he will reproduce the same acts"*¹⁴.

Our interlocutors underlined that the diffusion of violence in the virtual sphere impacts the teenagers who are not aware of the risk of this content more than the adults who can choose a content far from violence. For them, the family must take into consideration that control and communication are the effective means to protect children and adolescents.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND INTERACTIONS AMONG DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

From our case study, we noticed that the problems that young people experience were associated with the position of the city of El Hajeb compared to other cities. They consider that violence is not linked to a specific geographical space, but it is the result of specific reasons and situations of individuals and precisely that communication within the family and listening and participation in social life can give these young people the opportunity to change their ideas and orientations.

We can say that the integration of these young people in the association has given them a new environment for cultural exchanges, the opening on different tools of expression like social actions for young people, artistic activities like theater and music, as well as their active presence in the process of the fight against violence in the public space. Through their speeches this group is still trying to develop its knowledge so that it can achieve its objectives in the fight and prevention against violence. The members of this association work with different categories of victims of violence or in their social interactions within their entourage.

¹² In-depth interview, male respondent.

¹³ Focus group.

¹⁴ In-depth interview, female respondent.

Conclusions on the analysis of meso drivers

We can underline that the factors of radicalisation do not work independently, but we find a multiplication of factors in the local space as the interaction between the situation of poverty and precariousness in relation to the personal needs of young people to express themselves and communicate. The feeling of belonging to the territory is strong among our interlocutors, they have created their own space of creativity without thinking about migrating to larger regions like Casablanca and Tangier-Tetouan. Adding the associative work at the local community level expresses that the young people of the city are trying to build an integrated world far from the conflicts with the political decision-makers.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

The indicators that can be drawn from our case study are:

- The importance of building advice and counselling centers within the school and university spaces.
- The family must take into account the importance of communication with children and adolescents.
- The need to create synergies between associations that work in the socio-cultural field and local authorities to integrate young people from different neighborhoods.
- To integrate young people in the political discussion to express their needs.
- The importance of raising awareness among young people about violence and the risks that can affect their environment.

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

The meso analysis has allowed us to draw some indicators of violent extremism at the individual level, in this sense, the factors that we have grasped from our case study are: the inequalities between regions and the absence of solid public policies for the promotion of human rights, the exclusion of young people from political decision-making and the absence of cultural and leisure spaces in small towns and universities, and the role of the family in the obligation of some religious norms that do not always adapt with the freedom of young people in terms of practices.

General Conclusion

From the focus group we organised and the individual interviews, we can conclude our results as follows:

Young people of the region of Fez-Meknes are far from the social and political domain, which sometimes justifies in them the feeling of isolation and which pushes them to look for alternatives such as the adhesion to the association of our case study.

The role of associations in the fight against violence through the creation of advice and counselling centers and legal guidance. This strategy allows young people to learn about their social rights and their role as active citizens in society.

The participants also consider that public policies do not represent a true model of protection of youth from violence, while civil society becomes a main actor in the social fabric and in the innovation of mechanisms to fight against violence and extremism.

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Focus group with members of Amal association.

3 in-depth interviews with youngsters from Amal association.



Ultras Siempre Paloma football supporters

Amina Errifaiy, Khalid Mouna

Introduction

To understand the impact of macro structures on different territories, we have chosen to work in this phase of investigation on a group of sports Ultras active in the northern region of Morocco located in the city of Tetouan.

The purpose of working on this region is first to show how sport plays a role in the activism of Moroccan youth to claim rights, as well as to grasp the elements that constitute violence and the nature of the conflicts produced within this community and its relationship with violent extremism. We will therefore test the factors of violent extremism, the perceptions of the category of Ultras towards violence and the interaction between the community and the political structures of the region.

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We have selected this case because of its activities in relation to the other Ultras of Morocco, and from the information of the spaces where they are active and the important number of its members. The presence of this group in the Tangier-Tetouan region allows us to highlight the comparison between geographical regions, which gives us the possibility to identify the specific factors of radicalisation in relation to the space.

The group of Ultras represents for our study an important case because the young adherents come from different geographical spaces, the members enter in a conflictual relation with the political institutions, and they mobilise discourses of hate and violence in the virtual space¹⁵.

This group of Ultras is inspired by the activities of Ultras in other contexts like Egypt, and it tries to show different activities that it considers as actions of social change, alternative actions to improve the socio-economic situation of the region's youth.

Through focus groups and in-depth interviews, we aim at identifying the specific factors that lead young people to join violent groups. Our objective is to determine the weight of the drivers of violent extremism and their interactions with the social and economic situations of individuals belonging to a specific community, in this case the community of ultras.

¹⁵ The research team followed the activities and publications of the group in social networks.

Research methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

After completion of WP4 empirical research, we identified economic inequality and the interpretation of religious discourse as main drivers considered at the macro-level perspective. This is why the state has attempted to reformulate the religious field to limit terrorist actions. But the question that arises in this sense is: are these drivers still relevant at the community level? Can we capture other specific indicators at the level of a particular geographic or community space?

In the macro analysis of WP4 we have shown some criticisms of institutional policies in the fight against violent extremism, as well as the characteristics of its strategies carried out in different neighborhoods in the North of Morocco. From this analysis we can highlight the following elements:

- The importance of controlling the media and violent contents.
- The need to open the debate with civil society organisations that deal with the issue of violence.
- The openness of youth to cultural spaces.
- The participation of youth in local governance and communication with elected politicians.

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MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

In our case study, the meso analysis allows us to show the role of communities in the process of the construction of violence, the social characteristics that mark the individual and social experiences of young people, especially their relationship to violence within the school or in the public space, and that lead them to the situation of marginality¹⁶.

In our case study, we aim to identify how this group of Ultras has impacted a significant number of young people who have gone to Daesh in the period between 2011 and 2019¹⁷, and what is their discourse and interpretation of the production of violence in their territory, as well as the actions of mobilised youth against violence and / or to engage in activism in the North of Morocco.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region ranks third in terms of participation in the national GDP (10.8%) (Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2020). It is the second region in terms of economic activity, especially since the creation of the port Tangier-Med in the 2000s. However, this region has experienced a significant departure of young people to war zones, particularly since the 1980s, with the rise of Salafism Wahabism. This region has also experienced several forms of violence practiced by the state, first the repression of the revolt of 1958-59, then that of 1984, then the Hirak of the Rif in 2016-17. The migration

¹⁶ Participants come from neighborhoods characterised by the absence of socio-cultural integration spaces for young people, and labelled as marginal neighborhoods.

¹⁷ Confidential information presented by a State official.

network in Belgium and Holland has also played an important role in the arrival of Wahabism but also Shi'ism, especially in Tangier. In this sense, the positive indicator of economic development has not slowed the development of radicalism, which is explained for some of our interlocutors by the historical burden of this region marked by a strong state violence.

We also tried to shift the perceptions to understand the common characteristics: socio-economic, political and cultural elements shared by the youth in the Northern region and that motivate youth to travel to conflict zones. On the other hand, we also tried to look for indicators on which we can base the next steps of the micro analysis.

DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

Our case study is a sports Ultra group. It is a group of active young people in the Northern region of Morocco (Tetouan). The specificity of this group lies in the departure of a significant number of its members to Daesh¹⁸. This group gathers more than 1000 members from different neighborhoods of Tetouan¹⁹, especially neighborhoods characterised by socio-economic fragility. The majority of the members of this group have a low level of education²⁰. The choice of this group is justified by the link of these members with those who left for conflict zones (Islamic State), which seems important to us in order to better understand the factors that led their friends to the path of jihadism. The relational aspects are thus important to analyse the impact of social interactions in a given space and compare them with other geographical spaces that have different characteristics (social, cultural factors, territorial inequalities).

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CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION (OF PARTICIPANTS)

From a socio-economic point of view, the group members are from a marginalised neighborhood that contains different social categories that are always in conflict with the local political institutions, and that carry out actions to express their social, political and economic needs.

We first contacted one of the leaders of the group to explain the context of our survey, we conducted a non-directive interview with him to have a relationship of trust, then we asked for an appointment to conduct a focus group. The participants of the focus group were selected based on their age and their participation in the activities organised by the group throughout the year. We conducted two focus groups, one with participants aged between 18 and 30 years old, and another one with participants aged between 14 and 17 years old. This last focus group was organised inside the school after permission of the director.

When it comes to gender, it needs to be emphasised that all the participants are young men, we didn't find any girls supporting the Ultras. Since its creation, the majority of the group's members are men.

¹⁸ An interview with a president of social organisation active in Tetouan.

¹⁹ The interview with the leader of the Ultras in the North of Morocco.

²⁰ Interview with the leader of Ultras.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The focus group sample. Characteristics of the participants in the focus groups

The Sports Ultras (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of participants: young men, 6 members of the Ultra group. • Age: Young people between 18 and 30 years old, living in a marginalised neighborhood in Tetouan and practicing precarious activities such as trade in souks. Their educational level is limited to primary and secondary school level. • Group activities: It is a group that organises itself within the same neighborhood, and is active in social networks, either through their own publications or with Ultras from other regions. Their interest is to react with political events and social situations, not just sports.
The Sports Ultras (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of participants: 5 adolescents. • Age: minors aged between 14 and 17 years old, living in the marginalised area of “ Jamma Mezouak” in the Tetouan City.

Individual interviews sample description

Sports group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A young man aged 29 years old, the founder and leader of the Ultras group. His educational level is college. His job is unstable (informal activities). He is the one who organises all the activities of the group. 2. An active 23-year-old men. He discusses all issues related to marginalised youth, territorial inequalities and also political positions. He opens discussions around the issue of violent extremism and terrorism. 3. A young man aged 26. His school level is college. He is the one who writes the slogans for each event and always accompanies the group on its trips
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RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

Before starting the interviews, we translated the interview guide into Darija (Moroccan dialect) to facilitate the understanding of the basic concepts. We contacted the leader of the group to ask permission to conduct a focus group with him and the Ultras members. We conducted all interviews in their own neighborhood. The activities conducted were: one focus group with the young members of the group, one focus group with minors, and 3 in-depth interviews with the leader and other active members of Ultras group. The face-to-face interviews were an opportunity to discover the reactions of this category in relation to the problems related to radicalisation and violent extremism.

We have also exploited the observation of the activities carried out by the group in the virtual space in order to see the violent of the discourses conveyed in the digital sphere and observe the conflicts with the political actors.

For minors under 18 years old from the same neighborhood, we first organised a meeting interview before conducting the focus group, and we chose a school within the neighborhood to prepare a space for educational exchange when conducting the focus group.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

The work with the group of supporters was particularly delicate, firstly, because this group has experienced a significant number of departures to war zones, and secondly, we needed a trusted intermediary to be able to access them.

The second obstacle was including minors under the age of 18 related to the sports group, and also finding a suitable place for the discussion.

To overcome these constraints, we tried to find intermediaries to gain access, and also to set up initial informal meetings with the group members to establish a relationship of trust with them.

Meso-level dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

What is remarkable in this case study is the social and economic inequalities in the same city²¹. These socio-economic situations that young people are living put young people in the margin and push them to seek new opportunities to improve the standard of living. We observed that the neighborhood of Jamaâ Mazouaq²² does not count on any leisure or cultural space such as youth centers. There is also an absence of public services such as health centers and economic activities are limited to formal and informal trade.

The participants selected for this survey have confirmed that some social conditions in the Northern region of Morocco can push young people to radicalisation, namely: unemployment, school abandonment, poverty and weak family relationships. In these situations, young people are faced with producing violence as a reaction in their own environment. Besides the risk of adhering to radical groups either in Morocco or traveling to war zones. In this context, we will present the factors of radicalisation from the discourse and actions of the participants, and see how these factors influence the ideas of minors from the same space.

Religion

The religious factor has a clear impact in the Northern region, especially since a set of youth who chose to leave for al-Qaeda were impacted by the religious discourse²³. However, religion was not a driving force behind radicalisation, as participants did not notice their religious practices as a primary element in their daily lives. They justified their violent discourse and anger by the nature of their conflicts with state officials. We emphasise that they also rejected the relationship between religion and politics of which the PJD (Party of Justice and Development) is the case. The participants consider it an "extremist party" that does not take seriously the needs of the citizens and that has no concrete achievements at the political level in the region. *"We belong to an Ultras certainly, but we must not link this to the issue of extremism, because if we talk about this, we must admit that we are already governed by a regime and an Islamic government, and myself I voted for this government, my father as well, even the policeman voted for the Islamic government, is it going to be said that it is an extremist government. They have managed to spread their propaganda widely"* ²⁴.

Others among them stressed that individuals must be free in their thinking and belief. They observed that some members of the group have become conservative and they gave their opinion based on religious references on football. Our interlocutors justify the change of ideology among their friends by an exogenous influence and not endogenous: *"the thought of the team is open, and has no relation*

²¹ Based on the observations that we conducted in the city of Tetouan, we can affirm that the district of origin of our interlocutors has a lack of socio-cultural spaces, hospitals and fewer schools, despite the fact that Jamma Mazouaq is a very large district geographically.

²² Observations noted in the neighborhood where the participants live.

²³ Interview with a coordinator of the national coordination for the defense of detainees trapped in Syria and Iraq, April, 2022.

²⁴ Focus group, Ultras.

*with radicalism or violence. And those who do not like our activity consider that soccer is forbidden in Islam, especially those who were members of Ultras and overnight became too reserved, it is the same case of a famous singer who was fans of Ultras too*²⁵.

The interlocutors announced that the religious principles must be based on freedom and peace. They expressed that the members who left to Daesh have personal reasons and not collective. Being an ultra for them is a mechanism to fight against marginality and corruption in the region.

The political driver

Politics is one of the main factors in the participants' discourse. They showed the conflict between the group members, the elected local officials, the central government and the regional sports representatives. This triangle indicates that the group takes sport as one of the elements of protest against the power. They describe the disadvantaged situation of the city and of the young people from the slogans prepared and disseminated in social networks.

The participants recall the historical relationship between politics and the Ultras not only at the local level, but also in the national and transnational context: *"the Ultras have a political history in Tunisia, it is the Ultras that have guided the revolution... the former Ultras have marked the political history of the different countries... the Ultras have become bigger than a political party in terms of membership and influence"*²⁶. It can be seen that the group has entered into a symbolic political competition with the representatives of political parties.

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The participants expressed that violence is not only a product of youth, but also a violence exercised by the state, as the interlocutors consider that their social exclusion is a form of violence exercised by the state. To them violence is rooted in the social and economic inequalities in the Northern region, the violent prohibition to organise protests to claim social and political rights, as well as the lack of communication between elected politicians and citizens. The interlocutors declared that their sports activity is a means of expression and revindication as our interlocutor underlined: *"the foundation of the team was for several reasons: to defend the city, to defend the individuals"*²⁷.

The political in this context takes its place in the creation of a space of conflict between the state and the youth of the city, and through the game they are active in the organisation of the scenario for revindication against policy-makers and organic laws.

The economic deprivation driver

Unemployment and poverty are components declared by our participants. They explained violent extremism by the social and economic problems of the city's youth. The lack of means and economic resources marginalise young people who want to change their future, according to one participant: *"young*

²⁵ In-depth interview.

²⁶ Focus group.

²⁷ Ibid.

people do not have the means to take a cab and pay to play"²⁸. During the conversations, they questioned the reasons for the marginalisation of young people while the state needs human resources to keep its peace and security.

The interlocutors associated the adherence to violent groups with poverty: *"they exploit the youth and take advantage of their poverty and marginality"*²⁹. The participants quoted that in the absence of the main necessities the young people look for alternatives to improve their life and satisfy their needs. All the participants expressed that poverty and precariousness are the driving forces behind violent extremism.

Education, culture and leisure opportunities

The marginalised neighborhoods do not count on a cultural infrastructures for young people, which pushes them into delinquency or violence *"The lack of leisure spaces is also a factor, the state is starting now, after the departure of young people to the conflict areas to make and build leisure spaces, soccer fields but before the young people did not find any space, they had to pay to play, there is no team or anything, so they lose hope, they started to consume drugs, and spent the day in the coffee shops"*³⁰. All the participants mentioned the absence of sports grounds, youth centers where they can practice sports and artistic activities. For them, this situation indicates the total marginalisation of young people from social life; they used the term in Darija of *hugra*³¹ to describe the feeling of isolation from other territories.

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The participants consider that being one of the active members of Ultras can enhance the cultural orientations of young people, especially that the principles of the group are openness to other cultures and the acceptance of the other, whether it was ideological or religious difference. They confirmed that young people are excluded from socio-cultural programs, with an absence of youth centers notably in the popular districts. They added that this absence plays an important role in the process of radicalisation of youth: *"The lack of leisure spaces is a factor of radicalism, and the absences of these places are also the factors of the production of other social phenomena such as delinquency"*³².

The members of the group have found that the way out of this isolation is to join the Ultras in which they can improve their relational network, and an alternative for the youth of the city. The integration of ultras for our interlocutors is a mechanism to express their claims and grievances, particularly economic deprivation. The organised activities go through the leaders of the group who manage the stages and also the symbols used during their presence in the playgrounds. We have observed that one member among them uses the style of graffiti on the walls of the neighborhood designating political, cultural and sports symbols. Sport is therefore not the only objectively targeted by the group, but it has become an integrated method in a process of conflict and confrontation with the state.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Focus group of Ultras.

³¹ All the participants described their situation by this concept.

³² In-depth interview.

The majority of minors interviewed in the educational space stated that they do not participate in any school activities, thus the absence of activities related to national events or cultural events for teenagers and students in schools: *"No, we don't participate, and no one asks us to participate or prepare for an activity, neither do they organise activities"*³³.

Digital socialisation

From the point of view of the participants digital socialisation has an impact on the ideas of young people. On the one hand, members of Ultras use various platforms to organise and publish the announcements of the events. We noticed that they are very active in social networks like Facebook where they have created official pages and discussion groups³⁴. Social networks in their opinion are a sphere of expression of social needs and a mechanism for transferring messages to policy makers about the situation of marginality and exclusion and any form of injustice.

The digital technology replaces the role of cultural activities for teenagers. We have found that minors spend more than two hours in video games of a violent nature, such as fights and wars. They also frequently use social networks. The participants see that the virtual space is a field of production of violence, it is by the diffusion of images and videos that demonstrate the torture, the speech of the interlocutors indicates their refusal to diffuse or see violent content: *"Me, I do not like this kind of content, and I always refuse that my friends send me violent content like images and videos of torture"*³⁵.

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This case study represents an example of the daily conflicts that young people from marginal spaces live. On the one hand, the feeling of social isolation, and the lack of social and economic integration strengthen the position of young people from marginal spaces compared to those from more accommodated spaces. On the other, the young people interviewed see the activities of Ultras as a form of demonstration to convey a discourse which expresses social and economic dissatisfaction.

To sum up, the drivers identified in the discussions are: the lack of political participation of young people in the construction of local public policies, the disadvantaged economic situation and the absence of cultural activity for young people in marginal spaces.

In the case of minors, we have observed that violence is exercised in the educational space: the family and the school in particular, which they consider a legitimate act. On the other hand, there is always the risk of radicalisation through the digital space, as minors have become addicted to social networks and violent video games, far from the initial role of the family in orientation and communication. From the focus group of minors, the participants have shown its low participation in extracurricular activities and also communication within the family, which rounds the digital space an opportunity to share and exchange with peers. The characteristics of the working-class neighborhoods show how many of the young people live in the margins of society, while a group of them always try to show their belonging to this territory through sports or art.

³³ Focus group, minors.

³⁴ Observations on the Facebook official pages of the group.

³⁵ In-depth interview.

From this group of minors, the factor that seems to have a significant impact is their relationship to the virtual space, especially the daily social networks and video games. This uncontrolled use shows the absence of communication and poor relationship with their family, which leads them to look for an alternative to weave social relationships through the virtual space.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND INTERACTIONS AMONG DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

The drivers analysed are the main drivers of violent extremism as expressed by our interviewees. But what is remarkable is the relationship between these factors and the socio-economic and political context of the city. In this context, we can emphasise that young people in the city of Tetouan are always looking for some kind of integration process by joining the Ultras. This group plays an important role in the political mobilisation of young people. The strong presence of this case study is not limited to the sports activity, but it also takes other social, economic and political dimensions. The goal of the youth was always to find a space of expression and socio-political interaction either with the youth with whom they share the same situation of marginality and social injustice, or a space to express the needs of the population.

Conclusions on the analysis of meso-level drivers

To conclude this analysis, we can say that the drivers of radicalisation and VE are very much specific of the social category studied and their impact is not independent of social relationships that young people establish in society. When we talk about young people, they represent the large active category that is seen as deserving an important place in the national political debate, and also in the management of the local territory in order to minimise the rate of violence.

We can also add that the interlocutors have pointed out different forms of violence: physical but also symbolic, which is interpreted in terms of the status of injustice and inequality. We also found that in addition to the pre-identified seven drivers by CONNEKT, the following factor stands out as relevant: the lack of control by families. Young people under 18 years old who participated in our research reported that they spend time on social networks far from the control of their families (*"I always recharge my phone, I spend two hours every day on the phone"*)³⁶.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

From the in-depth interviews, the indicators for prevention against violent extremism are:

- Building sports fields in working class neighborhoods.
- Strengthen awareness around communication within the family.
- Developing creative spaces for young people from different backgrounds.
- Integrate the youth of the city in the social and political dynamics.

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

It should be noted that the meso analysis can facilitate the selection of young people to conduct the micro survey phase based on their role in the community and their relationship to the study area. Within this framework, we can follow the following aspects in the micro analysis:

- The nature of the conflicts produced within the community.
- The relationship of young people to violence in the environment (family, neighborhood and school).
- The individual reactions to situations of violence and the response to the state of injustice.
- The nature of the ideology that impacts the ideas of youth.
- Perceptions of the returnees from conflict zones.

³⁶ Focus Group, minors.

General Conclusion

To conclude, we can emphasise that the closed community can reinforce the attraction to violence among young people in different spaces. The Ultras takes their position as a tool for political pressure and the manifestation of different forms of violence. The group is heterogeneous and the participants consider that Ultras is a political mobilisation to claim for the integration of young people in the social and economic life and not only a sports activity . The dynamism of the group plays a role of a sphere that accepts the marginalised and excluded youth of society to express and claim against local politics.

Among the factors of radicalisation identified in this case study are: economic inequality and lack of access to social services, the digital environment, and the absence of an integral cultural policy.

Social, economic and political exclusion are revealed as important factors that push these young people to go to conflict zones and/or participate in the production of violent acts in the public space and mobilise a violent discourse in the virtual space.

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Adl wal Ihsane association

Amina Errifaiy, Khalid Mouna

Introduction

In the CONNEKT project, the meso research phase plays an important role in the analysis of the drivers of violent extremism, particularly in the different national contexts. We chose to work on three case studies to understand how the seven drivers of violent extremism operate in the community context, and to describe youth perceptions around the issue of radicalisation via the notion of violence and its impact on individual attitudes.

In this report, we will present the main results of our empirical research with a religious-political group that has been present in the Moroccan political scene for decades, and that circulates its ideology nationally and through the use of various methods. The importance of this case study for the CONNEKT project lies in the role of this politico-religious group in the socialisation of young people regarding ideology. Since the creation of this Islamist movement, the adherents have tried to found *Dawlat khilafa* (a caliphate state) and do not recognise the legitimacy of *Imarat Muminin* (the position of Commander of the Faithful) in Morocco. The nature of the conflict between the Islam of the state and the Islam exercised by this group is at the core of the issue. Since its inception, it has remained outside the Moroccan political scene, but it has always tried to exercise its strategy through the diversity of its activities: the organisation of associative and religious activities, particularly within the University (Yafout, 2017). It is considered an illegal group by the State since its creation and thus the number of its adherents is not provided officially, but its presence is strong at the level of the clandestine activities within the associations of religious character. Through its representatives in Moroccan universities they convey their ideas regarding freedoms, the relations between the Muslim world and the West, and the position of women in public space.

The politico-religious movement has a history of conflict with the Moroccan state and its exclusion from participation in political activities at the national level. However, it has structured an “authentic Islamic society (Daoudi and Alami-Fischer, 2020). This case study can contribute to the understanding the ideology of the group and its relationship with the seven drivers of radicalisation and to what extent it has an impact on the trajectories of young Moroccans.

The results might shed some light on the influence on the formation of religious and political ideas of young people and the mechanisms that the politico-religious group uses to build resilience at the policies of the Moroccan state. It is worth noting that the members of this movement participated in the movement of February 20, 2011. Several of them were engaged in the protests organised by

*"lajna Lmouchtaraka"*³⁷, an organisation claiming for the release of Salafists detained for terrorism.³⁸

To analyse the data collected, we aim to answer the following questions:

- How does the political-religious group participate in the development of a model of socialisation of young people despite its exclusion from the public political field?
- What legitimacy do the members of the group give to violence and violent extremism? What is their interpretation of religion?
- What factors does the group consider as leading to radicalisation?

³⁷ A movement directed by a group of Salafists who have organised several protests to demand the release of Islamist prisoners sentenced for terrorism in Morocco. All activities are available at: <http://www.cddi.org/>

³⁸ Interview with the coordinator of the *Lajna Lmouchtaraka*, Tangier, March, 2022.

Research methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

In WP4, we worked on the institutional discourse around the issue of radicalisation in Morocco. Our macro-level report on the drivers of radicalisation and VE offered a picture of how the state deals with the subject. From the fieldwork of WP4, we found that the interaction of territorial inequalities with political issues and economic deprivation are key relevant drivers of radicalisation. According to the intervening actors, the inequalities between the regions of Morocco, the lack of integration of young people in the public sphere, the non-participation in the creation of public policies, and the absence of economic programs in some regions can push individuals to engage in violent extremism. Digital socialisation also plays a key role, with some actors justifying the process of radicalisation by the exposure to new technologies and the continuous use of social networks by youth. The following recommendations result from the macro analysis:

- Enhance cooperation between state institutions and civil society to fight and prevent violent extremism.
- Integrate youth in the management of the public sphere.
- Create a space of culture and creativity for young people to practice leisure.
- Put forward a communication strategy between the different actors in the fight against radicalisation.
- Strengthen the role of educational institutions.

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

The meso analysis is linked to the macro study, since it is informed by the results obtained in the macro level regarding the seven pre-identified drivers (religion, economic deprivation territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, political issues, digital socialisation and education, culture and leisure opportunities). The selection of the case studies will allow the project to compare the state and supra-state approach to the phenomenon with the perception embedded in certain communities.

In this case study the interrelation between the religious and the political is central but it is also relevant to explore how the rest of drivers interact, if they do. Besides, the meso research allows to analyse to what extent religious ideology is taken as an individual and as a collective reference. The research allows us to describe also the mechanisms and tools of operation of this movement in various spaces such as schools, universities and the media to support the continuity of its activism and ideology.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

We aim through this study to focus on the perceptions and definitions of the members of this study group, the factors of radicalisation at the meso level and their interactions with the local context. It is a contextual analysis that treats violent extremism at the community level and then explains it at the meso level according to the interlocutors' interpretation of community norms and values, as well as

the social elements of extremism in the local versus the national context. Our objective is also to capture the aspects of prevention and countering violent extremism outlined by our study group and their recommendations from their own needs.

DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

It should be noted that, since the 1980s, the community under study has created its own space to defend its political-religious ideology. The group is still present in the public spaces despite its exclusion from the official political game. The impact of this group on young people is visible in their speeches, which express a strong resistance to political and social changes, as well as in their capacity to adopt new strategies to adhere new members either in schools or in universities.

The members of this movement are very present in different spaces such as universities by organising cultural and religious activities notably by their domination of the Moroccan students' union UTM, but also in associations which set up religious activities intended for women and young people (in the form of religious training). This group opposes the state's monopoly of the religious sphere, and demands a sharing in the management of this domain. It assumes that there is a distortion of the monarchical power in Morocco, and questions the way in which the power passes from father to son. The group refers to the khilafa (caliphate) instead of the monarchy (Zeghal, 2005).

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CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION (OF PARTICIPANTS)

Our selection of participants for this focus group includes three dimensions: local, regional and national. The members of the group are active at the local level by organising activities in the different cities, but the major decisions are made by the national leadership. What characterises this group is its political history and the refusal to recognise the religious authority of the ruler, which gives it a space for the creation of a work and organisation strategy to strengthen its ideology and impact the youth.

The main selection criteria are: the diversity of the activities of this group within different organisations such as universities, the professional status of the participants, the presence of women and the age span. We expressed our wish to have a meeting with the 14 to 17 year olds belonging to this group, but our request was denied³⁹. The group members who were present in our focus group have a high level of education, with a master's degree and above.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The selection of the members who participated in the focus group was made by the group's regional management of Fez-Meknes. The focus group was held in the presence of the group leader in a public space.

³⁹ Researchers attempted to conduct interviews with the younger members of the group, but the regional leader refused.

Characteristics of the participants in focus groups

The political-
religious group

- Number of participants: 5 members of the movement.
 - Age: between 26 and 30 years old.
 - Gender: 2 women and 3 men.
 - Education level: Their level of education is high (PhD level in law and Islamic studies).
 - Type of activity: Their activities are divided between teaching and higher studies.
 - These members have varied profiles, they have a strong presence in educational, social and also political structures at the national level, as well as in the virtual space.
-

Individual interviews

The political-
religious group

- A young man aged 18, student at the Faculty of Science. He recently joined the movement.
 - A 30 year old woman, PhD candidate. She is active at the associative level, she participates in all the activities and the demonstrations of the group, as well as from other organisations which share with them the same ideology.
 - A young woman, 26 years old, teacher in high school. She joined the group with her husband. She tries to integrate her religious ideology into the educational and school environment. Her profile is important in terms of the emergence of such ideology in the school space and the potentialities of influence on young people.
-

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

In this phase of research, we used qualitative research techniques: 1 focus group and 3 individual in-depth interviews. We were able to carry out only one focus group because of the refusal of the organisation to allow us to conduct another focus groups with other members and specifically with members under 18 years of age. We adapted the guiding questions according to the local context of our study case. Regarding the individual interviews, we used the Google Meet application for the 3 interviews because they refused several times to meet physically. Each individual interview lasted one and a half hours.

We started the interviews with the participants' definition of violent extremism to understand how they perceive the phenomenon in the Moroccan context, as well as their interactions within the group and outside their community. These are important aspects of the analysis of interaction between the drivers of radicalisation and the existing social interactions in both the local and national context.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

We encountered several obstacles in the implementation of this phase of research: first, the resistance of the political-religious group to organise the initial focus group because of their conflict with the State and also the political typology of the subject.

Our research was perceived as suspicious by participants, and we were confronted with the cancellation of several appointments for reasons that were not understood. It is thanks to our contacts with members of the group's central office, that we were finally able to set a date for the focus group in a public café, after their refusal to enter the university, but also because of the university's refusal at the last minute for the group to access the premises of the institution. The second obstacle was the refusal of our request to conduct a focus group with the minors belonging to the group.

Meso-level dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

From our case study, the political factor and state institutions play an important role in the increase of the rate of violence, in the lack of treatment of the youth issue through the creation of a social environment that adapts with their needs. On the other hand, official actors are considered to be directly responsible for corruption, unemployment and the lack of integration of youth in the governance and political management of local territories. The local context therefore allows us to understand the interaction between the drivers of radicalisation and the role of social actors, their discourse around violence and their collective perceptions of the phenomenon.

HOW MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS WORKS AT THE MESO LEVEL STUDIED (THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS)?

As we presented in the WP4 report on the macro drivers of violent extremism, we will explain the functioning of the seven drivers at the community level, and their interactions in the local and regional dynamics. The seven factors we test in this phase are: religion, territorial inequalities, political issues, economic deprivation, digital socialisation, transnational dynamics and education, culture and leisure opportunities.

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Religion

Religion is a main element in the group's discourse. The participants link the transformation of the religious field in Morocco with the political transformations that Morocco has experienced. In this sense, they see that religion is a necessity for the whole society and it should not be limited to the private life of individuals. They consider that religion does not participate in the production of radicalism and violence, but in their opinion, the problem is the lack of the role of religious institutions, especially the mosque, in the socialisation of young people on the principles of the Islamic religion. The participants believe that the state does not want to grant importance to Islamic education: *"The individual becomes like a blank page, an open book in front of everyone and easy to seduce. He becomes blind, he can't distinguish between what is wrong and what is right. And the media has played an extremely important role in the failure of socialisation processes"*⁴⁰.

We found that the interlocutors put forward an interpretation of the religious as an absent and disappeared element in the educational system which they call the system of norms and values; whereas religion must be present in all levels to minimise physical violence. Their opinion is justified by the nature of Islam which represents a tolerant religion. According to them, true Muslims refuse any type of violence either in the private or public sphere, and radicalism is not a result of the religious aspect, as underlined by one of the participants: *"radicalism has no relation with the Quranic verses, nor with the Sunna of the prophet"*⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Online in-depth interview, female participant

⁴¹ Online in-depth interview, female participant.

From another point of view, religion is interpreted as a resilience mechanism in front of violence and radicalism. The participant adds that Islam is a source of justice, peace and modernity, values that contribute to the fight against violent extremism, rather than being drivers of radicalisation⁴². The participants presented the example of moderate Islam from the behavior of group leaders as figures that express the principles of religion. In their opinion, human relations must be based on three main elements: rejection of violence, transparency and the adoption of a good behavior with strangers⁴³.

The interlocutors expressed that religion is a collective reference that determines individual attitudes, but the political management of religious spaces in Morocco are elements that cannot protect youth: *"Nowadays the mosques do not play a role in the religious orientation of young people because of the new management of the religious field in Morocco"*⁴⁴. Violent extremism is perceived as a result of, on the one hand, the decline and weak role that institutions occupy in changing the normative structure and its impact on the global religious culture, and on the other hand the state's monopoly on violence. According to an interviewee *"the state uses violence for the control and legitimacy of its power"*⁴⁵. The participants therefore consider that the official political practices are contradictory to the values of Islam. The speakers believe that the religious became a secondary element in the educational system, because the curriculum of Islamic education is devalued: *"Islamic education has no great value as a subject compared to the rest of the subjects"*⁴⁶. They believe that the absence of this element in school programs pushes young people to practice and exercise several forms of violence.

The political driver

The political factor is very present in the speech of the participants. They argued *"that the State eliminated the young people from political participation as in the case of trade unions and political parties"*⁴⁷. The exclusion of participation of the members of this politico-religious group in the elections are forms of injustice and hindrance to the freedom of expression, opinion and listening. On the other hand, one of the participants confirmed that *"the Moroccan state cannot be considered a democratic state because it treats the protests of the youth in the public space with violence, he added that the state does not have the mechanisms of communication and dialogue"*⁴⁸.

Other participants also expressed their discontent with the government, accused of not taking into account the circumstances of citizens when making decisions, especially in the period of the pandemic: *"In Morocco and as citizens, we only see decisions made overnight, we are aware of the efforts made by the state in this direction, but we need the means to accept the health measures"*⁴⁹.

⁴² Online in-depth interview, female participant.

⁴³ Focus group.

⁴⁴ Online in-depth interview, female participant

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Because this group cannot participate in official activities, and the state does not grant them the authorisation to pursue political activities.

⁴⁸ Focus group.

⁴⁹ Online in-depth interview, female respondent.

Also, the political factor for this group is related to the situation of injustice and marginality. This injustice is explained by the exclusion from political participation and expression of the people. For them, it is a kind of symbolic violence exercised by the State: *“for example, I was among the unemployed senior executives, I suffered several times from the violence of the auxiliary forces, and that the fact of protesting is a right recognised in all the international charters, it’s a right and a freedom of expression⁵⁰”*. In the same sense, the interlocutors recall the elimination of the Union of Moroccan students in 1985 within the Moroccan Universities *“the authorities do not authorise the political debate so that the students find solutions to their problems in a democratic way. It is normal to ignite the practices of violence because there is not a practice of healthy politics⁵¹”*.

We found that the interlocutors talked about two forms of violence: the violence exercised from the description of the conflicts between the group and the state, and the violence exercised by individuals as a reaction to the situation of political exclusion and marginalisation: *“we can say that it is a reaction and a result on a state, a project and a policy that influenced individuals, because it is the accumulation of the lack of consciousness plus the pressure of the state, the absence of the minimum conditions of life and comfort, any person reacts in the way that seems right to him⁵²”*. The interlocutors see that violence practiced by the State is contradictory to democratic values, which reinforces the feeling of exclusion among marginalised individuals and leads them to reproduce this violence in different forms.

Territorial inequalities

The speakers consider that violent extremism is not limited to a specific space. They believe that spatial characteristics do not produce radicalism. For them it is the lack of socialisation and/or personal and individual reasons that lead individuals to become radicalised or put forward violent acts: *“someone who has a good university degree and a high social and economic level, but perhaps suffered one of the forms of violence in the period of childhood, so the reasons and factors are not limited in specific standards⁵³”*.

One of the participants expressed that marginalised geographic spaces can be a field where terrorist organisations appear. Young people who suffer from social exclusion can be ready to learn radical ideas, and then, social and psychological problems are direct drivers of radicalisation. However, the territorial characteristics do not represent a driver that leads to violent extremism. On the other hand, socialisation is represented as a process that protects young people who live in fragile neighborhoods from becoming violent.

The economic deprivation driver

The low economic level is considered by the participants of the group as a direct factor of radicalisation. In their opinion, poverty builds in individuals a feeling of injustice in relation to others. For our interlocutors, terrorist groups take the poverty of the youth as one of the main elements to attract them

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Focus group.

⁵² Online in-depth interview, female participant.

⁵³ Ibid.

to join conflict zones: “for me I don’t justify this kind of behavior even if it is the reason and the motive that pushes young people to extremism, it can be a reaction on the situation of poverty”⁵⁴.

The participant mentioned that the economic factor is a complementary element in the pattern of radicalisation. In her opinion, individuals who have suffered violence in their childhood and live in a situation of poverty and precariousness are more likely to be radicalised and are the target of terrorist groups that present economic motivations for young people to join terrorist groups and improve their economic situation. She also adds that poverty is a form of social injustice and exclusion⁵⁵.

Education, culture and leisure opportunities

All the members of the group confirmed the lack of public spaces for youth recreation, which poses a problem of communication among young people who need mechanisms for dialogue to avoid violent expression⁵⁶. Another participant sees that the existence of leisure places in the neighborhoods does not mean an ideal protection of young people. She believes that within these places, individuals produce attitudes rejected by society. What makes the issue more complex for her is the exclusion of group members from participating in the socio-cultural dynamic, so they can raise awareness of young people and give them the means to protect themselves from violence and radicalism⁵⁷.

For the participants, leisure can be a practice within the group and between its members, so the dynamics of the group reinforces their will to react and debate from the organisation of several activities within the association or in the university clubs. One of the participants expressed that belonging to this group allowed him to create his own universe of expression despite his exclusion from the public sphere; he adds that from the cultural program of the movement, he can transfer messages to the young people to direct them to the right path⁵⁸. The participants show that the activities of the group are a space of expression for young people that fill the absence of spaces of social and political representation provided by the state.

Digital socialisation

When asked about violence in the virtual space, the participants confirmed that violent content is always circulated particularly in the period of the pandemic, because people have been attached more to social networks. Teenagers who see this content can reproduce it and especially the videos that present the combats and the images of war⁵⁹.

From another point of view, a participant emphasised that the images of the war against Muslims represents the pejorative image of the other. She added that the messages circulated in the media and social networks are signs to “*sully the image of Islam under the title of terrorism*”. However, they have

⁵⁴ Online in-depth interview, female respondent.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Online in-depth interview, female respondent.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Online in-depth interview, male respondent .

⁵⁹ Ibid.

found that a significant number of Muslims are victims of physical and symbolic violence: “*what happens today is a great international policy against Islam*”⁶⁰. In this regard, participants consider that the problem of conflict and violence is not limited to the local context, but in their opinion, international policies are building a war against Islam. It is an expression that shows the relationship between national and transnational dynamics.

They consider that violent extremism is not necessarily linked to religion. For them, Islam is a religion of peace and does not represent violent extremism. Instead, they see globalisation and international politics as a mechanism to eliminate Islam and Muslims. The conspiracy theory is strongly present.

The political factor is very much relevant in the discourse of the participants. It is identified as an element of manipulation of the young people (because of the exclusion of the group from the political participation). The exclusion of the group from the political participation leads to a conflict with the State, which is perceived by group members as not granting value to religion in the national education system.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND INTERACTIONS AMONG DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

The participants explain the process of radicalisation as a result of the interpretation of religious texts, on the one hand, and the influence of state policies, on the other. The first element is justified by the weak role of socialisation of the educational system. For the participants, socialisation is an important process in the construction of the personality, its role is to present a good religious example based on the values of tolerance and respect. In their opinion, social institutions such as the family and the school do not have today the necessary mechanisms to protect young people or teach them the religious values.

The second element they highlight is that the State, through its school programs has separated Islamic education from other school subjects, the devaluation of religious education in schools has led, in their opinion, to a poor knowledge of religious values and eventually, it might lead young people to adhere diverse forms of violence.

It can be said that the factors of radicalisation from the point of view of the members of the movement are just elements produced at the macro level and impact the orientation of individuals. While violence and violent extremism are reactions to situations of poverty and isolation of individuals within society, for them, young people need freedom of expression either in the form of communities or through participation in decision-making to value their role in society.

⁶⁰ Online in-depth interview, female respondent.

Analysis conclusions

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

We can emphasise that the most present drivers of violent extremism in the discourse of the interlocutors are a lack of socialisation on religious values and political issues, which are the founding elements of the ideology of the movement. The group's actors expressed criticism of the state and the internal political system as sources of violence. Their views reflect their sense of isolation from the political sphere, which rounds out their limited role outside the movement's circle.

Territorial inequalities are only a result of poor regional and national governance. For this movement, political actors must give importance to dialogue as a means of communication with activists to understand their needs and rights.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

The indicators of prevention against violent extremism are:

- Raising awareness on the risk of political exclusion.
- Discuss reform in school curricula.
- Communication between state actors and citizens.
- Respect for the right to protest.
- Dissemination of the values of tolerance and peace.

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

The meso analysis guided us to understand that the individual is impacted by the ideology and culture of the group he belongs to. In this sense, the micro analysis opens the way to understand the individual paths of the members of the movement, and to see its own role in the reproduction of violent extremism, or the prevention against the phenomenon.

General Conclusion

To conclude, the main factors of radicalisation that our interlocutors expressed are the lack of religious education within the family and within the school; personal (mis)interpretation of religion and lack of religious orientation within the school. The political factor is also very present, with the exclusion from the public political field perceived as a form of social injustice. What is remarkable in the interviews we have conducted is the presence of the conspiracy theory linked to transnational dynamics in the discourse of the participants, which means that this group still lives in a feeling of isolation that has lasted for many years.

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Annex

Interview guide for focus groups

- From your experience, how do you define violent extremism?
- Do you consider that Morocco has experienced situations of violent extremism? How do you define it?
- What are the main factors of violent extremism (religious, economic, political, transnational dynamics, cultural, educational, digital culture)?
- What strategies does your organisation use to combat violent extremism among youth?
- Do you consider that your organisation plays a role in de-radicalisation and/or prevention against violent extremism? How do you see it?
- How do state institutions work with you to fight against the phenomenon?
- What are your recommendations to fight against the phenomenon of violent extremism among young people?

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Two schools under one roof

Organised groups of football fans

Youth supporters of online Salafi influencers





Two schools under one roof

Sarina Bakić, Sanela Bašić, Anida Dudić, Muamer Hirkić, Damir Kapidžić

Introduction

The phenomenon of “two schools under one roof” implies two separate schools (pupils, teachers, and technical staff) which use the same teaching space. This is a product of post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina (further read as BiH) and it reflects one of the major political divisions in the country, namely the divide between Bosniaks and Croats in areas with ethnically mixed populations. The concept of “two schools under one roof” was established as a temporary solution¹ in order to encourage the return of displaced people, and according to some estimates, there are 56 schools today in BiH labelled as “two schools under one roof”². Often times there are separate entrances and physical obstacles for the separation of pupils. Schools use different ‘national’ curricula (Bosniak and Croatian), a mechanism for institutionalisation of educational and social divisions. In that way young individuals and social groups (defined by ethnic and religious identities) support and ‘feed’ ethnonationalist political ideas. The consequence that follows is continued negative portrayal of ‘the Other’, rooted deeply in nationalist political correctness, that is, mainstream cultural background, as well as the lack of sensitivity and understanding for anyone who is seen as ‘the Other’. The above-stated speaks to a fact that the education system in BiH is based on ethnocentrism, exclusivity from dominant ethnic identities and their educational politics, which is an obstacle for multicultural education and intercultural learning (Trkulja, 2017). The research concerning this community represents an important attempt to clarify the link between radicalisation processes and the fragmented educational system in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nonetheless, Work Package 5 of the CONNEKT project seeks to combine seven potential drivers of radicalisation (religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, social digitalisation, political issues, educational, leisure and cultural opportunities, and transnational dynamics) with different sub-national community-level contexts – which provides an important basis and framework for the study of the “two schools under one roof” phenomenon. In that sense, this case study tests seven drivers and provides observational explanations for radicalisation processes and relevant drivers among the youth in school setting, while paying particular attention to the driver of political issues/ideas.

¹ The concept “two schools under one roof” was born in the context of devastated education system of 1999 following the years after war destruction in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995).

² More information available on: <https://ndcmostar.org/bs/dijalog-o-obrazovnim-politikama/>, accessed on 01.02.2022

Research Methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The macro-level analysis on structural and institutional approaches towards drivers of radicalisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kapidžić et al., 2021) found different understandings of radicalisation among institutional actors. However, several factors were highlighted as relevant drivers of radicalisation, amongst other political ideas and ethno-political polarisation. The way that political divisions are institutionalised through governing institutions allows radical ideas to emerge and gain prominence. This includes radical narratives of exclusion, segregation and discrimination that can be identified in the education sector, and institutionalised through the “two schools under one roof”.

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

The added value of the meso analysis in this case study is to explore relevant drivers of radicalisation in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s divided education system. Previous research (Kapidžić et al., 2021) has shown that drivers related to politics, such as ethnic nationalism, are very relevant in BiH and that they are prominently expressed in educational policies. In BiH there are numerous discriminatory practices in the educational system which are detrimental for young people, however the phenomenon of “two schools under one roof” stands as the most visible example of educational politics which are only further deepening the divisions. Thus, the education system is deploying segregation of children on the national basis (in the Republika Srpska teaching is conducted in Serbian language, while in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina there are independent national schools or classes with different national programs – Bosnian and Croatian).

Numerous reports indicate that the practice of “two schools under one roof” is a violation of international conventions as well as domestic laws. In these specific schools where children are being segregated based on their ethnicity, education system is instigating segregation and discrimination on which it rests. Ultimately, children are attending the school in which their constituent people hold dominance, where school environment, including teaching plan and program, are in favor of only one ethnic group. Such educational climate is not only clashing with all educational principles, but furthermore it becomes a training ground in which the world is built on binaries of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. Considering that in these specific schools the political context of ethnic divisions is pronounced, it is significant to provide an estimate of possible drivers of radicalisation in young people.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives tied to this case study are to analyse the polarised and divisive conditions under which young people socialise, and to investigate the role of political ideas as a driver of radicalisation. As political ideas are integrated into the institutional structures of the schools, their built environment, and the separate curriculums, their role is to divide young people and restrict cross-socialisation. We aim to investigate to which extent this impacts youth dynamics and relations among separate groups of youth towards each other. Additionally, we emphasise the role of schools as communities where

youth build bonds with each other and learn to trust strangers belonging to their broader community. The conflicting aims of educational socialisation are further investigated.

DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

The research was conducted in two high schools labelled as “two schools under one roof” in Central Bosnia Canton. The reason behind conducting research particularly in this canton is that during the war period, this was an area of intensive fights which resulted in significant displacement of Bosniak and Croatian ethnic groups. After the war, this area remained polarised, which hindered social progress. Apart from social and economic deprivation in this area, “educational circumstances which are employed for the shaping and strengthening social divisions, intolerance and inequality” present a serious obstacle (UNICEF, ICTJ, 2015). The fact that discrimination and segregation in education are still deeply ingrained is demonstrated by OSCE data (2018) noting that in Central Bosnia Canton there are 18 cases of “two schools under one roof” which encompass 36 schools (20 central and 16 district schools). Moreover, apart from the existing segregated schools, in the past few years there were attempts of opening additional two new “two schools under one roof”. Under the public pressure, protests of young people and resentment of international community, this attempt was eventually restrained.³ Although it was decided by judicial proceedings that the manner in which “two schools under one roof” are being organised presents a violation of the prohibition on discrimination, the greatest number of segregated schools in BiH⁴ territorially still belongs to this canton. Due to the abovementioned, we decided to conduct the research in two high schools in Central Bosnia Canton, which are labelled as “two schools under one roof”. The schools in which the research was conducted were divided in a way that lessons in one school are being taught in Bosnian language, and in other in Croatian. The schools share common entrances, common premises (school yard and sport halls), as well as meeting halls. Pupils do not have common teachers nor common activities unless those are initiated by non-governmental organisations or similar actors.

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SAMPLING CRITERIA AND RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Participants in the research were pupils of two high schools labelled as “two schools under one roof” on the area of Central Bosnia Canton. Prior to conducting research, a request of approval for data collection activities was sent to the cantonal Ministry of Education. Upon obtaining the approval, contacts were made with school principals, and agreements were made on how the research should be conducted. The research relied on qualitative methods including focus groups/ group discussions and in-depth interviews. The implementation of research activities consisted of two phases: (1) the first phase of research included two focus groups which amounted to five second and third graders of the school in which the lessons are conducted in Croatian and Bosnian languages. (2) The second phase

³ More on: <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/06/20/bih-protest-u-%C4%8Denika-protiv-etni%C4%8Dke-segregacije-u-%C5%A1kolama-06-20-2017/?lang=sr> and <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/bhs/zone/Bosna-i-Hercegovina/Slucaj-dvije-skole-pod-jednim-krovom-u-Jajcu-180584>, accessed on 01.02.2022

⁴ Apart from Central Bosnia Canton, “two schools under one roof” are also located in Zenica-Doboj Canton, where there are two cases of “two schools under one roof” that include four schools on two locations. In Hercegovina-Neretva Canton there are eight instances of “two schools under one roof”, with 16 schools on eight locations. More available in: OSCE (2018). Two schools under one roof “*The most visible example of discrimination in the area of education in Bosnia and Herzegovina*”.

of the research implied in-depth interviews with second and third graders of “two schools under one roof” (three interviews with pupils who are being taught in the Bosnian language and two pupils who are being taught in the Croatian language). The selection of pupils for focus groups and interviews was carried out by school principals and expert bodies. The research team identified criteria of age, balanced gender ratio, and diversity school grades in order to ensure a representative sample and communicated this to school authorities. All selection criteria were taken into account. Focus groups and interviews were conducted by the members of the research team (professors at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Sarajevo), with the consent of pupils (without disturbing the teaching process). Furthermore, the parents were informed about the research conducted. Focus groups and interviews were conducted according to the highest academic research standards, ethical principles of research which follow the guidelines of the European Union, with previously obtained consent from the Ethical Board for Research of the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Sarajevo. All data collected through focus groups and interviews was classified as confidential and as such is not available to third parties. Prior to the research itself, participants were informed that the obtained data will be used exclusively for research purposes without disclosing the identities of the participants. The participation in research was voluntary, and the respondents were able to withdraw from participation at any time without stating a reason.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

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In the research, conducted through focus groups and five individual in-depth interviews, 15 respondents participated. The criteria for participation was the following: 1) participants need to be over 15 years, and 2) participants had varying school performance. In the school where classes are being taught in the Bosnian language, five participants were in a focus group (three male and two female respondents). Two respondents were 16 years old, two respondents were 17 years old and one respondent was 18 years old. Following the focus group, three respondents were selected (two male and one female) for in-depth interviews in order to better analyse the conditions in which young people socialise and develop resilience to adverse social phenomena. In the school where classes are being taught in the Croatian language, 5 participants were in a focus group (four male and one female). The age profiles of the participants were as follows: one respondent was 16 years old, three respondents were 17 years old and one respondent was 18 years old. After the focus group, two individual interviews were conducted with female respondents aged 16.⁵

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

The selection of the participants in the research (focus groups and in-depth interview) was done by the principals of “two schools under one roof” with the consent of pupils and informed approval of parents. The school counsellor provided a more in-depth explanation of the goals and aims of the research to the school pupils. The date of the research was agreed in accordance with the school duties of the pupils, and the research was conducted by the members of CONNEKT team. Prior to conducting the

⁵ The interview participants were not a part of the focus group.

research, the participants were asked to provide consent for the audio recording of the conversation, indicating that the materials will be used only for scientific purposes. All of the abovementioned affected the high level of trust between participants and researchers, which resulted in quality feedback and knowledge exchange regarding the conditions in which young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina socialise and develop resilience to adverse social phenomena.

Meso Level Dynamics

DESCRIPTION

Educational, Leisure and Cultural opportunities

Certain actors of the political socialisation have more significant role for individuals than the others, however for young people family remains the most important actor of socialisation. Family, family relationships, distance/closeness of family members are significant factors influencing the attitudes and behaviors of young people. Authors (such as White, 2002, Crettiez, 2016 as cited in Torrekens and de le Vingne, 2020) say that the family can be a major actor in encouraging an individual to violent behaviors, and discontinuity and/or interruption of family socialisation can have a positive effect on violent behavior and can further lead to radicalisation. Our research has shown that the orientation of young people towards family in Bosnia and Herzegovina is extremely high and family is an important part of identity.⁶ Therefore, if family in some way nurtures adversity to other ethnic groups, this can lead to limited communication of young people and avoidance of meeting with members of other ethnic groups (Tzvetkova and Mancheva, 2019). This is corroborated by the statement of the student who attends classes in Bosnian language⁷ that due to the great resistance and resentment of parents they do not participate in activities involving members of other (Croatian) nationality. This remains a serious obstacle in creating intercultural experiences among young people.

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Apart from family, an important agent of socialisation for young people is also school. The majority of young people aside from school activities are also involved in some type of extracurricular activities which are of great importance for building collective identity. Although the participation in these groups encourages young people to be actively involved in improving the quality of life of students, but also society as a whole, they join only those groups whose members are of their ethnic group. In "two schools under one roof" there are no joint teaching or extracurricular activities that can be attended by students at both schools. Despite the fact that they share an outdoor space in the school, that is intended for students at both schools (so-called "between the space"), they do not establish mutual contact.

In an in-depth interview, a student who attends classes in the Bosnian language⁸ stated that as part of the project activities, they invited students who attend classes in the Croatian language to socialise, but ultimately there was no cooperation from the other end. The research has shown that participants in the research are well integrated into society and feel socially included. However, education that rests on ethnocentrism affects all social spheres of young people: the groups they join and the activities they engage in are entrenched on deep ethnic divisions, which reduces the likelihood of meeting peers

⁶ Focus group 1, conducted in school where classes are taught in Bosnian language, 02.12.2021
Focus group 2, conducted in school where classes are taught in Croatian language, 03.12.2021

⁷ Interview 3, conducted in school where classes are taught in Bosnian language, 02.12.2021

⁸ Interview 1, conducted in school where classes are taught in Bosnian language, 02.12.2021

from another ethnic group. The above stated indicates that despite the fact that young people have a wide range of educational and cultural opportunities, the insistence on ethnic divisions is an obstacle to multicultural education and creates an artificial world of 'us' versus 'them'. This data is correlated with the results of previous research (such as Turjačanin et al., 2002; Puhalo, 2003; Turjačanin, 2004; Opačić et al., 2005; Puhalo, 2007; UNDP, 2007 and 2008, Puhalo, 2009; Šalaj, 2009, as cited in Puhalo, 2013) which state that there is an ethnic distance in Bosnia and Herzegovina: young people under the influence of social, political and cultural milieu 'construct' their social reality in which the values of only one ethnic group dominate. In such an environment, stereotypes and prejudices towards members of other ethnic groups are created, accompanied by (negative) attitudes, emotions and behavior.

Territorial inequality

In already existing literature, opinions are divided regarding whether mono-ethnic, or rather multi-ethnic environments are more prone to radicalisation. When questioning factors leading to radicalisation among young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Oruč and Obradović (2020) have not found any statistically significant connection among the degree of radicalisation and the place of living – rural or urban. Also, in our research no data was found that would indicate that the driver of 'territorial inequality' plays an important role in the process of radicalisation of young people. Moreover, the data in Country paper on macro-level drivers⁹ have shown that the driver of 'territorial inequality' in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not related to the rural-urban distinction, but rather with individual perceptions of marginalisation and injustice (Kapidžić et al., 2021). Perry (2016) states that young people in BiH, although they have no previous war experience, express dissatisfaction with the slow pace of change in society, where marginalisation, neglect and injustice are common. This is not even particularly due to actual deprivation, but rather subjective perception. In favor of this is the fact that students of "two schools under one roof"¹⁰ subjectively believe that they daily experience some kind of injustice (in the family, school, and local community) and express concern about it. In the in-depth interview, a participant attending school in Croatian language¹¹ shared the experience that the school sports club of which she is a member did not receive financial support from a municipality dominated by members of the Croatian ethnic group because their coach does not live in the area. Thus, speaking of territorial inequalities, it is more appropriate here to speak of "inequalities that arise as a result of deep ethnic divisions" which create a subjective sense of injustice.

Economic deprivation

High unemployment rates, growing poverty, inadequate health and social protection, unequal opportunities in education are just some of the causes of high economic deprivation in the country. During the sessions, respondents in both focus groups showed a high level of awareness of the factors that contribute to the low quality of life in BiH. Speaking about economic deprivation, the participants detected the causes, which are primarily related to unemployment rates, irregularities in employment and corruption in society. In addition to economic deprivation, participants in focus groups and in-

⁹ More available at https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Bosnia_Herzegovina_CONNEKT_Macro_Drivers.pdf, accessed on 08.02.2022

¹⁰ Focus group 1, conducted in school where classes are taught in Croatian language, 03.12.2021

¹¹ Interview 4, conducted in school where classes are taught in Croatian language, 03.12.2021

depth interviews spoke more about social deprivation, which results from non-recognition of basic civil rights. Numerous irregularities and denials of civil rights for students of “two schools under one roof” generate injustice that leads to disenfranchisement of individuals. Thus, one participant in the in-depth interview¹² stated that he was denied the necessary medical assistance only because one of his parents was a member of a certain political party. Due to these circumstances, he feels discriminated against and considers whether the political action of his parents in the future will be an obstacle to the full realisation of civil rights and needs. From the above example, we see a multi-layered link between factors that encourage economic and social deprivation, which causes a subjective sense of injustice, and can ultimately lead to discrimination, social exclusion, and marginalisation.

Social digitalisation

Online space is often cited as important in the process of radicalisation (Becirević et al., 2017). The DARE study (Dialogue on Radicalisation and Equality), which examined the role of the Internet and social media in self-radicalisation processes, states that young people can be victims of propaganda messages of radical organisations via participating in social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, YouTube, etc.) intend to build support outside the walls of their followers (Pathon et al., 2020). Given that the media influences and shapes attitudes and behaviors, previous research (such as Hasic et al., 2017) on this issue suggests that young people are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation in the age of accessible social media. Our interlocutors revealed that they are aware of the negative effects of the Internet on children and young people, and state that they often come across violent content (texts, games, photos, etc.) on social networks. Such content encourages anxiety and resentment among participants. Most of them claim that they do not understand the attractiveness of this online content and believe that they are sufficiently aware of the risks of potential involvement, so they often report violent content in order to remove it from social networks.

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Religion

Although the analysis of the results obtained in all focus group sessions shows a prevailing lack of understanding of what extremism is, participants stated that the most common association is including individuals who are extreme in Islam.¹³ When analyzing the reasons why research participants most often associate ‘Islam’ with ‘extremism’, most of them explain that they often come across ‘Islamic extremists’ in the media, where they are presented as people who harm others in the name of religion.¹⁴ This data is not surprising, because some media sources employ the term ‘Islamic extremism’, rather clumsily, stereotypically or even deliberately describing extremist and theoretical events, and thus spreading misinformation by presenting ‘Islam’ – religion and ‘Islamism’ - political ideology as synonyms.

Although Islamism and Islam exist as two separate categories and are by no means synonymous (Dukic, 2020), in BIH media certain article headings such as following can be read: “*French TV reporters visit*

¹² Interview 2, conducted in school where classes are taught in Bosnian language, 02.12.2021

¹³ Focus group 1, conducted in school where lessons are taught in Bosnian language, 02.12.2021

¹⁴ Interview 2, conducted in school where lessons are taught in Bosnian language, 02.12.2021

*BiH, warn of radical Islam in central Europe*¹⁵, *“Is Islam a religion of violence and are Muslims terrorists?”*¹⁶ etc. Kapidžić et al. (2020:105) state that some media in Bosnia and Herzegovina are „strongly focused on violence and sensationalism and that their reporting destabilises relations and undermines divisions. Thus, their findings are not in the service of informing the public, but rather in the service of political elites, encouraging ethno-national polarisation. Thus, following the ethnic line, they focus on the radicalisation of other ethnic communities“. In the fight against growing Islamophobia, numerous social media campaigns have emerged (such as the Twitter campaign “This is not Islam”¹⁷) to draw public attention to the fact that terrorism has no religion, and that the ideology of terrorists is pure hatred.

Analyzing whether every form of extremism leads to violence, research participants believe that extreme behavior does not necessarily lead to a form of violent behavior¹⁸, but that harm to others can be done without violence. Respondents have very little or no first-hand experience with anyone who has been involved in initiatives aimed at promoting extreme ideologies. Examining whether religion can be a driver of violence, students from „two schools under one roof“ believe that no religion encourages evil. However, in the last few years, through various negative events, they have realised that some individuals are committing violence in the name of religion.¹⁹

Political issues

Almost all participants are fully aware of the politicised social relations in the local environment and the disproportionate power relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which in general affect both internal and intergroup attitudes and behaviors. Focus group participants are aware of a divided local political environment that employs negative rhetoric, an overemphasised narrative of division, and other means of social manipulation to fulfill political interests. The respondent in the focus group²⁰ had stated that some students are favored by teachers because of the political party to which their parents belong. We have previously stated that one student felt that his health services were denied due to the political activities of one parent. This states that in addition to ethnic divisions, there are deep divisions in the country according to political - interest spheres.

One of the most politicised issues is the issue of ethnic and (or) national affiliation. Earlier research (such as Cekrlija, 2006; Puhalo 2006) shows that ethnic identity is one of the primary identities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the other hand, the data has shown that nationalism in the country is very pronounced among the largest number of citizens (Puhalo, 2013). Our research shows divided opinions of young people about the significance of ethnicity and ethnic identity: students who attend classes in the Bosnian language feel a sense of belonging to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the focus group,

¹⁵ More available at: <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/reporteri-francuske-tv-kuce-posjetili-su-bih-upozoravaju-na-radikalni-islam-u-sredistu-europe/>, accessed on 07.02.2022

¹⁶ More available at: <https://www.pozivistine.com/da-li-je-islam-vjera-nasilja-i-da-li-su-muslimani-teroristi/>, accessed on 07.02.2022

¹⁷ More information available: <https://www.klix.ba/lifestyle/kampanja-na-twitteru-ne-u-moje-ime-musliman-nikada-ne-moze-bit-terorista/151116007>, accessed on 07.02.2022

¹⁸ Focus group 2, conducted in school where lessons are taught in Croatian language, 03.12.2021

¹⁹ Focus group 2, conducted in school where lessons are taught in Croatian language, 03.12.2021

²⁰ Focus group 1, conducted in school where lessons are taught in Croatian language, 03.12.2021

they stated that they respect ethnicity, but that belonging to the state is more important to them. They believe that the division into 'us' and 'them', and 'ours' and 'theirs' is an obstacle to unity and creation of a better state of equal opportunities. On the other hand, students attending classes in the Croatian language do not feel much of belonging to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and ethnicity is more important to them. They believe that the state has not given them enough support and that it is more important for them that the people to whom they belong accept and respect them.

Transnational dynamics

Students attending classes in the Bosnian language have no connection to schools and organisations in neighboring countries. Analyzing the causes of poor cooperation with schools from neighboring countries, the participants who attend classes in Bosnian are of the opinion that cooperation with Croatia or Serbia would cause unrest, especially as of lately with speculations about war being increasingly mentioned in the media.²¹ On the other hand, for students attending the Croatian language curriculum, cooperation with schools and organisations in neighboring countries is of great importance. They believe that it is necessary to invest more effort in keeping up good relations with neighbors, especially with Croatia, which has a great influence on their socialisation. They also see the connection with Croatia in the commitment to attend classes exclusively in Croatian language.²²

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND INTERACTIONS AMONG DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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Given that previous research (such as Oruc and Obradovic, 2020) have shown that a number of factors in Bosnia and Herzegovina encourage radicalisation – including demographic, social, political, social, and economic reasons, leading to feelings of injustice, discrimination, social exclusion and marginalisation, no factor can be separated and simplified:

- In the conducted research, the drivers of "Territorial inequality", "Economic deprivation" and "Social digitalisation" did not prove to be significant.

For young people in BIH society, "individual perception of marginalisation, injustice and disenfranchisement" is a more important variable than "territorial inequality" and "economic deprivation" when it comes to radicalisation processes. Also, in the research, the driver of "social digitalisation" did not prove to be significant. Respondents are aware of the negative (violent) narratives present on the Internet but are not captivated by them and believe that they can resist such content. Findings Becirevic et al. (2017) show that the driver of "digitalisation" is insufficiently tested in the Bosnian context, which suggests that more extensive research is needed on the impact of social media in the process of radicalisation.

- The drivers of "Educational, Leisure and Cultural Opportunities", "Religion" and "Transnational Dynamics" proved to be significant in this research. The driver "Political Issues" proved to be very significant and cross cutting across all other identified drivers.

²¹ Interview 1, conducted in school where lessons are taught in Bosnian language, 02.12.2021

²² Focus group 2, conducted in school where lessons are taught in Croatian language, 03.12.2021

Deep ethnic divisions are fostered within the family *milieu*, and are further transmitted through education, cultural and leisure activities. The entire social life of young people is subordinated and entrenched in ethnic divisions. Positive steps in creating common content for students attending classes in Bosnian and students attending classes in Croatian are often stifled, and the integration of “two schools under one roof” is seen as an impossible solution. Deep ethnic divisions are further facilitated by the media, which often misuse the issue of religion through inadequate reporting in order to legitimise distorted opinions and worldviews (this is especially true of creating false narratives about Islam as the dominant factor of radicalisation).

The most influential drivers are political issues. The importance of ethnic and (or) national affiliation remains a political issue, which best reflects the deep divisions in BiH: while students who attend classes in Bosnian feel a high degree of state affiliation, students who attend classes in Croatian language prefer ethnicity. Our research has supported the results of previous research in Bosnia and Herzegovina (e.g. Hasić et al., 2017) which shows that in the absence of adequate institutional and social responses to the challenges facing BiH society, political manipulations often fill the gaps, leaving room for deviant political ideologies and their agents to shape the thoughts and actions of vulnerable individuals (especially young people).

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THE RELATION OF MACRO LEVEL DRIVERS TO THE RESULTS OF THE MESO LEVEL ANALYSIS

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The drivers identified in macro-level research are very well replicated at the meso-level. Some that are considered as less relevant or “background” at the macro-level are not seen as important by youth, due to lack of exposure (*territorial inequality, economic deprivation*) or good practices (*social digitalisation*). The social context that defines the macro level is well translated to the community level in this regard. The more relevant macro-level drivers (*educational, leisure and cultural opportunities, religion, transnational dynamics*) are all replicated at the meso-level to a certain extent. We can see that religion is seen as a potential driver, but this is mostly due to meta-narratives established through media and public discourse. The most relevant driver at both levels is political issues that also crosscuts all the other six drivers in some way. Divisions built on politicised nationalism within the community are ingrained in all aspects of life and serve as the basis for establishing the divided community of “two schools under one roof”. The in-group vs. out-group narratives that are key to radicalisation have political issues of divisive nationalism at their core.

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina mostly spend their free time with families and this is also where they make the most important decisions (Youth Study Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019). Due to its extreme importance, the family (primarily parents) directly and indirectly influences the formation of (ethnic) identity in children and youth and transmits values that are characteristic only for a certain ethnic group. The importance of emphasizing ethnic divisions continues through education, therefore schools become training ground in which the struggle for building and preserving one's own (ethnic) identity takes place. Thus, young people direct their free time and activities only to those groups whose members belong to their own ethnic group. Additionally, young people see any denial of civil right or inability to meet needs as a hotbed for ethnic divisions, leading to subjective feelings of injustice, dissatisfaction, and disenfranchisement. Encouraged and brought up in a world where ethnicity rises above other important issues, students attending classes taught in Bosnian, consider cooperation with students and organisations from neighboring countries as superfluous, even seeing it as a threat to the sustainability of the state. On the other hand, students attending classes in Croatian are more focused on peers and organisations in neighboring Croatia than on peers of (Bosniak) ethnicity in their city. The feeling of belonging additionally 'feeds' the determination to attend classes exclusively in Croatian. For students who attend classes in Croatian language, ethnicity and loyalty to the people are more important than ethnicity. In contrast, students who attend school in Bosnian language prefer nationality, and to them the idea of the state is stronger than ethnicity.

The analysis of the obtained data indicates that behind the scenes, "two schools under one roof" present political issues and the inability to reach an agreement between political actors and find changes that would lead to a joint approach to teaching (respecting members of other ethnic groups). Ethnic affiliation is often used for political purposes, and previous research (such as Puhalo, 2013) has shown that any attempt to integrate "two schools under one roof" is interpreted as a threat to ethnic and national identities.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

Education that encourages exclusive worldviews, insisting and resting on artificial divisions can become fertile ground in the development of extreme behaviors. In this way, instead of being a strong protective factor in the fight against violent extremism, the school contributes to its spread. Therefore, it is necessary to make systematic efforts to provide quality education that will prevent various ideologies and acts of violent extremism from coming to life. More specifically, education policies can prevent schools from becoming a testing ground for the development of violent extremism so that approaches to teaching are oriented towards developing pupils' resistance to violent extremism. Curricula should be enriched with content that will: develop critical thinking, encourage interpersonal skills necessary to meet others and strengthen social competencies that are key to active participation in a democratic society. The most important step in the prevention of violent extremism in schools is reflected in the eradication of discrimination, segregation, and politicisation of education, given that these elements

contribute to the violent radicalisation of young people. In these efforts, the key is in cooperation of all actors in the education system (teachers, professional associates – school counselors, psychologists, social workers, principals, parents’ councils, student councils...) as well as cooperation with important institutions and organisations in the local community (international organisations, youth associations, etc.).

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

Going forward to the micro level analysis and focusing on individuals, it is key to emphasise the intersectionality of the political issues driver. Radicalisation based on politics and political polarisation is nothing new neither particular to Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the way that it intersects and shapes several other drivers needs to be explored. Most importantly, it is relevant to identify what role political issues and nationalism have in emphasizing, strengthening, and shaping other drivers, if any. Also, it would be relevant to explore how relevant political issues and nationalism are on their own, apart from links to other drivers.

General Conclusion

Although the educational model of “two schools under one roof” has been established as a temporary solution and has no basis in the laws and other legal acts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it has existed on several territories for more than two decades. The phenomenon of “two schools under one roof”, based on deep ethnic divisions, is the most striking example of ubiquitous segregation, discrimination, and inequality in education. The education model in “two schools under one roof” reflects the cultural specifics of only one ethnicity, does not provide knowledge about Others and does not treat cultural differences as values. Although court rulings in several examples of “two schools under one roof” have confirmed that this model of education is discriminatory, court decisions are not enforced and sanctions for non-implementation are not imposed. Solutions for integration and inclusion are lacking because the phenomenon of “two schools under one roof” in Bosnia and Herzegovina is an extremely politicised issue. The results of the research once again have shown that education in Bosnia and Herzegovina is in favor of the divisive ideology, based on the policy of cultural difference pursued by the ruling ethno-national groups. Thus, it can be said that “two schools under one roof” present a symptom of ethno-national divisions (which were rooted during the war and were maintained to this day). Although the international community (led by the OSCE) has proposed several models for solving the problem of “two schools under one roof”, this issue, under the influence of political problems, remains unresolved. As a result, we have young people who create their identity, social life, education, and worldview on the belief that differences between people are irreconcilable, and divisions (not only in education but in all spheres of society) are justified. The political ideas behind this institutionalised form of division can clearly be identified as drivers of potential radicalisation among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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Annex I

The questionnaire

1. Do you spend time with your family?

- Do you have any joint activities?
- Do you talk with family members about topics that are important and interesting to you?
- Do you feel that your parents understand you and that they respect your views and opinions?
- Do you discuss important topics with your teachers, class teacher, pedagogue, or other employees at school?
- Do you share the problems you have with your class teacher or other teachers?
- Do you trust them?
- Do you think that teachers understand your problems?

2. Where do you spend your free time?

- Do you visit a youth center, a cinema, a theatre, or any space intended for young people?
- Do you have a place to do sports or other activities?
- How often do you visit such places (never, once a week, once a month)?
- Do these contents and activities suit you?
- Do you have clubs at school that you are a member of?
- How many hours a week do you spend in these clubs?
- Are there joint activities for students of both schools?
- Do you find activities offered by your school suitable for yourself?
-

3. Does the community where you live experience injustice?

- What kind of injustice?
- Are you personally concerned about this injustice and how does this affect you?
- Are you outraged by this injustice?
-

4. In your opinion, can violence be an answer or a solution for the injustice that a person experiences in his/her environment?

5. Have you or any of your friends ever experienced violence?

- E.g. Has anyone beaten, hit, pushed, insulted, or made fun of you?
- Did you report this violence to someone? If not, why not?
- Was the reaction of those to whom you reported the violence adequate and satisfactory?
-

6. When using Facebook, YouTube, games, or any other online platform, do you come across videos, images or text that contain violence?

- What do you think about such contents?
- How do you react when you see such content?

7. In your opinion, what is "extremism"?
 - Do you know, or have you heard of people you would describe as extremists?

8. Can you describe the relationship between violence and extremism?
 - Does all extremism lead to violence?

9. Do you feel belonging to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and to what extent? Do you feel like you belong to an ethnic group? Which affiliation is more important to you?

10. Are you a member of the Student Council, youth association, clubs, or other communities?
 - Which ones?
 - Are you proud of your belonging to such communities?
 - How would you describe the characteristics of this community?

11. Can religion be the driver of violence? Can religion be a factor in individuals' resilience to the attraction of violence? Explain how in both cases.

12. What role do the neighboring countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina have in your life?
 - Does your school cooperate with schools or organisations from other countries? Which one? What does that cooperation mean?
 - As a result, do you feel a stronger sense of belonging to your country, ethnic group, religion, or school?
 - Does such cooperation affect your attitudes towards other groups?
 - Do stronger ties with neighboring countries contribute to some radical attitudes and behavior, or do they mitigate them



Organised groups of football fans

Sarina Bakić, Muamer Hirkić, Anida Dudić, Sanela Bašić, Damir Kapidžić

Introduction

Football fans in Bosnia and Herzegovina are regularly responsible for urban violence, driven by a combination of fan-based subculture and political ideology. Almost all football clubs have a clear ethnic affiliation with ties to a particular nationalist ideology. This includes a culture of hostility especially towards clubs of the ethnic “other”. Political ideas (ideologies) are closely linked to the subcultures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially fans’ groups. In the cultural context, these subcultures represent a set of norms, system of values, and behavioral patterns that are different from the cultural patterns of wider community. Fans’ groups express resistance towards the dominant cultures, also of their own ethnic group, and highlight radical political ideologies. The groups are self-organised, have common views and values, an original or authentic name, a historical presence and institutional/group memory, specific roles, and behavioral patterns. The research aim focuses on fans’ groups that, in many cases, openly advocate nationalism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and homophobia, and who carry out violent attacks on various “others”. Groups of this subculture are already visible through staged violence in the streets and during football matches, accentuated by particularistic radical nationalistic ideologies, political folklore, and promotion of animosities and hatred towards “others” and out-groups. We believe this community will provide us insights into the potential radicalisation of an entire cultural segment in Bosnia and Herzegovina, mostly including young men, that reflects some of the most dangerous and vicious political ideas that intertwine with cultural factors to shape this influential and important subculture segment. Bearing in mind that football fans come from specific local cultural backgrounds, it is more than obvious that cultural and lifestyle factors would be the main drivers for this specific community. Furthermore, these subcultural groups are often driven by political ideas, not only strongly influenced by them, but also very often manipulated by various political power centers. Therefore, this approach and selection were adequately based on the CONNEKT project’s Working Package 5, which observes seven factors of radicalisation (religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, social digitalisation, political issues, educational, leisure and cultural opportunities, and transnational dynamics) on the meso (community) level. This group represents a connection with the previously analyzed macro/institutional level, where a significant number of respondents indicated the importance of researching football fans’ networks. The group exemplifies publicly visible displays of language, symbols and actions directly related to several drivers of radicalisation. Also, the group will be important for the next phase of the project (micro level), as well as for possible recommendations/interventions in the community.

Research Methodology

Subcultures can be important for various studies because subculture groups often develop their own communication styles and social norms. Certain behavioural patterns or values may be mistakenly pathologised by people or groups outside of that subculture. Also, certain subcultures may face discrimination from the majority groups within society (Bauman, 2001). But basically, social groups manage their status problems by creating a new subculture and establishing new norms that do not conform to the dominant culture's norms. These new norms encompass ideological meanings and have symbolic forms of resistance and struggle towards the system and mainstream culture.

The main reasons we have decided to choose football fans communities is that this subculture consists mostly of young people brought together through their shared ties to a football team and general knowledge and adoration for the sport. The intense feelings for a football club can lead to extreme behaviour when fans encounter one another. Football fans in Bosnia and Herzegovina also clearly present their feelings of rivalry and hatred in terms of nationalist symbols and a nationalist identity. Additionally, this includes various forms of socially inappropriate behavioural patterns related to their social rebellion as a result of their social and economic position within society.

An added value of this Analysis is that it brings findings that reflect a very heated social and political atmosphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina within which we have managed to organise focus groups and interviews with football supporters. National and political divisions within the entire society presented challenges but did not prevent our team from meeting with two different groups of football supporters from various parts of the Bosnia and Herzegovina. These two groups come from totally different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This was a serious challenge to obtaining comprehensive and valuable answers from these specific cultural groups. Within a precisely defined social context, this subculture is a perfect fit for our research regarding the comprehension of extremism, violence, and various forms of injustice among a community defined by their choice of leisure and lifestyle.

The main research objectives were to analyse potential radicalisation factors among youth: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities.

In order to select participants for focus groups and interviews, we first identified a shortlist of four football clubs with a clear and strong identity and history of publicly visible displays of violence. Football clubs were selected to reflect geographical and community differences, according to the social context and accentuated drivers suitable for the research. The two clubs that were selected as most relevant for the research are located in the north and south of the country, Banja Luka and Mostar, covering both entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Both have very active and visible football clubs' supporters' groups that we reached out to with requests for interviews, and both agreed without any preconditions. The main criteria for the selection of focus group and interview participants were active and substantial membership in the football clubs' supporters' groups, as well as their age (following the methodological framework that requires 15 to 30 year old participants). While we emphasised gender balance of

participants in our communication with the supporters' groups, our request was not fulfilled. The youngest participants were 19 years old and the oldest 31. All participants in the focus groups and interviews were male, living in Mostar and Banja Luka. All of them are employed and only one participant is in secondary school. For focus group 1 in Banja Luka, we had 4 participants, as well as 3 additional participants for the interviews. For the focus group 2 in Mostar, there were 5 participants, and an additional interview was conducted with 2 of them. In both groups, participants included the leadership of the football fans groups, with the main leader present in Mostar and the deputy of the group's leader present in Banja Luka. As previously noted, all other participants were supporters of their football teams, actively involved in the actions of the football clubs' supporters' groups.

According to the project methodology, the BiH field research team requested quiet spaces for adequate completion of the research. Both interviews and focus groups were conducted during one working day in each location. Using a previously prepared questionnaire, the research team was in constant contact with representatives of the supporters' groups in order to organise everything on time and to make sure that all participants would be present during the scheduled interviews. The general questionnaire was structured and adapted to this community, in order to adequately "extract" the essence of the views and attitudes of the group, while considering the daily practices and thematic frameworks in which this group functions. For instance, questions referring to the places of socialisation, free time, as well as the use of social networks were specifically tailored for this community. The main challenge of these research activities was the issue of mutual confidence and trust, especially towards us as researchers, mostly regarding the anonymity of football supporters and handling of potentially sensitive information. Also, our challenge was to overcome a certain 'uneasy atmosphere' related to the already mentioned heightened political and social tensions in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina's society. In conclusion, we have managed to achieve a high level of trust and positive responses from all participants in both groups. This confidence was achieved due to an affirmative approach towards them, without any prejudices towards their subculture. Other challenges were faced during the start of the research activities when establishing contact for the first time, as well as in relation to timing and COVID restrictions. We were concerned about the way the representatives of football clubs' supporters' groups would understand the project's goals, the title of the CONNEKT project, our research aims, and personal intentions. It was crucial to distance ourselves from any media outlet and investigative reporting, emphasizing the scientific nature of our research outputs. Since these communities are very closed and do not appreciate 'intruders', especially from another city and institution, this is a concern we had to constantly keep in mind.

Meso Level Dynamics

Most of respondents in both focus groups (in two different locations and football clubs) stated that the main ways they spend their free time is watching football games, going to cafes, pubs, listening music and spending time with their girlfriends. It was interesting that entire group from Banja Luka resented sport betting, while all participants from Mostar stated that they gamble every day and regularly. Regarding the question whether the community in which they live suffers from injustice, what kind of injustice, and whether they are outraged and personally concerned about it, participants broadly confirmed this. Nevertheless, they had different understanding of social injustice both at the personal and group level. For some of them, injustice can be seen and felt in every segment of the community, primarily through corruption, persistent unemployment, difficulty of everyday life, inadequate wages, emigration of people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and lack of life perspectives for young people. On the other hand, two participants from Banja Luka stressed that the greatest injustice happens on the street in interaction with state authorities. They consider that the political system is the biggest cause of injustice in the community underlining persistent police violence. An interviewee responded that “they beat us regularly, just for no reason, every time they see us.”²³ These respondents stressed that police regularly harass and bully football fans, just because of their different behaviour, look and lifestyle.

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On the question of whether violence can be considered a justified response to or a solution to the injustice that a person experiences, respondents claimed that violence can be a response to needed change in the system, but also that violence cannot bring about anything good for society in general. Some interviewees claimed that that violence is a ‘natural state of mind’ in this region of the world for ages, and that it is never excluded as a possibility: “people here simply cannot live without violence. But there are some other countries that are functioning on violence as well.”²⁴ One respondent mentioned protests as the best solution and response to perceived injustice. Regarding their own experience of violence, most of respondents claimed that they have experienced violence from the police and from fans of other football clubs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The focus group from Mostar underlined that nothing was done by police regarding violence committed against them by fans of another club, claiming that in media reporting they were depicted as hooligans, while fans of the other club were not. They also highlighted this situation as perceived collective injustice. The frequency of recent violence among football fans in Bosnia and Herzegovina is certainly, to an extent, connected with an increasing social vulnerability and socio-political frustration among many citizens, especially younger ones. In this case, violence should not be considered as “the strongest nonverbal communication” as German philosopher Friedrich Hacker said, but as the strongest form of communication in general.

For the focus group from Banja Luka, extremism is a very sensitive topic and personally something they could relate to when they were younger. Participants of the other focus group from Mostar do not find

²³ In-person interview with a football fan from Banja Luka, 25/11/2021

²⁴ In-person interview with a football fan from Mostar, 18/12/2021

explicitly negative connotations regarding this term. “Extremism is only a form of attachment. It is a comradeship.”²⁵ Almost all these respondents view extremism as something positive, “some kind of love for something,”²⁶ or “when somebody fanatically love his club more than his father or mother,”²⁷ and something “special and extraordinary.”²⁸ When respondents were asked about the relationship between violence and extremism, their answers were unanimous. All respondents claimed that extremism in most cases does not lead to violence and that there is no direct relationship between the two.

The political and societal complexity of Bosnia and Herzegovina is very noticeable in the responses of focus groups participants when asked about their sense of belonging to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina in relation to their national or ethnic identity. Almost every participant emphasised that they have no strong feelings towards Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country: “I do not feel any attachment towards Bosnia and Herzegovina”²⁹. They emphasised this in different ways but always clearly tinted with political statements and opinions, such as: “We are born here, this is our country, but nothing nice is said about us Croats here.”³⁰ All participants stressed that their national or ethnic identity is far more important for them than a sense of belonging to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some made a point in highlighting a lack, or denial of group rights for their ethnic groups. Regarding the collective identities of their communities, most of participants emphasised their dedication and loyalty to the clubs, underlining their mutual group identity, mutual solidarity, pride, and their positive role within society when necessary (assistance after floods, helping people in need, protests against injustice, etc.). “We are as one” is a commonly repeated phrase.³¹

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Focus group and interview participants were eager to talk about their views on whether religion is a driver of extremism and cause of violence or if it can be a factor in strengthening the resilience of individuals. Most stated that religion in Bosnia and Herzegovina has a positive life influence on individuals and that it has nothing in common with violence. They showed high awareness of political manipulation and misuse of religion within society and in media, also throughout history in general. They emphasised that other religious identities, those of other groups they do not belong to, have never been an obstacle or threat to them. Two participants mentioned that they would defend their religion in case it is threatened, a position which might be misused under certain circumstances.

Participants from both focus groups expressed that the role of neighbouring countries in their life is an important one. In Mostar and Banja Luka this relates especially to the role of Croatia and Serbia, respectively. This role is mostly seen through connections with football fans from those countries, their mutual cooperation and friendship. For all interviewed participants this type of cooperation is very important.

²⁵ In-person FG with a football fan from Mostar, 18/12/2021

²⁶ In-person FG with football fans from Mostar, 18/12/2021

²⁷ In-person FG with football fans from Banja Luka, 25/11/2021

²⁸ In-person FG with football fans from Mostar, 18/12/2021

²⁹ In-person FG with football fans from Banja Luka, 25/11/2021

³⁰ In-person FG with football fans from Mostar, 18/12/2021

³¹ In-person FG with a football fan from Mostar, 18/12/2021

Additional findings were collected through conducting in-depth interviews with selected participants. As previously noted, these in-depth interviews were performed with 5 participants. All respondents stressed that the relation with their families are most important to them, that they enjoy a very open relationship with mutual understanding. One participant mentioned that he spends most of his time with his daughter. They stated that their leisure time is spent no differently than that of other young people. Most of their free time is spent in cafes, pubs, with their girlfriends, watching football games on TV and going to the stadium matches. Respondents from Mostar wish there were more cultural opportunities in the city, especially places to go out and more music concerts. In Mostar, sometimes they do sports betting.

Regarding the question on social injustice within their community, all interviewees expressed a critical view on tensions in society, mainly ethnonationalist tensions, and mutual group distrust. They expressed their concerns and discomfort regarding the political and economic conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina equally blaming politicians from all ethnic groups for the situation in the country, singling out prevailing corruption and nepotism.

All participants in interviews disagreed with the statement that violence could be an answer for injustices in society, but also mentioned that it is sometimes unavoidable. Once again, they blamed politicians for the situation in the country due to which people are emigrating to find better life opportunities elsewhere. Only one interview participant claimed that he had not been subject to violence. Others strongly emphasised that they have been victims of violence, mostly by football fans of other teams and of police forces. They stated that police forces often bully them for no reason, physically attacking them and harassing them constantly. Even in instances of police violence and attacks that have been reported, nothing was done about it. Their opinion on this issue is that the public should know about these cases. Otherwise, the public views football fans only as hooligans and troublesome individuals. One participant from Mostar stated that he was pressured because of his language (Croatian) while studying in Sarajevo.³² He was very disappointed about an inadequate reaction of institutions on this matter as well.

Just as the focus groups participants, our in-depth interviews respondents view extremism in a very positive way, emphasizing its meaning as an extreme devotion to the football club or family. They blame media culture for presenting extremism negatively. They also expressed a lot of criticism towards other football fans who make use of various insulting banners and pictures during matches at stadiums (mostly ethnic hatred contents, glorification of genocide in Srebrenica, crimes in Jasenovac during the Second World War, etc.).³³ For one interview participant, an extremist is a person with character who has nothing to do with violence. Also, it was mentioned that an extremist is a person who has nothing to lose.

All participants claimed that religion cannot be related to violence if people are true believers. Interviewees view religion as a positive attitude towards life, but they are also aware that religion is

³² In-person interview with a football fan from Mostar, 18/12/2021

³³ In-person interview with a football fan from Banja Luka, 25/11/2021

used to create animosities between people and to generate conflicts, or as an excuse for terrorist violence. One participant underlined that his parents taught him not to hate other religions while another stated that religion must be a factor in the resilience of people to the threat of extremism and violence.

Additionally, all participant in the interviews expressed negative opinions towards violent contents on online platforms, when using Facebook, watching YouTube videos, or playing games. This is both on platforms related to football and any other online content. They expressed their concern for the impact of violent media contents on children and their development.

Questioned about their feelings of belonging to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, most of participants stated that this belonging is 'on paper' only. They all confirmed that they were born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but all of them are mainly concerned about the wellbeing of their own ethnic groups not about the fate of the country. All participants stated that the state or institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina did not give them anything. Emphasizing their national or ethnic identity is far more important to them as this gives them a sense of community. None of our interviewees are members of political parties or other organisations, but only belong to the football clubs' supporters' groups.

Furthermore, all participants from Mostar have dual citizenship (Croatian in addition to Bosnian and Herzegovinian). They praise their connection to this neighbouring country through ethnic, cultural and sport related contexts, especially the connection with Croatian football clubs' fans. "Even before the war, we were connected and this cooperation is very strong."³⁴ On the other side, participants from Banja Luka expressed satisfaction with their relationship with clubs from Serbia. This strong cross-border relationship also strengthens their supporters ethnic belonging. Yet claim that they do not support the current political regime in Serbia. This kind of anti-system attitude is at the core of their activities. Some connections with Serbian football clubs and fans are part of football tradition and have been kept alive for decades. These fans do not think that such cooperation affects their attitudes towards other ethnic and religious groups, but that it can definitely strengthen affiliation towards their own group and club. They found that cooperation with football clubs' supporters' groups in Serbia only contributes to radical attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours in the view of others who do not take part in this cooperation and view it from the outside.

³⁴ In-person interview with a football fan from Mostar, 18/12/2021

Analysis Conclusions

Organized groups of football fans present a specific kind of challenge when speaking about radicalisation in divided and post-conflict societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is mostly due to political and nationalist ideologies that are strongly connected to the identity of this subculture. The findings clearly show that in Bosnia and Herzegovina this subculture is under influence of political ideas and economic inequalities within society. The animosity that members of the groups show towards the political system, represented mostly through police forces, and towards ruling politicians, is the most vivid indicator of potential radicalisation. In other words, these drivers can have great impact on future radicalisation, when combined with already existing exclusion and stigmatisation of group members in the public sphere where they are seen as hooligans, criminals, and problematic individuals. The potential for radicalisation in this case can be measured through instances of political and nationalist violence, hatred in public speeches and symbols, physical fights between fans of rival teams, conflicts with police forces, and destruction of property. Based on the responses of our interviewees it is possible to raise a question for almost each of their statements. Why does the socio-economic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina block the ambitions and goals of young people coming from a background devoid of wealth? How does this impact their need for self-affirmation, their plans and hope for the future? This kind of socio-economic injustice, related to social class stratifications, ingrained, and institutionalised corruption, and resentment towards 'young people with rich (politically connected) parents' that our respondents mentioned tell us a lot about potential causes and triggers for their resentment and enormous bitterness, which can all be a factor for their radicalisation.

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When participants speak about violence and its expressions in various areas of life, it is important to mention that all of them stressed that responses of government institutions are not adequate. Initially, they spoke about judicial institutions, that did not react in many cases of violence or try to address those responsible. After that, they mentioned political and social institutions that did not create efficient prevention programmes for combating violence, religious institutions and civil society organisations that did not use their authority strongly to warn about the serious consequences of violence. This detailed understanding of the complexity of connections among institutional actors coming from a potentially radicalised subculture group presents an added value of our research. The members of football clubs' supporters' groups are fully aware of how institutions (do not) act to address radicalisation, extremism, and violence.

Sport, and especially football, has significant socialisation functions, as we could see in this research. It is about a process of more or less spontaneous and organised transmissions of general and specific cultural contents with considerable impact on younger generations who act as recipients (Vrcan, 2003:252). It is obvious that this role is growing more and more important, also due to the lack of functioning key social institutions such as family and educational institutions. These traditional institutions of socialisation are today experiencing a serious crisis due to the strong influence of informal groups, corruption, digital social networks that are not specialised for socialisation functions, and a prevailing impact of political ideologies and market pressure. This subculture, as demonstrated in this research, has developed, and nourished a strong sense of collective identity and belonging, together

with connective local, particular, and universal specific subculture's values (Tilly, 1987). The integrational processes within this subculture are what leads members to exhibit extreme emotional belonging and accordingly strong mobilisation.

Intersections between Drivers and Interactions among Drivers and Social Contexts

In the context of intersections between drivers and interactions among drivers and society, it is obvious that several drivers are intersecting. Socio-economically, all participants are members of the lower middle class, they have several jobs and live in working-class districts. Beside their evident devotion to their club and football, they are seriously frustrated with the economic and political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They characterised their affiliation to the football fans subculture as form of social and political revolt. Their animosity is particularly strong towards the political system and party politics, represented in the form of their interaction with police forces, but towards media as well. Furthermore, they view violence only as self-defence. The ethnic communities and ethnic identities that they belong to are closely connected and intersect with religion, political grievances, and transnational dynamics. On the other hand, all participant expressed their deep antagonism and hostility towards corruption and nepotism. Their resentment towards state and local institutions are very clear and are shaped by this view of a corrupt political class. Those institutions according to their statements are the reason for various social, cultural, and political injustices. It is important to highlight that economic deprivation intersects with political grievances that can become serious triggers to radicalisation of this subculture group. This intersects further with in-group socialisation, an undermined and weakened social position and a punitive justice system. Bearing this in mind, this specific community of young people could easily be turned into towards an acceptance of extremism not just in name but also in content, including the use of violence for specific purposes central to the group's identities.

General Conclusion

In order to adequately understand the term of subculture in the context of this research, it is important to note that subcultures are not any cultural characteristics taken separately. For understanding subcultures in the context of radicalisation it is important to assume that they are specific because they form relatively cohesive cultural system. According to sociologist Milton Yinger, subcultures are vital for theoretical, practical, and empirical needs and research, especially in terms of social pathologies and group behaviour. This means that for subcultures we need to have three major conditions: a forced upon adversity or exclusion of individuals or social groups related to certain important values resulting in frustration, a confusion about societal systems of values, and a lack of social control. This is clearer when we understand that each individual and social group usually have their own system of values, arranged according to certain meanings and adopted and accepted by its members. For subcultures it becomes evident that group values are often in opposition with the commonly accepted values of society in general. In other words, rather than being autonomous from the larger culture, subcultures of football fans contain and internalise some of its values and behavioural rules. This commonality is not lasting, subcultures are distinguished from the larger culture by a fairly distinct mix of behaviours, lifestyle, and conduct, as we were able to observe during our research. This specific subculture is also distinguished by a set of beliefs, interests, attributions, and values that are shared and developed through mutual interactions of members. They are characterised by a common fate and dilemma derived from their position counter to mainstream social structures. They are also characterised by patterned interactions and relationships within the subculture and between the subculture and larger social structure (Arnold, 1970).

It is a mistake to conclude that the values systems, attitudes, and conduct particular to subcultures of football clubs' supporters' groups only depend on psychological factors (frustrations, disorders, lack of social control). We found that this subculture in Bosnia and Herzegovina is deeply influenced, established and conditioned through economic, social, and political drivers. Observing these drivers can serve as a potential indicator for measuring increases and intensity of radical ideas and actions of this subculture. Furthermore, nationalist political strategies, displayed through the driver of political issues and ideas, are still very present and influential within mainstream politics and culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This driver is crucial in stimulating political instrumentalisation of football fans through formal and informal institutions, and nationalist media. Although political ideas have not been able to achieve some of their primary goals of societal and political division of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, they are still very much relevant and active through ethnonationalist polarisation and ideological ethnonationalism. As such these political ideas are not a 'matter of the past' only related to the 1990s war, but very much find their expression in contemporary everyday interactions. Consequently, organised groups of football clubs' supporters remain a potential arena for radical and divisive political attitudes, ethnonational polarisation, and political instrumentalisation.

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Annex I

The questionnaire

1. Do you spend time with your family?
 - Do you have any joint activities?
 - Do you talk with family members about topics that are important and interesting to you?
 - Do you feel that your parents understand you and that they respect your views and opinions?

2. How do you spend your free time in the community or city where you live?
 - Do you visit cultural centers, youth centers, cinemas or any space for young people?
 - Is there a place where you can do sports or other activities?
 - How often do you visit such places (never, once a week, once a month)?
 - What do you think about the contents or activities that are being offered at such places?
 - Do you visit betting shops to socialise?

3. Does the community where you live experience injustice?
 - What kind of injustice?
 - Are you personally concerned about this injustice and how does this affect you?
 - Are you outraged by this injustice?

4. In your opinion, can violence be an answer or a solution for the injustice that a person experiences in his/her environment?

5. Have you or any of your friends ever experienced violence?
 - Did you report this violence to someone? If not, why not?
 - Was the reaction of those to whom you reported the violence adequate and satisfactory?

6. When you use Facebook, YouTube, games, or any other online platform related to football but also other things, do you come across videos, images or text that contain violence?
 - What do you think about such content?
 - How do you react when you see such content?

7. In your opinion, what is "extremism"?
 - Do you know or have you heard of people you would describe as extremists?

8. Can you describe the relationship between violence and extremism?
 - Does all extremism lead to violence?

9. Do you feel belonging to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and to what extent? Do you feel like you belong to an ethnic group? Which affiliation is more important to you?

10. Are you a member of a body within your football club, other associations, political parties, civil society organisations or other communities?

- Which ones?
- Are you proud of your belonging to such communities?
- How would you describe the collective identity of this community?

11. Can religion be the driver of violence? Can religion be a factor in individuals' resilience to the attraction of violence? Explain how in both cases.

12. What role do the neighboring countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina have in your life?

- Do you cooperate with similar organisations or associations from other countries? Which ones? What does that cooperation mean?
- As a result, do you feel a stronger sense of belonging to your country, ethnic group, religion, or community?
- Does such cooperation affect your attitudes towards other groups?
- Do stronger ties with neighboring countries contribute to some radical attitudes and behavior, or do they mitigate them?



Youth supporters of online Salafi influencers

Muamer Hirkić, Sarina Bakić, Anida Dudić, Sanela Bašić, Damir Kapidžić

Introduction

After conducting research in the Work Package 4 (macro-level context), the majority of respondents stressed the importance of digitalisation as a factor of radicalisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), primarily because it still represents a largely unregulated sphere from the standpoint of institutional responsibility. Additionally, it was emphasised that, due to its simplicity, the online world offers virtual gathering places or places of incipient socialisation, where online religious or nationalist lecturers could gain a significant number of followers. Several such religious lecturers or *da'is*, who have the rank of “superstars” within their online communities on Facebook and YouTube, regularly post sermons and lectures that could include radical messages and views that are often not supported by the official religious institution – the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Moreover, their sizeable online following allows them a much higher visibility while conducting Islamic missionary work or *Da'wah*, in comparison to the official religious leaders or institution. Nonetheless, this represents an important sociological phenomenon, especially due to susceptibility of youths to online content (Kapidžić et al., 2021). At the same time, youth are open to gatherings and socialisation in both offline and online settings, meaning that their engagement goes beyond the traditional face-to-face interactions, and expands rapidly in the form of likes, comments and shares of the videos and online posts.

According to previous research conducted by Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), Salafi online influencers are supported by a network of organisations registered as associations for the promotion of ‘positive values’ and ‘original Islam’, youth associations and book clubs (BIRN, 2019). Also, Metodieva noted that previously, local and abroad-based influencers maintained their ties through shared activities, such as guest lectures and online discussions (Metodieva, 2021). Hesová believes that this last wave or form of Salafist activity can be characterised as neo-Salafism – which needs to be distinguished from previous Salafist, Wahhabi and Mujahideen activities in BiH – and which can also be viewed through the prism of online Islamic missionary activism that is mostly based on youth and adult education, religious authority, media activism, and community building (Hesová, 2021).

This study is structured in the following way. The next section explains the methodological approach, while taking into account the added value of meso-level analysis, research objectives, sample description, as well as the research tools used in the study. Section number three analyses all seven project-defined drivers (religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, social

digitalisation, political issues, educational, leisure and cultural opportunities, and transnational dynamics), and explains the interaction between individual drivers and the chosen social context. Section four delivers conclusions on the analysis of meso-level drivers, as well as the prevention indicators, while the last, fifth section, provides a general conclusion for the study.

Research Methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The macro-level analysis on structural and institutional approaches towards drivers of radicalisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kapidžić et al., 2021) found different understandings of radicalisation among institutional actors. However, several factors were highlighted as relevant drivers of radicalisation, amongst other political ideas and ethno-political polarisation. Digitalisation and especially social networks were mentioned as potentially relevant mechanisms of spreading radical ideas among youth followers. They can also serve as a tool for socialisation of individuals with radical or extremist ideas as an echo-chamber where such ideas are amplified. These results highlight the need to investigate the use of social media to spread potentially radical ideas among a large audience. The macro-level research emphasised the role of Salafist religious lecturers in using social media to spread their ideas. The community of their online supporters is the focus of this analysis.

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

By taking into a consideration youth as the target group, the research team noted that there is growing interest in content produced by online Salafist influencers, which is adapted to the latest social media marketing standards, thus making it straightforward and compelling for the broader audience. Salafi influencers use simple language that is understandable to everyone, provide direct advice and opinions, and often give comments on the trending topics. Exploring such online gathering places is a significant attempt to present the attitudes and values that are nurtured in closed groups that have a large online outreach. Also, most previous research in the countering/preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) sphere has not focused on the effects of digitalisation within youth-related communities, and this study is an attempt to identify and map the main drivers of radicalisation inside the digital environment.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

While observing meso-level in the context of youth supporters of online Salafi influencers, several major research objectives were identified, which proved to be relevant for the analysis. These include, but are not limited to:

- Increasing the knowledge on the digitalisation-related phenomena in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that could correlate with the potential radicalisation drivers among youth.
- Identifying prevalent drivers of radicalisation in the online Salafi communities.
- Mapping the principal subjects and topics within the consumed social media content.
- Establishing a clear linkage between the findings at the macro-level and subsequent meso-level analysis.

DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

This community proved to be relevant at the macro-level analysis, where a significant number of respondents mentioned Salafi influencers in the contexts of two drivers – digitalisation and religion.

Given that the idea of community at the meso-level is seen as any place (both offline and online) where socialisation takes place, it was possible to consider online groups that have such characteristics. Therefore, online supporters of well-known Salafi lecturers were selected as a representative group that has its own “digital ecosystem”, features, and characteristics, which set them apart and makes them unique in relation to some other, formalised communities. Also, online Salafist communities are not restricted by geography, and thus have the opportunity to connect a large number of young people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as from neighbouring countries and diaspora. The profiles of the most popular lecturers number hundreds of thousands of followers, and thus serve as platforms, forums and places of socialisation, where like-minded people gather. Through interactions with the original content, and comments on videos and posts, followers can provide their own views on daily occurrences. For the purpose of the first part of the research, which deals with content analysis, the profiles of the two most prominent Salafist lecturers were selected, which together number around 325 thousand followers on Facebook, and around 46 thousand followers on YouTube. For the purposes of the second part of the research, interviews and focus groups with young people who: i) belong to one of the Salafist associations and religious groups; and ii) regularly follow the online content of Salafi influencers on Facebook and YouTube are planned.

CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION (OF PARTICIPANTS)

The main criterion set during the selection process was active monitoring of online lectures and educational content of the most popular Bosnian Salafist influencers via YouTube and Facebook platforms. The target group for focus group and interviews are the people who take part in the online dissemination of potentially radicalizing messages. Most supporters use their real-life online identities when interacting with this content, and it is possible to identify and establish contact with them. Due to potential ethics concerns and the difficulty of establishing contact online a different approach was chosen. We reached out to members of communities and associations that support the work of online Salafists as our primary sample.

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SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

In the first part of the study, which is dedicated to a qualitative content analysis of the two most prominent online Salafi influencers, the project team looks at the comments of followers and their approval or disapproval of views and attitudes that are expressed. By doing so, researchers were attentive to the comments written by younger followers from the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the second part of the study, the meso level methodological framework adopted by the CONNEKT project sets out age as an important criterion for participation in the research. All participants in the interview and focus group need to be between 15 to 30 years old. Also, during the selection process, the research team paid attention to the gender ratio within the group. Due to challenges described below, the sample for interviews and focus groups was never established.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES + RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

The analysis section was divided into two parts. First, the project team conducted a qualitative content analysis of the most popular posts of the two most followed online da'is on Facebook and YouTube platforms. The posts were selected according to criterion of engagement, or more precisely, according

to the number of recorded reactions or likes – where a total of 20 Facebook posts, as well as 6 YouTube videos were analysed. Due to the possibility of page administrator’s moderation of reactions to the content (by limiting the possibility of commenting), it was decided to analyse the 6 most popular YouTube videos on Facebook – because identical videos have been uploaded on this platform as well, with the possibility of commenting. The period taken into account in the analysis is one year (from January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2021), and the analysis was done in a way that seven defined drivers (religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, social digitalisation, political issues, educational, leisure and cultural opportunities, and transnational dynamics) were coded into the content that Salafist influencers publish to their supporters. Coding was done in such a way that keywords and thematic units relating to drivers were assigned to most popular posts. In this way, posts were classified into adequate categories, which gave the opportunity to observe followers’ reactions, as well as potential matches with the assigned categories. Nonetheless, it was possible to obtain a broad picture of the topics that provoke the most reactions, and also to analyse the ways in which such topics are approved, through the comments section below each of the posts. The latter part of the research called for a focus group and 4 interviews with members of a religious group from Sarajevo, who identify themselves as young supporters of online lecturers on Facebook and YouTube.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

Given that Salafi communities are usually closed off to outsiders and outside influences, and often ostracised by the media, the main challenge has been in establishing trust towards us as researchers. As previous research shows (Kapidžić et al., 2021), during a significant number of departures to the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields in the period from 2013 to 2016, as well as during the integration of the illegal congregations or parajamaats into the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, these groups and associations were often the target of a large number of condemnations, which in turn produced distrust in media, as well as the general public.

In the first part of the study, researchers undertook a content analysis of online content of two most prominent Salafi lecturers. Only publicly available content was selected and no names or identifying information of supporters were gathered. For the second part of the research the research team attempted to establish contact with two target associations in Tuzla and Mostar but was unable to gain access. Initial contact, both direct and through intermediaries, was ignored or refuted with baseless arguments. The research team decided to adapt the research plan accordingly and reached out to a religious group in Sarajevo whose members actively follow online platforms of Bosnian da’is and were willing to engage as respondents. The questionnaire subsequently had to be adjusted in line with the content analysis results – meaning that it served as an instrument for verification of information obtained in the first part of the research. Therefore, more focus was devoted to all those factors that occur in the online environment, implying that the team wanted to have more information about the “online life” of the respondents (such as digital practices and use of free time). Moreover, there was a desire to seek more detailed answers regarding the relationship between extremism and religion, lifestyle, and transnational dynamics. However, timing proved to be a major obstacle as the research was repeatedly delayed in January, February, and March 2022 due to COVID infections among researchers and community members. Subsequently there was no

willingness from the community to interact with researchers. This proved to be a major challenge that the research team was not able to resolve in time, especially given the deadlines for deliverables of the project.³⁵ The report is therefore based solely on the first part of the study and the content analysis.

³⁵ Since more focus groups and interviews were conducted for the other three BiH case study reports, the required project workload was nevertheless completed.

Meso Level Dynamics

RELIGION

The idea of producing online Salafist content and establishing a Salafist network of online influencers is based on the desire to bring followers closer to the interpretation of Islam advocated by such groups. Therefore, most of the Facebook and YouTube posts analysed in this study deal directly or indirectly with Islamic regulations and contain religion as a leitmotif, meaning that online Salafi influencers offer interpretations of the regulations in a simple way that is understandable to all followers. At the same time, the essential reasoning behind their actions is the idea of Islamic authority, authentic Islam or a role modelling for all those who seek knowledge from “authentic” sources. The main idea that permeates the analysed posts is the value of active practice of religion and religious rites, and for this purpose, *da’is* use Quran, Hadith, as well as the works of both well and lesser-known authors, interpreters, and scholars – where many of them are from the same or similar Salafist circles. In this way, followers are presented with a dose of legitimacy that supports personal, day-to-day opinions, and thus there is a smaller number of those who could challenge such opinions. Previous macro-level research has shown that most Salafist influencers in Bosnia and Herzegovina completed their formal higher education in states such as Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia – meaning that they did not study within the Islamic Community in BiH, and for that reason, they were not allowed to become officials of this institution. However, online profiles show that Salafi influencers place emphasis on acquired degrees (master’s or doctoral degrees), in order to give an even greater dose of legitimacy to their attitudes and thoughts. Although formal titles have become an important part of the overall online identity of these individuals, there are also religious ones – where a large number of followers have adopted standardised titles for lecturers such as *da’i* (lecturer), *alim* (scholar) or *sheikh* (honorary title, in line with “His excellency”), and use them daily in comments that express forms of agreement with the stated views. Most supporters’ posts and comments are of a purely religious nature and show general agreement with *da’is*. This can be seen in the form of affirmative answers and expressions of gratitude – where some of the phrases and words that stand out include: “Mashallah sheikh/what God has willed has happened sheikh”, “Alhamdulillah/praise be to God”, and “Amin/may it be so.”

The content analysis has shown that a total of 10 of the 20 most popular posts (mix of textual content, photos and videos) of the two profiles analysed on Facebook have general religious activities and concepts as key topics. In one of the analysed posts, there is a video showing a young person in a life-threatening situation, which produced sympathetic responses from the followers. In the comment sections, a number of followers cited their own examples of facing the similar situations, emphasizing gratitude to God as the supreme authority and saviour. Prayers of both lecturers and followers were also present in other cases of daily occurrences, such as in situations when natural disasters (fires and floods) hit Bosnia and Herzegovina last year. Several posts concern the daily performance of prayer, emphasizing the importance and value of this act, instilling this habit from an early age, as well as gratitude to the supreme authority for the opportunity to pray in groups, without COVID restrictions. Such posts generally receive similar reactions, which indicate the approval and support of followers and do not have forms of differing or opposing opinions. On the other hand, although there is noticeable moderation of the comment section by administrators, several posts have mixed reactions

from followers as well as insults towards da'is. One such post is related to life advice given by a controversial Albania-born Salafi scholar Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani. Also, a significant number of negative comments were left on the video of a young girl whose mother tested her general knowledge about Islam, where a large number of followers referred to the fact that the child was too young and did not truly understand all that was learned by heart. Moreover, in one of the comments left by a member of another religious group, in which he pointed out that his religion (Orthodox Christianity) is the right one, da'i replied that "the Quran clearly states that such people are unbelievers", which can be characterised as a form of explicit "othering" without a two-way dialogue on the topic. In another video, da'i explains the issues of temptation and punishment in Islam, while expressing distrust towards security institutions such as the police. However, a significant number of comments on this post can be characterised as disapproval and disagreement with the position on the topic that the lecturer took.

SOCIAL DIGITALISATION

The basis of online Salafi missionary work is the possibility to make use of social digitalisation through the establishment of virtual gathering places, where mimicking of what is known as traditional socialization in congregations or within places of worships takes place. The development and optimization of social networks, which in a short period of time produced a significant following and thousands of reactions or likes per post, is an impressive undertaking that has given most *da'is* considerable visibility and reach. Research shows that the content is carefully selected, optimised and adapted to the latest standards of social networks, thus following the latest audio-visual production trends. Visual appeal and well-produced content brings greater interest and involvement of the younger population, especially in terms of the language that is adapted to the targeted population. For instance, the language in videos is often simple, with many colloquial terms and humorous, meme-like remarks that are relatable to most "ordinary" people and this alone, contributes to the charisma of the lecturers. Additionally, there are on-the-spot Arabic to Bosnian translations of verses from the Quran, which affirms the idea of authority and authentic knowledge.

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When analysing the content, we noticed that there is noticeable moderation of comments on Facebook and YouTube, which is often explained as an attempt to avoid unnecessary discussions, or to allow only positive comments. On the other hand, this form of moderation, in many cases, means one-way communication, without the possibility of discussion and questioning of the content that is posted. Also, in a large number of posts that can be commented on, there are mostly affirmative answers that indicate agreement, and it is often possible to see dozens of identical comments. This form of affirmative approach of followers is not exclusive for this group, but it is quite visible, meaning that it just confirms the relationship between the authority and followers. During the analysis, we also noticed that most of the video content is uploaded in identical format on both platforms, while other posts in the form of photos and text are published via Facebook.

EDUCATIONAL, LEISURE AND CULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES

While observing the content on Facebook and YouTube platforms, the majority of activities of online Salafist lecturers can be summarised under the category of "lifestyle coaching", as they offer instant advice for everyday life issues. They often emphasise advice related to the position of women in the family, the

relationship of spouses, allowed and forbidden daily activities, and social phenomena that are not related to religious teachings. Most such opinions stem from religious interpretations of primary and secondary sources and are therefore an integral part of the overall religion-based context, but at the same time, these could be misused and misinterpreted by users to suit their individual aims. Any lifestyle-related topics are subject to individual interpretations, and as such may depend on the individual or authority who presents these topics to the supporters. Therefore, it can be concluded that online Salafi lecturers act as non-formal educational actors, who attempt to deconstruct complex ideas and demanding concepts in a simplified way to all generations and audiences by relying on religious references. In one previous study, Sabic-El-Rayess confirmed this claim by pointing out that, in a vacuum left by formal education, Salafi mentors provide continuing education for the marginalised through mentorship-based clinics, online programming, podcasts, and physical lectures (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021). In addition, the overall online presence and marketing awareness of online lecturers can be viewed through the prism of a carefully built brand, which has its own characteristics and role in the daily lives of followers. As Sorgenfrei argues, Salafi influencers are able to communicate or promote a tangible product, an ideology, or a message in such a way that followers perceive it as a desirable cultural element and, what is more, as part of a beneficial way of living (Sorgenfrei, 2021).

Our research has shown that YouTube videos are, in a large number of cases, re-uploaded versions of Facebook Live lectures, which are regularly held on their profiles. YouTube content analysis revealed that the most-watched videos in 2021 are questions and answers to general lifestyle inquiries, where each hour-long video offers answers to approximately 50 followers' questions. Topics are diverse and address issues such as liking pictures of people of the opposite sex on Facebook, wearing appropriate, baggy pants (women's clothing), celebrating birthdays, hunting animals for the sake of nutrition, and many others. In their videos, da'is note that these are pre-received questions from followers to which they regularly answer. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is growing interest in opinions and instant lifestyle advice of da'is. This is further confirmed by supportive comments of supporters. The analysed content has a considerable relevance in the context of cultural or "the way of life" driver of potential radicalisation. This primarily refers to the change of the so-called social fabric of the society, where society sees certain practices, perceptions, and physical appearances as foreign and inadequate for the social context of the state, while Salafi influencers and their followers see digital platforms as prolific ground for the promotion of more "traditional" way of life. On the other hand, during the Facebook analysis, two posts out of a total of 20 stood out as posts related to advising and promoting a certain way of life. The first post, which indicates that men should not "look at other people's wives", provoked a number of reactions in the comments, where some of the followers pointed out that one should not question the sheikh's advice, while others stressed that "it would be great if women did the same." The second, and most controversial post of all, referred to the Sarajevo LGBT Pride Parade where one da'i posted a photo of trucks washing the streets after the parade, stating "bravo guys." Many of the comments on this post are offensive, with followers joining in and insulting this community, using words such as "acid", "stench", "disinfection", and "disease."

TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

Previous research in Bosnia and Herzegovina has shown strong links between Salafist networks in the Balkans and within the European Union – primarily in cases of diaspora communities sharing the same language, roots and culture. Also, in Islam, the idea of ummah (community) that transcends nation-

state borders plays an important role, and thus connects Muslims around the world. This concept represents an important segment of the daily work of online Salafis, which is best seen in posts expressing solidarity and support to various Muslim countries and peoples. Several such posts confirm the strong support that online da'is have from the Sandžak region in both Serbia and Montenegro. Also, in one of the posts, da'i points out that people from Sandžak are "the pride of faith", while in several others he pays tribute to the recently deceased Mufti and politician Muamer Zukorlić, who was a respected figure within Bosniak circles in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro. At the same time, most of the comments of the online community are of an affirmative nature, where great gratitude towards sheikh is expressed. In addition to the Sandžak case, there was also a support for Turkey during last year's fires, where da'is sent their prayers for "our Muslim brothers in Turkey." Finally, during last year's conflict between Israel and Palestine, one of the online Salafis prayed "for our brothers in Palestine, because the Zionists are committing indescribable crimes and tortures against Muslims," emphasizing that "they are both God's and Palestinian enemies."

OTHER DRIVERS - POLITICAL ISSUES, ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION AND TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

Much of the online activism of Salafist lecturers on Facebook and YouTube is about everyday events, implying that political events in Bosnia and Herzegovina have some space in their activism. Often, criticism is directed inwards – more precisely towards the policies of Bosniak politicians and parties, as well as towards the Republika Srpska entity and the treatment of Muslims who are a minority there. In their posts, the da'is mostly pray for imams working in the Republika Srpska, praising their efforts for Muslim post-war returnees. The analysis showed that online Salafi lecturers do not challenge the political system in a way that implies them wanting to become part of those structures, or in a way that they want to change that system from within. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that such posts are not among the most popular ones in terms of supporters' engagement, and as such do not represent a significant driver in the context of this study. The other two drivers that have proven irrelevant to this community are economic deprivation and territorial inequalities. The general narrative that permeates religious teaching is that any economic benefit is subordinate to spirituality – implying that real wealth is in the practice of religion. In addition, the analysis of posts on Facebook and YouTube showed that the driver of territorial inequalities is non-existent in the context of the online Salafi network.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND INTERACTIONS AMONG DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Digitisation is an overarching element, a tool that enables the spread of different drivers such as religion, educational, leisure and cultural opportunities, and transnational dynamics. Moreover, it is possible to note that religion is a constant link between all these drivers. Islam, in this sense, does not represent a source of radicalisation, but it opens the possibility for individual interpretations of religion that do seem problematic, primarily in terms of using sources (authors) that do not necessarily resemble the meaning of Quran or Hadith accepted by the majority of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, the driver of religion has strong linkages to the driver of educational, leisure and cultural opportunities, primarily due to validation of certain lifestyles through religious texts, which can be at odds with established, mainstream societal practices – mostly in terms of physical appearance

and behaviour. Finally, the transnational dynamic is directly based on the concept of religion, or the link between the *ummah*, which contributes to a greater sense of sympathy for any grievances that affect Muslims around the world.

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO LEVEL ANALYSIS

Online Salafi lecturers, as well as the community they built and serve, were an important part of the macro-level analysis, where respondents from different types of institutions highlighted the possibility of radicalisation in such groups, primarily in the context of drivers such as religion, digitalisation and transnational dynamics. If we analyse the attitude of this group towards institutions, it is possible to identify two main phenomena. Focusing on religious institutions, the relationship of online Salafi lecturers with the Islamic Community in BiH has gone through several changes in recent years – from initial criticism, through direct challenge and opposition, to integration and mitigation of rhetoric. Nevertheless, there is still a need to be heard and to have a “louder” voice when performing a Da’wah, and digitalisation and social networks allow them to do so. Likewise, content posted on social media by da’is is more engaging than the content of the Islamic Community, and therefore da’is views and opinions within the online community are more likely to carry the same or stronger weight than the official institutions. On the other hand, digitalisation and online community-building have enabled visible cooperation and networking with the non-governmental Salafist sector in the promotion of various lectures across different platforms and channels, also across borders.

HOW MACRO LEVEL DRIVERS WORKS AT THE MESO- LEVEL STUDIED (THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS)?

Drivers identified in the macro-level analysis proved to be compatible with drivers highlighted in the meso-level analysis. Furthermore, this study showed that drivers and their interactions overlap in such a way that digitalisation, or more precisely, consumption of online content containing religion as a leitmotif, can directly or indirectly enhance the driver of educational, leisure and cultural opportunities, and also increase sentiments of concern or compassion for Muslims in other countries (transnational dynamics). The driver of political issues that was identified as highly relevant at the macro-level, and that includes issues such as ethnic nationalism and political ideologies, is not relevant for this analysis. The embeddedness of online Salafi lecturers and their supporters within the Bosniak Muslim societal segment of BiH has shielded it from political drivers that relate to ethnic diversity.

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

The analysis of the content on the Facebook and YouTube platforms of the two most popular da'is in Bosnia and Herzegovina showed the relevance of several drivers such as social digitalisation, religion, culture or "way of life", as well as transnational dynamics. Also, the strong interconnectedness of these drivers was noticed, where social digitalisation allows the expression of other previously mentioned drivers and religion permeates throughout. Online profiles of Salafi lecturers have become virtual gathering places, offering optimised audio-video content and thus ideal conditions for socialisation, while also replacing physical locations such as mosques or masjids.

First, religion can be used as an educational instrument for proving individual views and consolidating one's own authority in terms of interpretations of complex concepts. However, the use of other sources, such as the views of a number of Salafi scholars, can be problematic for end users/consumers of content and can include elements that encourage radicalisation. The analysis of the content showed that there is some dose of critical interaction to such content from the supporters themselves who question certain interpretations through comments. On the other hand, there is also a dose of insulting comments aimed at da'is. Religious content is mainly used in the form of prayers for everyday events, such as various natural disasters, where comments are mostly a direct reflection of the content and do not have the dimension of negative reviews. Second, the driver of educational, leisure and cultural opportunities can be reduced to the idea of promoting a certain way of life, which means the desire to non-violently correct the system through methods of persuading, lobbying and presenting the positive aspects of such an approach to life. Likewise, Salafi lecturers can be viewed from two angles – as educators and as a brand – which ultimately signifies offering a daily reminder of alternative ways of living and acquiring knowledge, while presenting themselves as beneficial role models. Finally, transnational dynamics, paired with religion, proved to be relevant in cases of solidarity with Muslim nations and peoples, implying sympathy for those going through natural disasters or war events – where the latter is particularly important due to the experience of war in BiH.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

Although it is impossible to measure radicalisation accurately, its presence is visible in the ways in which some supporters express their views regarding the topics that are important to them, or regarding topics that provoke some form of grievance. Also, by approving or agreeing in the form of reactions/likes or comments on Facebook and YouTube, it is possible to conclude that most supporters nurture similar or identical values. However, it is important to note that such instances do not necessarily reflect the position of the whole group, but only parts of the community that have identical views, or parts of the community to which certain topics have personal significance. It is also important to take into account the fact that there is administrative moderation or switching off of commenting, which in most cases means that the allowed comments express different forms of agreement with da'is views. This implies that there is not much space for conflicting opinions or two-way dialogue between content producers and their online supporters.

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

Going forward to the micro level analysis and focusing on individuals will be difficult in this case. It proved impossible to gain enough trust within the closed Salafi community or among supporting organisations to allow for focus groups and interviews. This might still be possible when it comes to survey instruments, while engaging community individuals would require outsized effort and commitment. Within the micro-level research, it is key to focus on two aspects: 1) the radicalisation potential of the online content, especially in relation to religious and lifestyle messages that focus on out-groups, and 2) on the relationship between the messenger, the da'is, and their message in order to investigate which of the two carries more weight when it comes to potentially radicalising content.

General Conclusion

Young supporters of the online Salafi influencers have been selected as a community whose attitudes and values are important for a better understanding of the digital space, which is becoming a relevant area for various forms of socialisation. At the same time, the online space is still institutionally unregulated, which opens the possibility for placing and spreading potentially dangerous extremist content. Online Salafi influencers also have significantly better visibility on social networks than the Islamic Community in BiH, and thus represent a challenger for the ultimate religious authority and interpreter of religious regulations.

The methodology of the study was approached from two angles: i) first, an analysis of the content on Facebook and YouTube profiles of the two most popular da'is was done, where 20 posts with the highest number of reactions in 2021 were singled out; and ii) second, interviews that were planned but ultimately not conducted with members of a religious group from Sarajevo, who identify themselves as young supporters and followers of online Salafi influencers. The results showed that digitalisation is an overarching category when it comes to all analysed drivers, which can lead to the interconnectedness of other drivers in the online space. On the other hand, it is noticeable that religion permeates through two drivers – educational, leisure and cultural opportunities, as well as transnational dynamics – which means that religious interpretations are the leitmotif present in all drivers. However, it is important to emphasise that in these cases religion is subject to individual interpretations, as well as the interpretations of various Salafist scholars whose works are promoted. In addition, there is a presence of critically-oriented comments on somewhat more controversial posts, but there are also comments that contain insults addressed both towards da'is and the content. Finally, the driver of transnational dynamic has proven to be relevant only in cases of compassion for struggles of peoples and nations with Muslim populations, both in the region and in other parts of the world.

Research at the meso-level has shown that, in addition to the strong influence that the community can leave on the individual, in terms of agreeing with a large number of views and opinions, there are still individual understandings and attachments to topics that the individual perceives as important. Therefore, the findings of this study will serve for further analysis at the micro-level, where it will be possible to identify the dominant drivers of radicalisation of the individual, as well as the role of "self" perceptions and attitudes towards community, institutions and society in general.

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KOSOVO

Political Grievances in the Municipality of Mitrovica South

Transnational Dynamics in the Municipality of Gjilan

Religious Interpretations in the Municipality of Gjakova





Political Grievances in the Municipality of Mitrovica South

Lulzim Peci, Agon Demjaha

Introduction

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

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

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

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

Research Methodology

RECAP OF THE RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

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

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

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

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

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

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

CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

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

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

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

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

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

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

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

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

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

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

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

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

The Meso-Level Dynamics

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

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

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

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

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

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁸ E5, A3, Ibid.

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

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

¹¹ Z4, Ibid.

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

¹³ M3. Ibid.

¹⁴ S12, Ibid.

¹⁵ E5, Ibid.

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

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

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

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

¹⁶ Interview with A1.

¹⁷ Interview with A3.

¹⁸ Interview with A2.

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

²⁰ Interview with A1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁷ Interview with A1.

²⁸ Interview with A2.

²⁹ Interview with A3.

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

³¹ Z4, Ibid.

³² A1, Ibid.

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

³⁴ S12.

³⁵ M3.

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

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

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

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

³⁶ R1.

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

³⁸ D2. Ibid.

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

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

⁴¹ Z4, Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴³ M3, Ibid.

⁴⁴ R1, Ibid.

⁴⁵ S12 and M3. Ibid.

⁴⁶ Interview with A1.

⁴⁷ Interview with A2.

⁴⁸ Interview with A2.

⁴⁹ Interview with A1.

⁵⁰ Interview with A3.

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵³ A1, Ibid.

⁵⁴ U3, Ibid.

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

⁵⁶ H4. Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶¹ Interview with A1.

⁶² Interview with A2 and A3.

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

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

⁶⁵ M19. Ibid.

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

⁶⁷ SH7. Ibid.

⁶⁸ M3 and A3. Ibid.

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

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

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

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

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS

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

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

⁷⁰ A5, Ibid.

⁷¹ Z4. Ibid.

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

⁷³ S12. Ibid.

⁷⁴ SH7, Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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

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

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

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

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS OF THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

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

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

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

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO- LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

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

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

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

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

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

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

General Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Transnational Dynamics in the Municipality of Gjilan

Lulzim Peci, Agon Demjaha

Introduction

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

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

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

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

Research Methodology

RECAP OF THE RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

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

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THE ADDED VALUE OF THE MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

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

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

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

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

THE CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

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

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

THE SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

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

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

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

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

THE DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS

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

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

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

The Meso-Level Dynamics

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

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

Against this background, the interviewee A2 observes that although Kosovo was an isolated place before the war of 1999, the importance of transnational dynamics has changed after the war when a number of global extremist movements from the Middle East, and some individuals from North Macedonia connected to them, penetrated Kosovo and specifically Gjilan.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the interviewee A1 notes that from 2012 to 2013, five – six imams from the North Macedonia were active in spreading religious extremism in Kosovo, until their entrance in the country was banned by Kosovo's authorities. In this regard, he observes that many individuals from Gjilan who have extremist views and the majority of those who joined the conflict in Iraq and Syria, have family relations in the North Macedonia, whereas there were only few cases from diaspora that joined extremism.⁷⁶ According to him, the division of the Islamic Community of the North Macedonia in two wings, namely the traditional Hanafi madhhab (Ottoman), and the Wahhabi one, has had an impact on radicalism in Kosovo and Gjilan specifically, due to family links, especially in the North Macedonian cities of Kumanovo and Skopje. Consequently, due to the role of these family relations, Islamization has become very present in Gjilan⁷⁷. In this regard, a participant of the age group from 12 to 15 years claimed that he has heard that some Muslim clergy from the North Macedonia were propagating extinction of other religious communities, whereas another participant of this age group has observed cases when they have offended atheists as well.⁷⁸ A participant from the age group from 15 to 18 years thinks that after the war, many religious organizations from abroad that were propagating extremism entered Kosovo,⁷⁹ whereas participants of the age group from 18 to 30 years have surprisingly not observed such cases.

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

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

⁷⁶ Interview with A1.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

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

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

sometimes influenced by the radical groups.⁸⁰ However, the interviewee A2 observes that there are some cases when a number of radicalised youth came from very patriotic families that haven't had anything to do with extremism. According to him, these cases are a result of the change of the traditional role of the family that occurred after the war of 1999, and of the opening of Kosovo to the world, as well as of the distortion of the educational system.⁸¹ On the other hand, a young participant in this research thinks that religions at the global level play a role, because they may get nations closer to one another, but, also, nations may fall apart because of them⁸².

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

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

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

⁸⁰ Interview with A1.

⁸¹ Interview with A2.

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

⁸³ Interviews with A1 and A2.

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

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

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

⁸⁷ Interview with A1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁹¹ Interview with A1.

⁹² Interview with A2.

⁹³ Interview with A1.

⁹⁴ Interview with A2.

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

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

⁹⁷ N1, Ibid.

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

When it comes to the role of clergy, the opinions among the participants of this research are also divided. Participants of the age group from 12 to 15 years think that religious leaders in general are doing a good job with their congregations, but they have also heard about some Muslim clergy that have pushed youth towards extremism and joining the ISIS.¹⁰⁰ A participant of the age group from 15 to 18 years thinks that Muslim clergy do a very good job with their congregations¹⁰¹. A participant from the age group from 18 to 30 years stated that in general Muslim clergy do a good job¹⁰², but another participant observes that Muslim clergy preach different interpretations of Islam that sometimes creates confusion among congregations¹⁰³. Another participant of this age group thinks that around 30% of the Muslim clergy preach extremism and fuel hate towards other religions¹⁰⁴. In this regard, the interviewee A1 claims that religious leaders in Gjilan are very influential, and that some youth identify with them. Another matter of concern, according to him, is what to do with imams and other extremists who have been charged for terrorism and are finishing their sentences. He worries that there is a risk that these persons, who entered jail as imams, can get out as leaders.¹⁰⁵ This point of view is shared by the interviewee A2, who observes that in Gjilan the identification of some youth with certain religious leaders is evident. Furthermore, he blames the political elite for flirting with religion due to their electoral interests, and for not hesitating to approve all requests of the Municipal Islamic Community for building mosques.¹⁰⁶

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

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

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

¹⁰⁰ E37, E7, B28, *ibid.*

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

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

¹⁰³ Z8, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ L13, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Interview with A1.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with A2.

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

¹⁰⁸ E36, T6, *ibid.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹¹¹ Z8, Ibid.

¹¹² Interview with A1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹²⁰ Interviews with A1 and A2.

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

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

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

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

¹²² Interviews with A1 and A2.

¹²³ Interview with A1.

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

¹²⁵ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹³⁰ C4, Ibid.

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

¹³² T6, Ibid.

¹³³ E7, Ibid.

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

¹³⁵ U6, Ibid.

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

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

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

¹³⁹ U6, Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ N1, Ibid.

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

¹⁴² C4, Ibid.

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

Against this background, the social factors that can strengthen the resilience towards violent extremism, according to interviewee A1 is the fact that for the vast majority of the population the prevailing primary identity is the national one.¹⁴⁶ According to the interviewee A2, important resilience factors also include the improving socio-economic conditions and education.¹⁴⁷ On the other hand, the social factors that weaken this resilience, according to the interviewee A1 are different imams who propagate Muslim Ummah and give primacy to religious affiliation in relation to national one,¹⁴⁸ whereas, according to the interviewee A2, such weakening factors are corruption and nepotism¹⁴⁹.

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

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS

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

¹⁴³ L13, Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with A2.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with A1.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with A1.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with A2.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with A1.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with A2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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

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

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

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

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

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS OF THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

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

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

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

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

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO- LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

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

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

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

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

General Conclusions

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

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

1. How globalisation and transnational movements impacted on politics and society?

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

2. Are perceptions on foreign policy a driver of violent extremism?

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

3. What is the role of new family patterns to diffuse social relations in the field of the transnational nature of radical groups?

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

4. How globalised communities link themselves to transnational movements?

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

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Religious Interpretations in the Municipality of Gjakova

Lulzim Peci, Agon Demjaha

Introduction

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

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

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

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

Research Methodology

RECAP OF THE RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

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

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MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

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

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

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

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

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

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

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

CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

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

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

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

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

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

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

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

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

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

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

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

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

Meso-Level Dynamics

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

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

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

Against this background, the research results show that the perceived social context related to multi-religiosity is generally characterised with a high level of cohabitation, but with some problems related to socio-religious distance. In this regard, the participants of this research of the age from 12 to 14 years have in general emphasised the lack of religious differences in social relations with their schoolmates or with their peers in the communities where they live¹⁵⁰. However, they pointed out that the conversion of religion is in certain case accepted with uneasiness by many from their peers,¹⁵¹ and that inter-religious marriages are still viewed with prejudices¹⁵². Similar attitudes were noted among the participants of the age group from 16 to 18 years, who have also emphasised the lack of religious differences in their social relations, and their close friendships with their peers of another religions¹⁵³. According to the participants of this age group, persons from rural areas face the gravest social injustices, while the rural–urban divide as a local social pattern is still prevailing in this community¹⁵⁴. The participants of the age group from 18 to 27 years, in general maintain similar observations.¹⁵⁵ According to one participant, religion is not the primary identity pattern of individuals in this municipality, and it is generally perceived by society as somehow neutral,¹⁵⁶ while another participant has observed an increasing trend of inter-religious marriages nowadays, although in the past they were somehow “forbidden”¹⁵⁷.

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

¹⁵¹ Ibid. A 32.

¹⁵² Ibid. E 13.

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

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

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

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, B02.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, A1.

By the same token, the interviewee A.1. considers that social practices of religion in Gjakova are liberal. As he mentions, whoever makes a choice to go to tekke, mosque or church can do it without any obstacle. People usually freely practice their own religion, without any discord or interference, and have high respect for each other regardless of their religious beliefs. However, he observes that the number of inter-religious marriages remains low, though today's young people do not have the prejudices of his generation¹⁵⁸. On the other hand, the other interviewee observes two categories of people in relation to terms of their social behaviour toward religions of others. The first category boast for having a friend of another faith, while the other one does not accept them in their close circles. Furthermore, according to him, inter-religious marriages are still stigmatised and ignored by certain social circles¹⁵⁹. However, the last interviewee has a slightly different opinion about these issues. According to him, the Gjakova Municipality is well known for its religious coexistence within Albanian population despite of being one of the places with the highest percentage of members of Catholic faith. Especially during the times of Yugoslav/Serbian regime, the religious tolerance has been nurtured and strengthened over the years, and was pursued with fanaticism. This has also continued after the war in 1998-99, since the Municipality of Gjakova, regardless of the fact that a vast majority of its population nominally belongs to Islam, in two terms has elected a major of Catholic faith (Pal Lekaj, 2007 - 2013). In addition, the Catholic community comprises only 17.2% of the population, it is over-represented with around 30-40% in the decision-making structures of the local government¹⁶⁰.

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

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

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

¹⁵⁹ Interview with A.2. (age 54), Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

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

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

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

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

a potential threat¹⁶⁴. On the other hand, the interviewee A3 observes that some young individuals from Gjakova joined ISIS, although they belonged to families that were not religious or were not at all attracted by religious conservatism and fundamentalism¹⁶⁵. Similarly, the interviewee A2 claims that some imams have managed to indoctrinate certain individuals by preaching radical Islam and by denigrating other religions and their believers¹⁶⁶.

In this regard, some participants perceive the driver of transnational dynamics as rather influential regarding violent extremism. In this line of argument, one participant has noted that years ago, in the mosques in Gjakova a number of charity organisations from the Middle East have distributed "humanitarian aid" to some local worshipers, who have after some time gone to Syria and died there¹⁶⁷. Another participant mentioned that some years ago, some Arab organisations were distributing leaflets with religious content, that, among other things were also propagating radicalism and supporting violent extremism¹⁶⁸. Furthermore, an interviewee¹⁶⁹ has pointed out to a case when a number of imams from Gjakova participated in a protest organised by the elements of Muslim Brotherhood in Kosovo that took place in Prishtina more than 10 years ago¹⁷⁰. Based on these evidences provided by the participants it can be concluded that the driver of transnational dynamics contributed to radicalisation and violent extremism among youth in this municipality.

Against this background, according to an interviewee, the number of Muslim believers joining the congregations in the mosques of Gjakova is quite small. He pointed out that, on Friday prayers in total a maximum of 1,000 believers worship in the 11 mosques left from the Ottoman Empire¹⁷¹. He further explained that in the municipality of Gjakova where the seat of the Bektashi Quarter¹⁷² of Kosovo is located, the majority of Muslim believers belong to Bektashi tradition¹⁷³. The interviewee also claims that tekkes are more powerful than mosques in Gjakova, and that they are frequently used for arbitration of private disputes between their followers.¹⁷⁴

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

¹⁶⁴ Interview with A1, March 14th, 2022

¹⁶⁵ Interview with A3, March 14th, 2022

¹⁶⁶ Interview with A2, March 14th, 2022

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁷³ Ibid.

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

from the war wing of Kosovar politics. He further claims that the local population often sees the religion not solely as faith, but also as an interest or as an activity of a certain groups that makes personal benefits, meaning less religious and more business oriented¹⁷⁵.

The research findings show that drivers of economic deprivation and the education sub-driver are of special importance regarding social resilience to radicalism and violent extremism. In this context, regardless of the fact that seven inhabitants of Gjakova joined the ranks of ISIS, an interviewee claims that there is no radicalism and extremism in the municipality, but he believes that the existing social resilience could be threatened by the low level of education and socio-economic development.¹⁷⁶ He argues that some "charity organisations" from the Middle East have through the provision of humanitarian aid, computer courses and other benefits, managed to recruit some youth to join the war in Syria, by misusing their bad economic conditions for their political aims¹⁷⁷.

The other interviewee claims that plurality of religions and social practices have no impact on radicalisation and extremism. However, he considers that some local decision-makers that neglect the secular character of Kosovo by allowing public servants during working hours to join congregations in mosques may contribute towards radicalism. According to him, the same is true for electronic media that sometimes have no sense either about the secular character of the state or the religious plurality. Accordingly, he considers that the level of education and socio-economic development plays a very important role in building social resilience in the community¹⁷⁸.

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On the other hand, another interviewee observes that the increase of the number of congregations in the local mosques is a result of the need for solace from bad economic and social situation, socialisation and solidarity between people. In addition, he claims that today many believers are also philanthropists, who often initiate humanitarian actions for various religious holidays, regardless of whether these are Muslim or other holidays. He underlines that the Muslim community has given funds to build a Catholic church in Gjakova, while the Catholic community has also raised funds for reconstruction of the mosques damaged by the Serbian regime during the war. Furthermore, he claims that in such an environment, young people cannot find a venue to become radicalised on religious bases, and that this phenomenon is limited only to certain individuals¹⁷⁹.

Regarding culture and leisure, participants in this research have observed that nowadays youth have sufficient access to sport, cultural and other activities and premises¹⁸⁰. Nevertheless, different age groups have expressed the wish for changing the routine of their free time. Some participants of age group from 12 to 14 years would prefer to work with NGOs dealing with human rights or technological innovation¹⁸¹.

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

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

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

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

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

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

Others, belonging to the age group from 15 to 18 years prefer to spend more time in practical work related to their future professions¹⁸². Finally, the majority of participants from the age group from 18 to 27 years would prefer to travel abroad, especially to Europe, but the lack of visa liberalisation for Kosovo citizens hinders such desire.¹⁸³ The interviewees have also confirmed that sports and cultural facilities in Gjakova have improved in the last years, but they note that despite that youth does not participate in large numbers in these activities¹⁸⁴.

This research has provided sufficient evidence that social digitalisation is rapidly shaping the way of life of youth in this municipality, and that it is an important driver that intertwines with the drivers of religious interpretations and transnational dynamics. In this regard, the majority of young participants in this research have declared that they spent many hours of their free time engaging with social media,¹⁸⁵ which has also been confirmed by the interviewees¹⁸⁶. Furthermore, the majority of youth participating in this research admits that it acquires most of the information about religions via social media¹⁸⁷. In this regard, a participant of age group 12–14 years said that she enjoys different people talking about their religions in social media (Tik Tok and Instagram)¹⁸⁸. Similarly, another participant confirmed that social media have a lot of religious content, and that by using them she learns about religions,¹⁸⁹ whereas another participant said that she uses Youtube to learn and listen religious preaching¹⁹⁰. On the other hand, a participant of this age group observed that when different people post about their religion on social media, often others contest their religion. Sometimes, they even argue that their religion is not a true one, which, according to her, is an issue of lack of respect for religious plurality¹⁹¹. Finally, another participant has claimed that she uses social media not only to learn about her religion, but also to learn about other religions¹⁹².

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In this vein, a participant from the age group from 16 to 18 years has observed that he has encountered video-games simulating fights via internet, which used holy religious objects as a target, and that many other pages have seductive religious content. He also referred to pages propagating that only a certain religion is true, which according to him may cause misunderstanding and unintentional conflicts among many people¹⁹³. Another participant had similar observation, and claimed that especially in Instagram, there are posts that urge for religious fanaticism, which, according to him, are particularly dangerous, due to their tendentious content that may affect relations between people.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, a participant from

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

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

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, E7.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. M.13.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. A32.

¹⁹² Ibid. S6.

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

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. D10.

this age group has experienced a case when in a football fans page there were discussions about religion that escalated to hostility among its members. He thinks that younger people could be endangered by these hate spreading contents, since social media have become also virtual venues for debates¹⁹⁵. Similarly, young participants of the age group from 18 to 27 years have observed that groups who stand behind different pages, including those that entail criminal activities, such as paedophilia, prostitution and even terrorism, massively use social media for recruitments for their aims. He pointed out that also there are many pages of religious content that at the first sight look fine, but when searched deeper, their content is quite problematic¹⁹⁶. Whereas, another participant claimed that there are many pages in social media that contain religious content, which contradict Koran, if they propagate Islamic content or Bible if they propagate Christianity, and usually spread disinformation¹⁹⁷.

When it comes to violent extremism, the sources of information acquired by young participants in this research are similar, but they have discussed this topic with people from different relational backgrounds. Some participants of the age group from 12 to 14 years said that they have received information on this topic, including ISIS, from teachers who lectured the subject "Civic Education" as well as from electronic and social media, and that they have also discussed it with their family members¹⁹⁸. A participant of this age group thinks that ISIS is a product of criminal groups, whose aim is to instil fear through killings in order to achieve its aims¹⁹⁹. On the other hand, some participants have confirmed that some of their schoolmates believe that scenes of these crimes transmitted by media are either manipulated or false, which in itself is a matter of concern²⁰⁰. Participants of the age group from 15 to 18 years have also claimed to have received information on this issue from electronic and social media, and have then discussed it with parents, friends and the teacher of history.²⁰¹ Regarding foreign fighters from Kosovo in ISIS, a participant thinks that the responsibility for this lays at Muslim clergy and financial incentives.²⁰² Similarly, some participants of the age group from 18 to 27 years said that they have acquired information mainly from electronic and social media, but in contrast to other age groups, they have mostly discussed these matters with friends. They have also confirmed of being aware of atrocities committed by ISIS, including those by Kosovo foreign terrorist fighters.²⁰³

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

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. A13.

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

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. B2.

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

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. E13.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. T23.

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

²⁰² Ibid. S4.

²⁰³ B2, G7, A1 Focus group with students of the public University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, March, 14th, 2022.

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

patterns were noted among the participants belonging to the age group from 18 to 27 years. Some of the participants have declared that they discuss important matters solely with parents and family, and they do not have sufficient trust on their friends and social circles to discuss important personal issues²⁰⁵. In this regard, the interviewees share similar opinions on this issue. The interviewee A1 emphasises that although youth trust their parents to talk about issues of their concern, in general, they are more open with their friends than with their parents²⁰⁶. Similarly, interviewee A2 also thinks that youth are more open with their social circles than with their parents. According to him, the reasons for these attitudes of youth, regardless of their gender, depend on the intellectual level and openness of their parents. He claims that parents have a particular responsibility in prevention of radicalisation, since they can detect the slightest changes in the behaviour of their children. Another problem that he has stipulated is that if two parents work, they do not have enough time to spend with their children, which, in turn, makes youth naturally more open to their social circles to talk about issues of their concern²⁰⁷. The interviewee A3 has confirmed that the lack of sufficient time to spend with children causes failure of parental factor. In addition, he observes that nowadays children talk openly to their parents and that they are not overwhelmed by their authority like in the past²⁰⁸.

An interesting finding of this research is that the vast majority of participants have claimed that they have either been victims of bullying, or that they have witnessed it happening to their peers in primary or secondary schools. In addition, they have admitted that physical violence among youth is occasionally present in their schools and neighbourhoods²⁰⁹. Such cases of bullying and violence in schools were usually solved after being reported to teachers²¹⁰. Nevertheless, certain youth were hesitant to report to Police some cases of violence occurring outside the schools, out of fear of being considered as traitors²¹¹. Additionally, according to a participant in this research, another phenomenon that is becoming prevalent is cyberbullying, which is occasionally affecting youth badly with depressive effects and sometimes even hurts them more than physical violence²¹².

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹⁰ Ibid.

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

²¹² G7, Ibid.

incumbent mayor²¹³. The other participant of this age group thinks that consecutive dissatisfactions and despair with the performance of political parties and governments may lead some individuals towards violent extremism,²¹⁴ while others may join NGO-s to oppose the bad governance²¹⁵. Participants from the age group 15 to 18 years have also expressed similar views. A participant of this age group thinks that certain persons might turn to extremisms after being despaired numerous times by politics,²¹⁶ whereas another participant admitted that she has such a case in her family²¹⁷. Furthermore, a participant of the age group from 18 to 27 years pointed out that nowadays each family needs to have at least one member in a political party, in order to achieve something, thus making politics not a voluntary, but rather a mandatory engagement²¹⁸.

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

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There is an overall consensus among participants of all age groups, as well as interviewees, that national belonging is more important than religious affiliation²¹⁹. A participant of the age group 18 to 27 years has maintained similar position, while also saying that in her community national or religious affiliation does not play a great role in relations among citizens²²⁰. She also claimed that based on her experience, religious affiliation plays an important role outside Kosovo, since the moment she declared being a Muslim while visiting Western Europe, some peers belonging to Catholic and Orthodox religion have immediately asked her if she was a Wahhabi or an extremist.²²¹ Another participant of the same age group also responded that first comes the nation, since the national belonging cannot be changed, while the religious affiliation is changeable²²².

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

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

²¹⁴ F2, E7, Ibid.

²¹⁵ E7, Ibid.

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

²¹⁷ Ibid, S4.

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

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

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

²²¹ Ibid, B02.

²²² Ibid, G7.

change, in the same way in which the support for a football club can change²²³. He further pointed out that although there were attempts in the past, the religion has not been able to overtake the place of the nation. In addition, according to him, the nation has never been endangered, at least not in Gjakova²²⁴. The interviewee A.1., also believes that the Kosovar identity, i.e. the state identity, is the dominant one, and not the religious one, since Kosovo, even by its Constitution is defined as a secular state. He even went a step further, by stating that, in fact, the national affiliation is a deterrent and preventive factor of radicalisation and extremism²²⁵. Furthermore, according to him, the religious identity is not national at all, since through religious discourses it is possible to brainwash most of the believers. For him, the brainwashing through religion in relation to the nation is exactly the extremism that has been happening in recent years²²⁶. According to the interviewee A.3., in terms of the ethnic composition, 90% of the Albanian majority population lives in tolerance with the minority RAE community, so he sees no possibility or elements of radicalism in the national relationship between these two ethnicities that coexist in the municipality of Gjakova²²⁷. He believes that religious uneasiness can become a source of potential intolerance only if there is inequality within society. For instance, if the ratio of the Muslim community to the Catholic one is 80% to 20%, it is not advisable to have almost half of the decision-making members in the municipality from the Catholic community, because that would immediately create inequality between the two communities²²⁸.

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

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INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS

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

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

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Interview with A.1. (65 years), Gjakova, March 14th, 2022.

²²⁶ Ibid.

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

²²⁸ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS OF THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

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

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

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

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO- LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

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

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

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

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

General Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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NORTH MACEDONIA

Commemorations of the 2001 Macedonian conflict in Tetovo

Football Fan Groups in Tetovo

Prisons and Correctional and Educational Facility Volkovija





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.

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 Šipkovića-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).

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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 interviewees 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 that 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.

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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).

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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 *Vojvodë*, 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 *Vojvodë* 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, Nanev 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 *Vojvodë* 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. *Vojvodë*’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, *Vojvodë*’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 (Stojančov, 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 Torrekens & de le Vingne, 2020).

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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 "dependent 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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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, 2021d). Additionally, in February 2022, one-day cascading trainings on radicalisation were held for prison staff and probation officers.

PRISON SYSTEM IN RNM, CEF VOLKOVIIJA, 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.

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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.

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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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BULGARIA

Online Conservative Communities

Football supporters

Neighbourhood (City of Pazardzhik) and the Shesti Neighbourhood
(Town of Nova Zagora)





Online Conservative Communities

Stefan Ralchev, Nadya Stoyanova

Introduction

Far-right extremist rhetoric and actions are espoused by a spectrum of actors in Bulgaria which roughly fall in the following three categories (Dzhekova et al., 2015): political parties, non-parliamentary activist organisations and informal groupings. The political unrest and wide-spread protests which the country experienced in 2013-2015, coupled with the migrant crisis, provided a suitable environment for the re-ignition of some existing far-right organisations and the emergence of new actors, paramilitary formations which have become known in the public domain for their patrolling activities near the Bulgarian border with Turkey. Similarly, the parliamentary elections of 2017 resulted in the entry into government of the far-right coalition Patriotic Front (PF), which marked the first time in which a nationalist far-right formation became a decisive factor in the executive. This presence resulted in lack of political will to tackle right-wing radicalisation, while at the same time intensifying the already present process of normalisation of hate speech in the public domain (Ivanova, 2018). Despite the rise in incidents involving right-wing nationalists, behind which formal and informal organisations were visibly sitting, counter-intelligence, police and investigative institutions avoided working against right-wing radicalism.¹ The last parliamentary elections of November 2021 resulted in the entry into Parliament of another far-right party, Vazrazhdane (Revival). In parallel, along with the rise in prominence of political actors in the far-right spectrum, research underscores the persistence of widespread prejudice against certain minority groups, mainly the Roma and LGBTQI people (Todorov, 2021), which can readily be exploited by right-wing extremist actors.

Political parties in the far-right ideological spectrum use hate speech against different minorities, most often the Roma but also Muslims, refugees and migrants and LGBTQI people. Generally, however, political parties and their members eschew engagement in violence or direct calls to violence. The use of violence is largely associated with other, more informal, right-wing extremist actors (the second category mentioned above) but is very difficult to estimate in its full extent.² (Apart from the nationalist parties represented in parliament, there are parties in the country that have a small number of supporters and are prone to demonstrative violence against various minority groups in order to gain popularity.³) However, exploiting popular prejudice, political actors proactively organised or took part

¹ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

² For detailed information on, see Amnesty International Bulgaria (2015) *Missing the point: Lack of adequate investigation of hate crimes in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Amnesty International, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur15/0001/2015/en/>; Dzhekova, R. et al. (2017) *Situational Assessment of Extremist Trends*. Sofia: CSD.

³ In 2021, supporters from a Facebook group of the Bulgarian National Union (BNU) led by its leader Boyan Rasate attacked Rainbow Hub, an LGBTQI community centre, going as far as to hit one of the activists. See for example "Агитка на БНС, предвождана от Расате, нападна и изпотроши ЛГБТИ център [BNP outfit led by Rasate attacked and vandalised LGBTQI centre]", Mediapool, 30 October 2021, available at <https://www.mediapool.bg/agitka-na-bns-predvozhdana-ot-rasate-napadna-i-izpotroshi-lgbti-tsentar-news328225.html>.

in inflammatory events (e.g. protests against the so-called “Roma criminality”) which have high potential for resulting into violence.

The third category of actors, online and offline informal groupings, is the focus of the current research. Recent developments in Bulgaria have indicated that far-right actors are increasingly engaging in rallying popular support through spreading propaganda and misinformation, both online and offline and forming alliances with other actors to influence policy-making. The debates around the so-called Istanbul convention and the proposed Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 showcased how the instrumentalisation of Russian propaganda and fake news by the emerging nexus of conservative Christian organisations, far-right political parties and non-partisan organisations can gather momentum online, result into protests and ultimately achieve the goal of derailing policy reforms (Karaboev and Angelov, 2018). Subsequently, similar tactics (spread of Russian and other propaganda, fake news and disinformation online resulting in protests) by partially overlapping actors were used in opposition to Covid-19 pandemic measures.

The current report focuses on the intersections between the far-right narratives and actions as expressed in online conservative communities focusing on key novel issues for the far-right, such as protection of traditional family values and opposition to Covid-19 measures. It looks into how macro-level drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism, identified previously by CONNEKT, act at the meso level of these communities and their specific social contexts. The issue of violence and the potential for violence is also explored. The report draws on field research carried out in the period December 2021 through March 2022 and aims to examine the interaction between macro factors and meso-level community dynamics.

Research Methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

General framework

With the 2013 refugee crisis, Bulgaria has seen a series of significant changes in the macro-level environment. The most serious change is in the factors of international dynamics and political/social discontent. After the peak of the refugee flow through Bulgaria in 2015, nationalist parties assigned the issue top importance. The two major parties at the time, both the ruling GERB and the opposition BSP, adopted many of the nationalist parties' theses on refugees, possibly in an attempt to limit their loss of electorate and the emergence of more radical nationalist parties.⁴ With the sharp decrease in the refugee flow in 2017, the topic of the "demographic threat of Muslim refugees" began to fade.

The second line of rhetoric of nationalist parties, the one against the Roma minority, also started to diminish in appeal. With the opening up of the EU labour market by major countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, France and others, a process of intensive emigration began, including in Roma communities, and criminal incidents and social conflicts in the country as a whole declined sharply, bringing attention away from the so-called issue of "Roma criminality".⁵ A factor for the diminishing crime rate may have also been the very rapid decline in unemployment and growth in income in the country in the period 2014-2019 (National Statistical Institute, 2020).

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However, new issues of division emerged linked to transnational developments. After the elections in 2017, the victorious party GERB formed a government with the new coalition of nationalists United Patriots. Two initiatives of GERB were the ratification by parliament of the Istanbul Convention and the adoption of the Strategy for the Child (2019-30). But the United Patriots stood firmly against both documents. GERB was forced, after a series of shocks, to give in to the nationalist parties in order to maintain its power, thus encouraging the emergence of a strong anti-European and conservative wave in the country.⁶

With the onset of the pandemic, a macro-level factor linked to political discontent was the opposition to the anti-Covid-19 and vaccination measures. The new opposition formations, fearing that the pandemic would give the GERB government a chance to win the next general elections, openly took sides against lockdowns, wearing of masks and later vaccination.⁷ Particularly active in this regard was the nationalist Vazrazhdane. Its entire 2021 election campaign was developed through groups of its supporters on Facebook and against Covid-19 measures.⁸

⁴ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

⁵ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

⁶ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

⁷ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

⁸ In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

Findings of the CONNEKT macro-level analysis

The results from the macro-level analysis demonstrate that Bulgarian institutions' approach to radicalisation focuses mostly on the (perceived) threat of Islamic radicalisation. The official response can be described as out of sync with actual radicalisation dynamics, as far-right radicalisation can be described as much more dynamic, seen in inputs provided by the civil society. Far-right actors were seen as evolving in terms of structure and tactics, as opposed to a largely stagnating and overstated threat of Islamist radicalisation. Thus widely heterogeneous understanding of what radicalisation constitutes was observed. While far-right radicalisation is generally overlooked by institutional representatives and prioritised by civil society actors, some institutional representatives recognise that right-wing radicalisation needs to be addressed. Similarly, more recent narratives of the right-wing, as well as associations with conservative Christian actors, are recognised as problematic and an indication of radicalisation by both institutional representatives and civil society. However, officially, few measures are taken to counteract far-right radicalisation in its various manifestations. Instead, P-CVE is overly focused on Islamist radicalisation and prioritises law enforcement measures while overlooking the prevention dimension.

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

The meso-level analysis is an essential part of the empirical core of CONNEKT. By shedding light on the views of community members and local-level institutions and allowing for direct observation of community-level dynamics, the meso-level analysis will enable a more accurate and nuanced understanding of which radicalisation/extremism drivers are the most relevant in regard to the specific communities selected, how they manifest and what impact they have on social interactions. Furthermore, the present inquiry will constitute a bridge between the macro- and individual-level analyses and will help to identify and investigate the interactions and relations which exist between the national, community and individual dimensions.

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RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives of this case study align with the overall objectives of CONNEKT's WP5, namely to analyse a sub-national community-level environment which is conducive to or at risk of violent extremism, and determine factors within the social environment which create conditions for violent extremism. Along these lines, a main research objective of this case study is to examine how the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism identified in the academic literature, and also studied by CONNEKT, function in the target ultra-conservative communities as context of social interaction.

DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

Local-level state institutions

The methodological approach for the present case study involves non-participant observation of public Facebook groups and pages identified using Facebook's instrument CrowdTangle and consulted with experts (see below). The target communities are thus not geographically defined but virtual rather. It

is safe to assume that the most active members and followers in the groups and pages come from larger towns and cities, rather than villages. The conducted interviews include representatives of youth organisations youth formations of political parties. In this light, the identifiable relevant institutions are self-regulatory bodies of Facebook, local authorities and political parties.

CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION (OF PARTICIPANTS)

For the present case study on online conservative communities the team focused on analysing interactions in online groups and eight semi-structured interviews with representatives of civil society organisations, independent experts and political parties. As a result of the team's consultations with the research coordinators of CONNEKT and the present WP5 on the ethical approach to the research, it was decided that only public Facebook groups and pages shall be observed, in line with ethical standards as defined by the project. Following this decision, Facebook' CrowdTangle instrument was used to identify the five most popular ultra-conservative groups in terms of membership and interactions and the five most popular pages in terms of followers and interactions, both for the period 15 September – 15 December 2021. The groups/pages' names directly indicated affiliation of members with a specific ideology or cause or were active in promoting causes associated with the communities (e.g. traditional family values). CrowdTangle itself suggested associated groups. In parallel, a consultation was held with experts about their view of the most relevant groups/pages, mostly coinciding with the CrowdTangle choice. The groups/pages were organised mainly around two issues prioritised by key far-right political actors, namely the protection of traditional family values from encroachment by liberal "gender ideologies" and opposition of the Covid-19 measures and restrictions.

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Interview respondents were selected based on two main criteria, namely: being active in (or at the very least a sympathiser of) the most prominent far-right parties or other conservative civil society organisations; and age (12-30 years of age), considering the target group covered by the CONNEKT project. In some cases, the team suspended the second criterion, as prominent figures in these movements are often older; the independent expert, also not within the target age group, was interviewed for additional data triangulation. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents fit both criteria (five out of eight interviewees were considered were in the age category). One interview carried out is with a young citizen activist, who while not a sympathiser of a specific party is socially active in supporting traditional family values and expresses views in line with those of far-right parties.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The content analysis focused on online interactions in terms of posts and comments found in the most active and popular Facebook group according to CrowdTangle, "*Свободата е отговорност*" "Freedom is responsibility" (focusing on different issues but mostly on opposition of Covid-19 related measures and restrictions) and Facebook page, "David Aleksandrov" (focusing on different issues but mostly on protection of family values) were observed by two independent coders and coded against macro factors as adopted in WP4 of the CONNEKT project. According to the CrowdTangle data collected for the period 15 September – 15 December 2021, the "Freedom is responsibility" group had 12,821 members,

contained 3,696 posts and had 76,708 interactions; the “David Aleksandrov” page had 6,056 followers, contained 160 posts and had 10,771 interactions. According to Facebook’s website, as of May 2022, the “Freedom is responsibility” group had some 13,500 members, and the “David Aleksandrov” page had 6,728 followers.

In addition, a total of eight respondents were interviewed, including three youth activists (two young representatives of two prominent far-right parties, one of whom a leader of the youth chapter of the party and one youth conservative club), one youth sympathiser of a far-right political party, an independent expert, a leader of a conservative non-governmental organisation (not a youth representative) and another representative of a prominent far-right party (not a youth representative) as well as a young citizen activist.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

As described above, for the current case study, a triangulation of methods was employed. After consultations with stakeholders, the research team decided that online observation would be applied to online (Facebook) communities as part of the current case study on far-right groups within football and/or MMA clubs. The insights of the online observation would be supplemented with data from semi-structured face-to-face interviews with key individuals active in the respective community. The online observation would aim to answer the following research questions:

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- How do identified macro factors of radicalisation relevant to these communities’ influence and manifest in their interactions and core narratives?
- How are the contexts identified by CONNEKT present in (or relevant to) these communities?
- How does the online environment influence interactions between the participants (e.g.citing “right” or “wrong” positions/beliefs/practices picked from social networks; how the content of specific posts correspond to certain comments; how the format of the online environment predispose certain interactions)?
- What are the common narratives of these communities and how do these common narratives develop and get reproduced in the online space?
- To what extent is there space to discuss or challenge common narratives of the groups?
- How popular are the Facebook sites and groups of these communities and how active are participants in them (in terms of posts, likes, shares, comments)?

Only open and publicly accessible Facebook groups and pages would be considered as sources of information. The data gathered was to be used to analyse the narratives espoused and the interactions within the communities, including the role of macro factors of radicalisation in informing narratives and how they manifest in community interactions.

The method employed would be non-participant or unobtrusive observation of the public posts and interactions of the selected communities. The method was chosen in order to mitigate negative outcomes that are likely to occur in the event of revealing the aim of the research. There is widespread

mistrust among the selected communities towards civil society, which is often described as an advocate of the very harmful ideologies that these communities stand against. In addition, non-obstrusive observation would allow the team to observe the organic development of interactions and narratives among the communities.

The observers (coders) would rely on relevance (purposive) sampling of posts/comments. In this thematic approach, the codes used will correspond to the drivers assigned by CONNEKT in the WP5 methodology but also as suggested by CSD for the current case study (online conservative communities): political dissatisfaction, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, social digitalisation. The end result of the observation would be a selection of relevant posts/comments for the case study, with assigned codes (drivers), which will serve as a basis for the data analysis.

In addition to this qualitative aspect of the observation, the team was to make use (as an illustration) of quantitative data offered by CrowdTangle (number of likes, shares, responses, etc.) in order to justify the choice of Facebook groups and pages which will be the subject of the qualitative analysis (see CrowdTangle statistics in Section 2.6).

The team carried out non-participant observation of interactions and content analysis of posts and comments in one public Facebook page and one public Facebook group. "Freedom is responsibility" was observed from 10 to 20 January 2022 and from 23 to 31 January 2022. "David Aleksandrov" was observed from 26 January to 8 February 2022 and from 14 to 20 February 2022.

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Apart from the online observation, the research approach involved semi-structured interviews with representatives of ultra-conservative communities (political parties, youth organisations and online groups). The questionnaire for the interviews was prepared in consultation with research coordinators and comprised questions linked to the relevant macro-level drivers, identified by CONNEKT, as well as specific questions about the respective group and the dynamics of the interviewee's joining it. Six semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held and two sets of written answers to a questionnaire were provided in the period January through March 2022 as follows: activist of Vazrazhdane political party (January); member of Youth Conservative Club civil society organisation (February); member of ROD International association (February); citizen activist (February); youth leader of IMRO political party (February); independent expert (March); member of Vazrazhdane political party (March); member of Vazrazhdane political party (March). The data from the content analysis of posts and comments as well as from interviews was coded to uncover the most relevant macro-factors and their manifestations in community-wide dynamics.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

One challenge was that Facebook's tool CrowdTangle is not able to scrape content from comments under posts, and for the purpose of this research comments would be the main source of data (they tend to contain more extreme reactions to news published as posts). Because of that, the researchers had to do the observation manually, checking all the posts and comments for the designated time period.

A second important challenge the team encountered when carrying out the non-participant online observation was the inability to carry out the initially envisaged, much longer, period of observation of three months. The problem was that the selected group and page generated very large amounts of content, making it technically impossible to track interactions for longer periods of time due to the pages crashing. As a result, the team opted to shorten the period which was technically feasible. The generation of high volumes of data in the selected page and group, however, meant that there was enough data for the team to analyse with the shorted period as well.

A third challenge encountered by the team related to the initially planned methodology, which involved two coders coding a sample of 10% of the data and later involving a third coder to compare and verify that intercoder differences are within acceptable limits. Ultimately, the plan was to calibrate the approaches of the two coders to minimise inter-coder bias, allowing the team to divide the work. However, upon carrying out the test, it turned out that the two coders, while coding content under the same macro factors, tended to code different data. A repeat of the sample testing showed the same results. Ultimately, the team decided to proceed with two coders going over the same data for the same period of time and subsequently analysing all content coded. This approach was chosen in order to ensure comprehensiveness of the data collected and to avoid coder bias.

A third setback concerned delays in the data collection due to the Bulgarian parliamentary elections in late 2021 and contamination of some of the staff as well as respondents with COVID-19. It was important to postpone the fieldwork until after the elections as political actors relevant to the research were busy with campaigning.

A final difficulty concerned the fact that some interviews were cancelled due to respondents' unwillingness to be associated with the labels "extremism" and "radicalisation". Mistrust of project aims upon was expressed by some prospective responses upon getting acquainted with the consent form for taking part in interviews.

Meso Level Dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO LEVEL ANALYSIS

Ultra-conservative groups and their beliefs and behaviour can be analysed within the WP5 pre-defined social context of urban and peri-urban spaces: urban areas where social interactions take place in a dimension of daily relationships. To put things into context, the ultraconservative communities which formed around defence of traditional family values and specifically against legislative initiatives considered to undermine these values, most notably the Istanbul convention and the proposed Strategy for the Child 2019-2030, included a number of diverse actors, such as far-right political actors then in government as well as conservative Christian denominations and associated non-profit organisations (Karaboev and Angelov, 2018). These actors were supported in their opposition by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church⁹ and the Mufti's office.¹⁰ Online support was also rallied against the documents resulting in protests. (Ultimately, the Istanbul convention was ruled as unconstitutional and the proposed Strategy for the Child was withdrawn.)

Upon the withdrawal of the two legislative documents, a new issue around which online conservative communities rallied was in opposition to measures taken to combat and manage the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, a reconfiguration of the opposition against pandemic measures and vaccination was observed in contrast to the issues of the Istanbul convention and the Strategy for the Child.

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What is specific about informal groups organised around right-wing conservative causes is that they often emerge through social networks around certain causes. Over time these groups around causes begin their own life, find new directions and often right-wing nationalist parties begin to borrow these new ideas.¹¹ Two far-right parties emerged as main opponents of all types of measures – the oldest far-right party Ataka and, most prominently, the newest far-right party Vazrazhdane, which managed to gain seats in Parliament in the last elections held in November 2021 (See for example Webcafe, 2021). In addition, as a journalist investigation by Kirkova, Kostadinova and Marchev (Factcheck, 2021) for the initiative Factcheck launched by the Alliance of European Journalists in Bulgaria showed, a number of actors who were active in spreading online misinformation in defence of traditional family values later moved on to do the same with regard to Covid-19 measures and vaccination.

The organisation behind the conservative communities in focus is different – online or within friends' circles. Usually there is no clear leadership in the groups, and the inclination to engage in protest

⁹ "Обръщение на Светия Синод относно Истанбулската конвенция [Address by the Holy Synod on the Istanbul Convention]". Pravoslavie.bg, 22 January 2018. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8mncbn> Nevertheless, it should be noted that the position of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church against the Strategy for the Child has not been clearly stated. A position against the document was posted on the official website of the Church but was later withdrawn and argued to be a personal position. See "Скандал в Синода по стратегията за детето [Scandal at the Synod on the strategy for the child]". StandartNews, 12 February 2019, available at <https://www.standartnews.com/balgariya-obshtestvo/skandal-v-sinoda-po-strategiyata-za-deteto-384884.html>

¹⁰ Grand Mufti's Office (11 April 2019). "Национална стратегия за детето 2019-2030 или когато пътят към ада бива постан с „добри“ намерения [National strategy for the Child or when the road to hell is paved with good intentions]". Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3sfzvn5c>; "Главното мюфтийство се обяви против Истанбулската конвенция [The Grand Muftiate declared it is against the Istanbul Convention]". Eurocom, Available at: <https://eurocom.bg/new/glavnoto-miufiistvo-se-obiavi-protiv-istanbulskata-konvenciiia>.

¹¹ In-person interview with independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

actions is spontaneous.¹² They have found sustainability and a sense of belonging in the virtual realm, giving them the specific online social context.

HOW MACRO LEVEL DRIVERS WORK AT THE MESO- LEVEL STUDIED (THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS)?

The main macro-drivers actualised at the meso-level within conservative online communities are political dissatisfaction and transnational dynamics. Another prominent factor was identified, namely the role of the (social) media and social digitalisation.

The core narrative of the online communities examined during this research feature two interconnecting themes that also illustrate how the two macro factors of political dissatisfaction and transnational dynamics interact:

- The Bulgarian political elite is corrupt and inept
- The Bulgarian political elite is executing the agenda of foreign actors, variably pointed out to be the EU, the US, NATO, Big Pharma, all of which are representations of shadow global elites
- Russia is defending traditional family values, as well as itself from the encroachment of the US, the EU and NATO and their “gender ideology”
- The pandemic is planned and executed with the idea of reducing world population and/or controlling leftover population by shadow global elites
- The pandemic is used to limit individual rights and freedoms and thus to usher in a new type of fascism under the guise of public health policy
- The narrative of international elites controlling and exploiting the Bulgarian population through the corrupt national elite is well-established and used by far-right extremist actors in country (CSD, 2019) and elsewhere (Lee, 2021) and as the current research shows has also been employed widely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bulgarian institutions are represented as being controlled by foreign actors and to merely represent as a conduit for their interests:

“MH [Ministry of Health], as part of the Global Health Mafia, financed by the World Bank (read the Federal Reserve of USA – Fed), represented in Bulgaria by the “Ministry of Health”¹³

This narrative of victimisation and being under threat is often observed in far-right discourse and has adapted well to opposition to Covid-19 related measures and restrictions. Not only are these national institutions (and by extension their foreign masters) corrupt and not protecting the national interest, or humanity’s interest, they are actively undermining it by chipping away at individual freedom with the goal of establishing an ever-advancing dictatorship:

¹² In-person interview with an independent expert held on 15 March 2022.

¹³ Post in Facebook group, 15 January 2022.

“But already 100% of people feel that this is not about vaccines, neither about science, nor about the people but about something...which we have all seen during the time of Stalin, Trotsky, Hitler and all other dictators.”¹⁴

The more traditional far-right thesis of the elite’s betrayal not only of inherent values of the Bulgarian people but also of the economic ruin of the country is also often expressed:

“At the moment the EU is exactly this. The West but mainly Germany, bribes the local elite through Eurofunds. The elite gets the country in EU and makes membership an absolute religion, including instituting repression for whoever is against. Going out becomes heresy. Once the country is in, it is sucked out through other mechanisms – local monopolies are bought out, trade chains, unprofitable long-term contracts are concluded which cannot be changed by subsequent governments etc. The EU funds and the highly paid positions in the EU for a handful of bureaucrats are the “bribe”.¹⁵

Similar arguments are presented both online and by respondents with regards to traditional family values, which considered as being under attack. Nevertheless, it should be noted political dissatisfaction is more strongly pronounced in online settings and among those who are not actively socially engaged in proactively advancing their causes offline. Interview respondents, especially those associated with organisations such as far-right political parties or conservative civil society organisations, are less likely to express very strong feelings of injustice.¹⁶ As one respondent stated: “I believe we live in a moderately just country.”¹⁷ Injustice and the presence of double standards for the political elite and the general population are recognised are however viewed as highly problematic.¹⁸ Still, it appears that getting actively involved in political or civil society organisations tempers more radical views by giving a sense that injustices can be addressed by being socially active.

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While respondents also consider traditional family values are under threat due to foreign encroachment in Bulgarian politics,¹⁹ online communities tend to be more radical in emphasising that liberal values of tolerance and respecting and protecting minority rights, which are inherently incompatible with Bulgarian identity are pushed on the population:

“We have to be confident that Bulgaria will be there when the third gender is gone, gone are the several transnational structures which today are leading international geopolitics. There won’t be COVID, climate change, multiculturalism, open society, feminism and gay parades. But we will be here, like we have been for many centuries.”²⁰

¹⁴ Post in Facebook group, 28 January 2022.

¹⁵ Post in Facebook group, 30 January 2022.

¹⁶ Written responses to a questionnaire by the leader of a conservative CSO, February 2022; Written responses to a questionnaire by a member of a conservative youth club, February 2022; In-person interview with a leader of a youth chapter of a prominent far-right party, 24 February 2022.

¹⁷ In-person interview with a leader of a youth chapter of a prominent far-right party, 24 February 2022.

¹⁸ In-person interviews with representatives of a prominent political party (one youth), 27 March 2022.

¹⁹ In-person interview with a citizen activist, February 2022; In-person interviews with representatives (one youth) of a prominent far-right party, 27 March 2022.

²⁰ Post in Facebook group, 15 January 2022.

Transnational dynamics also manifests on the meso level in the fact that the narratives, arguments and specific content shared in online conservative communities are often imported in ranging from citing foreign sources of information (e.g. a video in Italian showing positive tests, which emphasises that the most positive results are of people with various rates of vaccination). Referring to events happening abroad (e.g. protests in different cities around the world against Covid-19 measures) or through repeating arguments originating from abroad.

Opposition against the Strategy for the Child in Bulgaria spread both online and offline the information that the Strategy will make it possible for children to be more easily extracted from their families and given to gay couples in Norway. As an investigation of the Dnevnik newspaper showed very similar allegations were used in other countries in opposition to juvenile justice initiatives (Lehstarska, 2019). Similarly, the Great Reset theory has been spread in other countries and with regard to other disease outbreaks (Fatcheck, 2022).

Another manifestation of the transnational dynamics factor, especially in terms of the protection of traditional values is the presentation of Russia as a defender of traditional values. Nevertheless, there are indications that misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic originating from Russia has also been spread actively in Bulgaria by one of the most fervent opponents of vaccines and pandemic-related restrictions. Despite being a veterinarian, this opponent of Covid-19 measures was particularly active in Bulgaria but also often appeared on Belorussian TV, where he has been variably represented as a virologist, economist or political scientist. (Bedrov and Lavchiev, 2020).

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As the present research has shown, political dissatisfaction and the use of foreign propaganda and misinformation have been adapted well to support both the causes of opposition to encroachment of liberal values and opposition to COVID-19 measures. On the other hand, the convergence of far-right narratives and religious conservatism has not translated well to the opposition towards COVID-19. There are only limited allusions to religion in online interactions on the topic of the pandemic. On the other hand, religious arguments are often expressed in opposition of encroachment of gender ideologies from the West. Any attempts to challenge the male-female dichotomy is perceived as an affront to the holy order as created by God:

*This photo session is targeted and aims at the primordial values and traditions of our nation in order to tarnish them but not only this – it is aimed against the primordial and divine structure of man and the world. It is not at all random.*²¹

Another key factor identified in the research is social digitalisation. The growing reliance on accessing information through social media is coupled with algorithms that promote the formation of echo chambers is exacerbated by the general failure of social media platforms to counter the spread of misinformation related to Covid-19 (Milmo, 2021). This failure is particularly pronounced in tackling misinformation in languages other than English (Rishi, 2021). As research has demonstrated “users

²¹ Comment under post in Facebook page on an art project featuring trans models re-enacting classic paintings of the prominent painter Vladimir Dimitrov – the Master.

online tend to prefer information adhering to their worldviews, ignore dissenting information, and form polarised groups around shared narratives” (Cinelli et al., 2021). This has important effects on decision making as research has shown that even in neutral situations people tend to disbelieve others with opposing views even when they are more competent (Marks et al. 2019). In fact, some of the respondents themselves tend to recognise the potential of social media to foster violence.²²

The above dynamics of being exposed to information that only confirms already existing beliefs in examined online communities is coupled with strong demonisation of the mainstream media as another conduit of the foreign agenda. This serves the dual purpose of de-legitimising content contradicting the views of the community and legitimising the “alternative facts” spread within it:

“The world of media is over...get rid of the TV and watch the real alternative news related to the liberation of the people and not on the infliction on them of newer and newer psycho attacks...”²³

It should be noted that despite the concerning messages observed in the online community, outright calls for violence are rare. Instead, most actions that the online community calls for fall in the remit of the legitimate – protests, resignation, investigation and sanctions for the political elite. Protesting as a strategy for achieving goals is particularly referenced both by respondents who are not part of any organisation²⁴ as well as by the online community as evidenced by the numerous shared videos and other content on protest actions against Covid-19 measures taking place around the world.

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Similarly, interview respondents tend to not view violence as a solution for the problems they identify in Bulgarian society. This more moderate position expressed by interviewees can partially be attributed to several factors – the tendency for people to express more extreme views online (Stern, 2018) as well as the fact that as representatives of more organised far-right actors (e.g. political parties and youth clubs), they would tend to eschew violence in comparison to other far-right actors such as skinhead gangs and hooligans (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Respondents associated with political parties and formal clubs not only do not condone violence but directly oppose it as a means of combatting injustice.²⁵ Instead, more legitimate means are emphasised, such as increased control over and sanctioning of unlawful behaviour.²⁶

Some isolated calls for physical violence can nevertheless be found in online interactions, especially directed towards the Bulgarian political elite:

²² In-person interview with a far-right party sympathiser, 12 January 2022; Written responses to a questionnaire by a leader of a conservative CSO, February 2022.

²³ Post in Facebook group, 28 January 2022.

²⁴ In-person interview with a citizen activist, February 2022; In-person interview with far-right party sympathiser, 12 January 2022.

²⁵ In-person interview with two representatives (one youth) of a prominent far-right party, 27 March 2022; Written responses to a questionnaire by a member of a youth conservative club, February 2022; In-person interview with a leader of a youth chapter of a prominent far-right party, 24 February 2022.

²⁶ In-person interview with a member of a prominent far-right party, 27 March 2022.

"I would go even further than this! All who allowed this national treachery should be SHOT (the way they do in China)."²⁷

Nevertheless, it should be noted that while there are no indications of far-right violent radicalisation, the dynamics described above are highly problematic as they bring about and exacerbate already existing societal schisms and polarisation. In addition, while serious violent incidents related to opposition towards initiatives seen as undermining traditional family values or against Covid-19 measures have not taken place, concerning events coming close to violent confrontation have been observed. In the city of Varna, the staff of a mobile vaccination point was verbally assaulted by opponents of vaccination.²⁸ Similarly, protest actions, despite being legitimate, do have the potential to escalate into violence if crowd dynamics are not properly controlled or if protesters are riled up by far-right actors.²⁹ While the protest organised by the Vazrazhdane party's 12 January 2022 did not turn violent, there were unsuccessful attempts to break into Parliament (Mitov, 2022). Similarly, a shared video of protestors from Varna trying to reach the Vazrazhdane protest show threatening behaviour towards police, despite not turning violent.³⁰

In terms of the narratives expressed, the online communities examined tend to focus on specific current events on the global stage and their expressions on the national and local level and thus repeating theses associated with the far-right. Even the most extreme of far-right messages occasionally make it to the communities examined and go unchallenged. One such example was the case with a shared video of Ursula Haverbeck detailing why the Holocaust has never happened.³¹

²⁷ Comment under post in a Facebook group, 19 January 2022.

²⁸ "Няма да им позволим". Пункт за ваксинация е бил нападнат от "антиваксъри" ["We won't let them": vaccination point attacked by anti-vaxxers"]. Svobodna Evropa, 20 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31468719.html>.

²⁹ There are a number of examples of inflammatory protest actions organised by far-right actors which escalate into violence, such as the case of the Ataka protest in front of the central Sofia mosque.

³⁰ Shared video in Facebook group, 12.1.2022

³¹ Shared video in Facebook group, 26.1.2022

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

Interviews with participants in conservative informal groups and experts monitoring these processes revealed some common features in the dynamics of the groups. The motivations for their organisation in protest actions on the street emerge mainly on Facebook and among friends at the local level. These are heterogeneous groups, and Facebook appears as a platform of their organisation. Participants perceive themselves as “different” from the rest of society. There are no expressed leaders, as most are horizontal organisations. There are representatives and supporters of far-right parties, but when an everyday issue of common interest arises, the groups begin to produce content and eventually a live event such as a protest occurs. In this sense, on the one hand there are Facebook groups with an ideology, and on the other there is live organisation.

The meso-level analysis shows that the macro drivers also emerging on the meso level are political or social discontent, transnational dynamics and social digitalisation, as expressed in the essence of the observed online groups. In terms of political discontent, what unites these groups are a few basic statements, the most common being the demand for “justice and punishment of politicians”. At the same time, sensitive issues in the far-right discourse in society from the recent past (e.g. the “problematic” Roma minority) are no longer relevant in the presence of new issues (such as the Istanbul Convention, the Child Strategy and Covid-19). Very often conspiracy theories are involved in the groups’ explanation of reality. This is also one of the main lines as concerns the transnational dynamics factor. In this light, the interplay of drivers is a central characteristic, with the most frequent combination being political grievances and international influence. One conclusion of the meso-level analysis is that online communities tend to express their disagreements more radically than what was observed in interviews, which is a manifestation of how the social digitalisation driver plays into their attitudes. This and the fact that Facebook is a basic platform for their organisation for offline action makes this factor highly relevant. Another conclusion from both Facebook groups and interviews is that violence tends to not be endorsed as a legitimate means in pursuing one’s goals and protests are seen as the acceptable way to go. However, risk for extreme behaviour is present, manifested in specific verbal attacks on vaccination points or tensions at anti-government protests.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

The data point to problematic areas which could be addressed in future prevention efforts. Key elements of prevention of potential far-right radicalisation should address rampant political dissatisfaction which leads to extreme distrust towards institutions, including institutions based on expertise (e.g. the Bulgarian Alliance of Doctors). Political dissatisfaction is deeply ingrained in Bulgarian society. As Avramov (2015) has argued, that this has led to development of a “systematic crisis feeling” - the persistent and deep-seated dissatisfaction with the political class, the socio-economic state and living standards in the country observed during transition which persisted after entry in the European Union (EU). Decisive actions and a multi-faceted approach on all levels of society are needed to restore some degree of social trust in institutions and the media, diminishing trust in conspiracy theories.

In addition, the appeal of conspiracy theories, misinformation and fake news has been underscored in debates around the Istanbul Convention, the Strategy for the Child and especially the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of misinformation thus needs to be tackled by a multifaceted approach. With regard to youth, fostering critical thinking and media literacy is particularly important. Critical thinking is insufficiently prioritised at Bulgarian schools, as shown by the subpar results of the last PISA study, carried out in 2018. The study showed functional literacy rates in Bulgaria are low and have, depending on the specific components either remained stagnant or worsened for the last three editions of the research, carried out in 2012, 2015 and 2018 (Dimitrov, 2018).

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

The present research does not indicate that online conservative communities formed in protection of traditional family values and against Covid-19 measures and associated with the far-right actors show significant potential for violent radicalisation. On the other hand, the spread of propaganda and misinformation as well as narratives generally espoused by the far-right narratives to large, receptive audiences online has the potential to bring about worsening of societal polarisation. Supporters of far-right and pro-Russian party Vazrazhdane present the highest risk of being radicalised and of taking to extreme actions, demonstrated in several recent anti-government protests organised by the party.

General Conclusion

Ultra-conservative communities in Bulgaria, online and offline, tend to organise along ad hoc issues of interest, most often “in defence of traditional family values” and against Covid-19 restrictions. Their membership and agenda is often intertwined with that of far-right, populist parties of the day. Facebook serves as a strong platform for their organisation and motivation, including for live protests. The relevant drivers from the macro-level analysis, which are manifested at the meso level and are frequently interplaying, are political grievances, transnational dynamics and social digitalisation. A strong role in the dynamics of meso-level interactions is played by conspiracy theories and Russian propaganda. While violence is not endorsed by these groups, a risk for violent action exists linked to protests organised by them, especially ones associated with the Vazrazhdane party.

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Interviews

In-person interview with a far-right party sympathiser, 12 January 2022.

In-person interview with a leader of a youth chapter of a prominent far-right party, 24 February 2022

In-person interview with a citizen activist, February 2022

In-person interview with an independent expert, 15 March 2022.

In-person interview with a representative of a prominent political party, 27 March 2022.

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In-person interview with a representative of a prominent political party, 27 March 2022.

Written responses to a questionnaire by the leader of a conservative CSO, February 2022.

Written responses to a questionnaire by a member of a conservative youth club, February 2022.

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Football supporters

Stefan Ralchev, Nadya Stoynova

Introduction

This report presents the results from research on meso-/community-level dynamics among young football supporters in Bulgaria related to processes and risks of radicalisation and violent extremism. It follows up on a macro-level analysis conducted earlier as part of the CONNEKT project and tries to establish what the relations of meso dynamics are to the macro-level drivers setting the frame of the previous research, within the specific social contexts. The targeted communities were online public Facebook groups or pages, and the research was complemented by interviews with football fans of popular clubs. The communities were selected based on previous research by CSD (Dzhekova *et al.*, 2015) and after consultations with stakeholders as part of CONNEKT's Stakeholders Seminar. In addition, in the run-up to the data collection phase for this effort, there were media reports of alleged violence on the part of football fans against vulnerable groups or the police.³² The four macro factors identified to play a role at the meso level are social digitalisation, political grievances, territorial differences and transnational dynamics. One additional driver, specific for the context of football supporters in Bulgaria, was identified, and namely nationalism, often manifesting itself as xenophobia and hate speech. One conclusion of the meso-level analysis is that social networks serve to amplify extreme attitudes among fans; another is that violence is considered a legitimate means to achieve an end. These conclusions will help endorse an adequate prevention approach in the future and select appropriate micro-paths to individual dynamics and drivers for radicalisation and violence among football supporters.

³² See for example "Малките ултраси, вилнели в центъра на Пловдив, скочили заради спонтанен ЛГБТ парад [Young ultras rampaging in the center of Plovdiv jumped because of a spontaneous LGBT parade]", *Trafficnews.bg*, 27 September 2020. Available at: <https://trafficnews.bg/plovdiv/malkite-ultrasi-vilneli-tsentara-plovdiv-skochili-zaradi-190322/>; "56-та вечер на протести: Ултраси нападат полицията, мощни бомби всяка секунда [Ultras attack the police, powerful bombs every second]", *168 Chasa*, 2 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.168chasa.bg/Article/8969365>.

Research Methodology

RECAP OF RESULTS FROM MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

Far-right extremism in Bulgaria has become increasingly dynamic in recent years. Diverse actors engage in far-right rhetoric or acts, including political parties, non-partisan organisations and informal groups such as skinheads and football hooligans.³³ Far-right extremists have inflicted injuries and even death on members of minorities. (Hristova, 2018). Civil society has been particularly vocal in emphasising the threat of far-right radicalisation. The macro-level analysis for Bulgaria, while a number of respondents from law enforcement and the judiciary recognised the threat of far-right radicalisation, showed that few measures targeted towards primary prevention or more systematic sanctioning of far-right violence such as hate crimes have been undertaken (Dzhekova and Stoyanova, 2019). One reason for this is the notion among representatives of institutions that the far-right lacks mobilisation potential towards violence. Problems in the registration, classification and investigation of potential crimes with discriminatory motives greatly complicate accurate assessment of the scope of the phenomenon (Dzhekova et al., 2017). At the same time several respondents agreed that there is widespread normalisation of far-right rhetoric in Bulgarian society.

One specific feature of football hooliganism in Bulgaria is that hooligans are often used by political parties for political goals (paid involvement in protests, sabotaging anti-government protests, sparking ethnic conflict) (Dzhekova et al., 2016). This suggests that institutional responses to far-right radicalisation expressed in football hooliganism may be reluctant. In the macro-level analysis for Bulgaria, one law enforcement representative argued that during the COVID-19 crisis, football fans participated in protests because they honestly wanted to be allowed to attend football games, while dismissing any linkage with fans of a recent attack on LGBTI people in Plovdiv, which was reported by the media to have been organised by supporters of a local football team. He believed that football hooligans' aggression is mostly directed at supporters of other teams and what we see is a stagnation in these groups.

Other conclusions were that the far right is particularly dynamic, with the rhetoric and tactics used by far-right actors evolving considerably and moving away from violence and towards more veiled influence tactics, especially with the proliferation of online disinformation in recent years. Particularly as regards football supporters, as shared by a respondent from the security services in the macro-level research, there is no longer a hard core of far-right extremists focused on and gravitating towards the fan clubs. There is a significant change in the profile of members, and the characteristics which are cited in different research differ substantially (Dzhekova, Ralchev and Stoyanova, 2021).

MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS ADDED VALUE

The meso-level analysis is an essential part of the empirical core of CONNEKT. By shedding light on the views of community members and local-level institutions and allowing for direct observation of

³³ Ibid.

community-level dynamics, the meso-level analysis will enable a more accurate and nuanced understanding of which radicalisation/extremism drivers are the most relevant in regard to this social group, how they manifest and what impact they have on social interactions. Furthermore, the present inquiry will constitute a bridge between the macro- and individual-level analyses and will help to identify and investigate the interactions and relations which exist between the national, group-level and individual dimensions.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives of this case study align with the overall objectives of CONNEKT's work package (WP5), namely to analyse a sub-national community-level environment which is conducive to or at risk of violent extremism, and determine factors within the social environment which create conditions for violent extremism. Along these lines, a main research objective of this case study is to examine how the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism identified in the academic literature, and also studied by CONNEKT, function in the community as context of social interaction.

DEFINITION OF MESO-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL ONES

The methodological approach for the present case study involves non-participant observation of public Facebook groups and pages identified using Facebook's instrument CrowdTangle and consulted with experts from law enforcement and independent observers (see below). In this light, the identifiable relevant meso-level institutions/stakeholders/communities are football supporters of specific teams; factions within supporters of a team; metropolitan police; neighbourhoods; and towns.

CRITERIA USED FOR SAMPLE SELECTION (OF PARTICIPANTS)

The research methodology for this case study included non-participant observation of public Facebook groups and pages (posts and comments below them) of football supporters and four in-depth interviews with football supporters of specific teams in the age range 18 to 30. The research team chose to use online group observation rather than face-to-face field activities to collect data because (i) the access to an adequate number of respondents for the purpose of the research would be difficult, given the closed nature of these communities and the suspicion with which they treat scholars and journalists; and (ii) in this way it could focus on the increased online presence of football fans over the recent years and correlate it with the digitalisation driver of CONNEKT. The narrower age range for the interviews (rather than the entire target population of CONNEKT of 12-30), was chosen because it would be problematic to seek the consent of parents when interviewing minors. The criteria used in the selection of the sample are as follows. As a result of the team's consultations with the research coordinators of CONNEKT and the present WP5, it was decided that only public Facebook groups and pages shall be observed, in line with ethical standards as defined by the project. Following this decision, Facebook' CrowdTangle instrument was used to identify the five most popular football supporters' groups in terms of membership and interactions and the five most popular pages in terms of followers and interactions, both for the period 15 September – 15 December 2021. In parallel, a consultation was held with representatives of the national police and Sofia metropolitan police about their view of the most relevant groups.

The selection of interviewees was based on popularity of the football team they supported and accessibility.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The Facebook groups and pages unite supporters, mostly youths, of the respective team and contain posts and comments about ongoing matches, transfers of players, relations with the football governing body (the Bulgarian Football Union, BFU), rival teams and supporters, topical political events and patriotic posts about national holidays and figures. The latter two were of specific interest to the observers. Posts and comments on all mentioned topics contained allusions or outright qualifications that could be characterised as racist or discriminatory.

The team arrived at the selection of four specific groups/pages: CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS (supporters of CSKA Sofia) – by far the most active group in terms of posts; and Ultras Levski, National Fanclub of Supporters of PFC Levski and Levski Sofia Zapad (supporters of Levski Sofia) – pages which were much less active, hence their higher number and longer observed period. The first group was observed for the periods 14-25 January and 17-21 February 2022; the three other, less active, were observed for the periods 11 November 2021 – 11 February 2022 and 17-21 February 2022.

According to the CrowdTangle data collected for the period 15 September – 15 December 2021, the CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, had 3,216 members, contained 2,576 posts and had 120,866 interactions; the Ultras Levski page had 29,783 followers, contained 37 posts and had 29,860 interactions. According to Facebook's website, as of April 2022, the National Fan Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia page had 24,045 followers, and the Levski Sofia Zapad page had 1,041 followers. The interactions among football fans observed in the virtual realm can be characterised as intensifying in certain periods, especially when a major or controversial event occurs in reality, as well as more radical in terms of language, often resorting to hate speech about certain groups.

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The four interviewees were as follows: two fans of Levski Sofia, one of the two most popular teams in Bulgaria; one fan of CSKA Sofia, the other most popular team; and one fan of Beroe Stara Zagora, one of the teams with most active supporters outside the capital Sofia. One of the Levski fans identified with a faction within the supporters as a whole; the CSKA fan described himself as active in the past but not so active at present; and the Beroe fan described himself as currently active.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH TOOLS DESCRIPTION

After consultations with stakeholders, the research team decided that online observation would be applied to online (Facebook) communities as part of the current case study on far-right groups within football and/or MMA clubs. The insights of the online observation would be supplemented with data from semi-structured face-to-face interviews with key individuals active in the respective community. The online observation would aim to answer the following research questions:

- How do identified macro factors of radicalisation relevant to these communities influence and manifest in their interactions and core narratives?

- How are the contexts identified by CONNEKT present in (or relevant to) these communities?
- How does the online environment influence interactions between the participants (e.g. citing “right” or “wrong” positions/beliefs/practices picked from social networks; how the content of specific posts correspond to certain comments; how the format of the online environment predispose certain interactions)?
- What are the common narratives of these communities and how do these common narratives develop and get reproduced in the online space?
- To what extent is there space to discuss or challenge common narratives of the groups?
- How popular are the Facebook sites and groups of these communities and how active are participants in them (in terms of posts, likes, shares, comments)?

Only open and publicly accessible Facebook groups and pages would be considered as sources of information. The data gathered was to be used to analyse the narratives espoused and the interactions within the communities, including the role of macrofactors of radicalisation in informing narratives and how they manifest in community interactions.

The method employed would be non-participant or unobtrusive observation of the public posts and interactions of the selected communities. The method was chosen in order to mitigate negative outcomes that are likely to occur in the event of revealing the aim of the research. There is widespread mistrust among the selected communities towards civil society, which is often described as an advocate of the very harmful ideologies that these communities stand against. In addition, non-obstrusive observation would allow the team to observe the organic development of interactions and narratives among the communities.

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The observers (coders) would rely on relevance (purposive) sampling of posts/comments. In this thematic approach, the codes used will correspond to the drivers assigned by CONNEKT in the WP5 methodology but also as suggested by CSD for the current case study (far-right football supporters): political dissatisfaction, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, social digitalisation. The end result of the observation would be a selection of relevant posts/comments for the case study, with assigned codes (drivers), which will serve as a basis for the data analysis.

In addition to this qualitative aspect of the observation, the team was to make use (as an illustration) of quantitative data offered by CrowdTangle (number of likes, shares, responses, etc.) in order to justify the choice of Facebook groups and pages which will be the subject of the qualitative analysis (see CrowdTangle statistics in Section 2.6).

Apart from the Facebook group observation, a total of four interviews were held with fans of Levski Sofia, CSKA Sofia and Beroe Stara Zagora. The first two Sofia-based clubs are the most popular nationwide, while the third is one of the most popular clubs outside the capital Sofia. Three interviews were held in-person on 23 and 27 December 2021 and on 4 January 2022. The fourth one was completed in the form of detailed written responses to questions, according to the preference of the interviewee, sent over the email on 21 February 2022.

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

One challenge was that Facebook's tool CrowdTangle is not able to scrape content from comments under posts, and for the purpose of this research comments would be the main source of data (they tend to contain more extreme reactions to news published as posts). Because of that, the researchers had to do the observation manually, checking all the posts and comments for the designated time period.

A second important challenge the team encountered when carrying out the non-participant online observation was the inability to carry out the initially envisaged, much longer, period of observation of three months. The problem was that the selected group and page generated very large amounts of content, making it technically impossible to track interactions for longer periods of time due to the pages crashing. As a result, the team opted to shorten the period to two weeks which was technically feasible. The generation of high volumes of data in the selected page and group, however, meant that there was enough data for the team to analyse with the shorted period as well.

A third challenge encountered by the team related to the initially planned methodology, which involved two coders coding a sample of 10% of the data and later involving a third coder to compare and verify that intercoder differences are within acceptable limits. Ultimately, the team decided to proceed with two coders going over the same data for the same period of time and subsequently analysing all content coded. This approach was chosen in order to ensure comprehensiveness of the data collected and to avoid coder bias.

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A final difficulty concerned the fact that some interviews were declined or cancelled. One reason was, given the thematic focus of the research, that the potential respondents did not accept labelling them as 'radicalised'; another was the respondents' general mistrust towards non-governmental organisations and the aims of scholarly research.

Meso Level Dynamics

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESULTS OF THE MACRO LEVEL ANALYSIS

Football supporters and their beliefs and behaviour can be analysed within the WP5 pre-defined social context of urban and peri-urban spaces: urban areas where social interactions take place in a dimension of daily relationships. A thorough study of football hooliganism by CSD shows that for young people in Bulgaria, the neighbourhood is the most decisive factor which determines their club allegiance, i.e. where they grew playing football with their friends, went to school and were seeing graffiti about a football club. (Dzhekova et al., 2015).

The school environment can be also a factor of youth aggression: "Peer pressure at school and on the streets of the neighbourhood and association with juveniles prone to aggression and crime are also important factors leading to radicalisation, since as a person prone to aggression displays less aggressiveness when in a group of non-aggressive peers." (Dzhekova et al., 2015). By joining a fan club, the supporter experiences a belonging to a particular group which they perceive as "family". "They seek support, understanding and the respect of others within the group. The group is deemed to share the same values as the individual – prowess, bravery, honour and a sense of justice... Furthermore, belonging to a group waters down the sense of responsibility and makes football fans ready to commit criminal offences they would be reluctant to commit outside the group. Thus very often violence at stadiums is a result of minor incidents in which gradually non-aggressive people are embroiled in escalating fights." (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Criminality is strongly linked to the activities of some factions, including drug sale, assaults (including with firearms), usury, etc.³⁴

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According to the CSD study, those joining the hooligan scene are aged between 15-23 years and young members need to pass certain acceptance ceremonies such as inflicting damage on the enemy club's property, beating up a schoolmate supporting the rival club, "and can escalate into beating up a member of ethnic minorities." (Dzhekova et al., 2015).

Indeed, the neighbourhood and the hometown emerged as the main social context relevant to football supporters interviewed for the present analysis, along with family tradition. Three respondents mentioned it as a factor, and three also mentioned family.³⁵ The dynamics of interaction during football matches generally follow the pattern of gathering in groups in the neighbourhood and then going to the stadium. The bigger clubs' supporters organise themselves into factions, which are sometimes hostile to each other. Typically, the strongest or most popular faction sets the rules of behaviour at the stadium – chanting, choreography, etc. – and also before the game, at the gathering point in the vicinity of the stadium.³⁶ A comment under a post in the Facebook page Ultras Levski illustrates the role of the

³⁴ See for example "Знакови лица от агитката на Левски зад решетките заради мокри поръчки [Flagship Levski supporters behind bars for ordered hits], TrafficNews.bg, 24 April 2020. Available at: <https://trafficnews.bg/krimi/znakovi-liitsa-agitkata-levski-zad-reshetkite-zaradi-mokri-176414/>.

³⁵ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021; In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022; In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021; Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

³⁶ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021.

faction leader: "The Tall One – this is the man who currently leads a whole empire. This is the man who demonstrates what Levski-ness is. This man is our leader. The whole stadium, the whole crowd, each person is guided by his signs, his words, his movements. Yesterday I watched him give himself away, give his soul and heart so that the last person in the stadium could sing and my heart would be filled. And when he climbed the railing and the whole Block was looking at him, I think he realised that he was our "Emperor." Thank you!"³⁷

Not all fans are organised, though – the majority of people supporting their team at matches go independently, in small groups, and sometimes there are frictions with the organised supporters, who are trying to impose certain behaviour ("you are going to sing this or that song," "you are going to wave this flag," etc.).³⁸ Both organised and unorganised supporters tend to meet not only on match days but socially.³⁹ Groups can vary in their size and in time: official fan clubs are larger, with several thousand supporters,⁴⁰ while factions usually comprise less than a hundred people.⁴¹ Leaders, at the neighbourhood level, are often established by their ability to show bravery and successfully engage in fist fights with other supporters.⁴² All respondents shared that the biggest loyalty among fans is to the club and country, and one respondent from outside Sofia mentioned loyalty to the hometown. As for loyalty towards the specific group or faction, the same supporter said that the biggest betrayal would be a member of the group to talk to the police about other members. This could result in ostracism for the 'traitor' and even in the group falling apart.⁴³

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One interesting feature of organised fans which this research showed but was not observed in the CSD study of 2015 was the tendency to engage in sports. One respondent said interest in sports and practicing them was a motivating factor to become a devoted supporter.⁴⁴ Another shared that his and other factions of supporters have established fight clubs in mixed martial arts (MMA) in order to "canalise their energy." He added that football supporters today no more find it fashionable to drink alcohol but rather do sports and lead a healthy life.⁴⁵

Another notable tendency as regards social contexts vis-à-vis football supporters in Bulgaria is that match attendance has steadily decreased since the 1990s. According to the CSD study, average attendance has fallen from 6,500-7,000 in the 1996-97 season to some 2,000 in the 2014-15 season (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Indeed, in informal discussions with police as part of this research, in order to determine the most relevant target groups (Facebook and respondents) as part of the methodology,

³⁷ Comment under a post in Ultras Levski, 20 February 2022.

³⁸ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021; In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022.

³⁹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021; In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022; In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021; Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁴⁰ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021;

⁴¹ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁴² Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁴³ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁴⁴ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁴⁵ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

interlocutors shared that interest in football games has dramatically fallen, especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, and hard-line supporter groups have become less and less active.

One specific social context linked to this research are of course online groups or pages in Facebook (see CrowdTangle statistics about the specific groups observed in Section 2.6). There is the sense of group belonging mostly linked to the respective football team and the Bulgarian nation. One of the open groups which the research team joined had the practice to officially welcome new members with a public post seen by all members, suggesting a sense of belonging to the specific Facebook group.

HOW MACRO LEVEL DRIVERS WORKS AT THE MESO- LEVEL STUDIED (THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS)?

Outside CONNEKT's frame, according to the CSD study, most observers see the macro-level factors conducive to radicalisation among football supporters as linked to the overall political and economic characteristics of the country: the slow economic development and the accompanying unemployment, poverty, corruption and various political crises. "Although these political and socioeconomic problems should not be underestimated, they can only be viewed as aggravating factors contributing to the increase of manifested violence in society as whole." (Dzhekova et al., 2015). This research has found that four of the pre-defined macro factors employed by CONNEKT are applicable to the meso-level analysis of the communities of football fans and underline risks for radicalisation among them: social digitalisation, political dissatisfaction, territorial divergences⁴⁶ and international dynamics. A strong additional factor has been identified: nationalist convictions which tend to manifest themselves as intolerance to "the other" (Roma, Turks, the Macedonian nation), often resulting in hate speech in Facebook groups.

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Social digitalisation

The very methodology selected for the meso-level research – one that includes observation of public Facebook groups and pages – demonstrates the relevance of the social networks phenomenon, which the research team deemed important for the purpose of this analysis. The online environment tends to magnify extreme sentiments shared by the target group, allowing them greater anonymity and freedom. This was confirmed in the interviews conducted in parallel as part of the research. All respondents said they actively used social networks and channels for communication.

"Social networks nowadays are everything, they have replaced and changed communication. It is much easier to say something to someone, especially more unpleasant, on social networks. Everything presented on social networks can deceive someone, or leave him with the wrong impression of an event or something else. We believe that social networks are the tool for imposing today's values. Their use, especially by young people, can certainly be linked to potential violence. Behind the keyboard, many of them show inspiration and courage, which is lacking in a face-to-face situation."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ For the purposes of the analysis, territorial differences in this case study are understood as self-perceived distinctive traits or beliefs of certain football club's supporters that sets them apart from a rival club's supporters or from supporters from other cities: e.g. dedication to anti-communism, charitable activities, etc.

⁴⁷ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

*“Social networks are very influential, especially in fan circles where everyone wants to prove themselves, more and more often, due to certain, how to say, feelings of shyness, people would rather say it on the Internet than live. But it’s natural, it’s everywhere. This can be seen when there is some scandalous case in the country, everyone shares five thousand opinions and statuses and what not.”*⁴⁸ Asked whether a Facebook post can provoke violence, this respondent said that it was possible (“Small things can start the big fire”) but often the case was that no significant attention was paid to the person posting. Another respondent said social networks posts can provoke violence and shared that because of some posts the location of rival factions was identified.⁴⁹

Social digitalisation played a role even before the advent of social networks. One interviewee agreed that internet certainly contributes to violence, not least because of explicit visuals, and mentioned specific websites where stories were published about fights between factions, confiscated paraphernalia (scarves, etc.) as trophies and choreography during games.⁵⁰

Political grievances

Political dissatisfaction manifests itself as a radicalisation factor at the meso-level (visible in the online observation and interviews) along three main lines: 1) negativism towards the current leadership of the football governing body, the BFU, which is most of the time linked to the political leadership of the country, previous or incumbent; 2) general indignation against corrupt government and political parties; and 3) calls to protests against the current order, including violence. All three lines were evident in data obtained in the online observation, while interviews demonstrated clearly negative attitude towards Bulgaria’s communist past, disapproval against current political leadership and a specific attitude towards violence as a legitimate instrument, in some cases, to achieve one’s goals.

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As mentioned earlier, understandably the most exploited topics in the observed Facebook groups/pages were linked to football: the respective teams’ performance, transfers of players and rival teams. However, a clear tendency registered by the research team was for criticism of the BFU president, Borislav Mihaylov, and his team, often associated with the general political situation and governance of the country. As his background is from one of the two biggest Sofia football clubs, Levski Sofia, most of the criticism came from the rival team’s supporters in the group CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS.

*“Until in the government of the state (in football and all other sports and institutions) there are people without education, we will never be okay.”*⁵¹ *“What is this kind of State? The people do not want to see any more of them, and they are explaining that there is no one like them and everybody wants them”; “It seems it is time that we threw them out, the ‘other’ way. This democracy is starting to be too much for me”; “Scum!”*⁵²

⁴⁸ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁴⁹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022.

⁵⁰ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021.

⁵¹ Comment under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, 17 January 2022.

⁵² Comments under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, 18 February 2022.

However, supporters of Levski Sofia, while criticising the planned appointment for sports minister of Radostin Vasilev, with a CSKA background (*"Let's show we are against Radostin Vasilev's becoming sports minister!"*⁵³), have also expressed negative attitude towards the BFU leadership, linking it to the political establishment previously in power in Bulgaria: *"The Bulgarian Football Union, under pressure from Boyko Borissov [the former prime minister] and then sports minister Kralev, changed all its regulations in order to put Litex Lovech under its new name CSKA-Sofia in the top division and change its licence."*⁵⁴

A very strong sentiment across Facebook groups/pages concerns the perceptions of the corruption of football management and the political class.

*"Until the Prosecutor's Office visits the BFU and the Ministry of the Interior, there's no going for the better"; "What can you expect from corrupt people, this BFU has hit one bottom after another, where's the Prosecutor's Office?"*⁵⁵; *"How do you sustain a football club without any sponsors and audience? How much money did you and Madzho [a mafia boss] receive from Boyko Borissov [the former PM] to get him in power?"*⁵⁶

Distrust in political parties and institutions and perceived social injustice in Bulgarian society emerged as shared sentiments in some Facebook comments and throughout interviews made for this research. Online comments are far more intense than statements from respondents.

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*"Bulgarians, wake up, get out of the running amok in which you find yourselves! Use your chance that your bloodsuckers from the [political parties listed], the 'red' trade unions, the Prosecutor's Office, the courts, corrupt journalists... have well shown themselves under the spotlight and 'beat' them until they are moving, and even after that!... When we sweep them forever out of our fatherland, we'll be free and richer in every respect!"*⁵⁷

*"There are many injustices in society. From economic to social and all kinds. For example, there is a need for legislative changes that need to be resolved ... In Bulgarian society, the word [political] party is dirty... There are very few people who like something, even I am no longer one of them, and even fewer who are actively involved in something. I think that's bad."*⁵⁸; *"Well, there is [lack of justice], in my opinion, because for some people the rules apply, for others they do not"*⁵⁹; *"Most of our group does not see democracy as a positive thing for our nation."*⁶⁰ Indeed, interviewees were divided as to whether democracy is an effective system for society, with others expressing greater trust in it.⁶¹

⁵³ Post in National Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia, 29 November 2021.

⁵⁴ Comment under a post in National Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia, 1 January 2022.

⁵⁵ Comments under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, 18 January 2022.

⁵⁶ Comment under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS addressed to a rival club's boss, 20 January 2022.

⁵⁷ Comment under a post in Ultras Levski dedicated to an anniversary of a national hero, 19 February 2022.

⁵⁸ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁵⁹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022.

⁶⁰ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁶¹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

Regarding violence, what was observed in online comments shows not infrequent calls for its use against officials and the political class. Interview respondents were generally against it but some of them admitted that it can be a legitimate means to an end when other methods fail.

"This MP should be careful... I say again, the cattle should be careful."⁶² "Away with the wig [pejorative for the BFU president] or I will find an iron bar and make him beautiful";⁶³ "Ready for protest against the traitor Kiro [the incumbent PM]"⁶⁴

"Violence is an extreme measure, when the feeling of injustice is already so accumulated and the instruments of democracy and governance have obviously not worked, so in the end there is escalation, etc. I hope such a thing never happens, but at some point, if the levers of democracy do not help, violence remains the last refuge of justice... Look, violence is rooted in human nature... There cannot be no violence in society";⁶⁵ "Extreme views inevitably lead to violence";⁶⁶ "I can definitely say that violence is a part of all of us, especially as a group that has defended the honour of its city and club many times through fistfights... The link between violence and radical views is that it is only the tool through which the enemies of our ideas must be broken... Everyone in our group knows violence and what it leads to."⁶⁷

Some interviewees insisted that violence is not a universal response: *"Radicalisation in our circles is not greater and different from that in our whole society. It must be understood once and for all, that football fans are not a separate society in society"; "Nowadays, I don't think [violence] can be a solution to anything, but back in the day, to a large extent, maybe";⁶⁸ "For the injustice we all live with, violence is not the answer to all questions. Not even violence can always defeat our enemies. The truth and the belief that we are on the right track is the only weapon that can make us stronger than our opponents when we talk about society, not football stories. Violence yields temporary results, not lasting solutions."⁶⁹ Yet violence often accompanies activities of football fans even outside games. For example, in the anti-government protests in the summer and autumn of 2020, it was widely believed, including by the police, that some violent outbursts and provocations were made by organised fans of major football clubs.⁷⁰*

Territorial inequalities

As mentioned above, for the purposes of the analysis, territorial differences in this case study are understood as self-perceived distinctive traits or beliefs of certain football club's supporters that sets

⁶² Comment under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, 25 January 2022.

⁶³ Comment under a post in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS, 26 January 2022.

⁶⁴ Comment under a post in National Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia, 17 January 2022.

⁶⁵ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁶⁶ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022.

⁶⁷ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁶⁸ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021.

⁶⁹ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁷⁰ See for example "НОЩ НА СБЛЪСЪЦИ В СОФИЯ: Десетки ранени полицаи и протестиращи [Night of clashes in Sofia: \Dozens injured police and protesters]", Nova TV, 3 September 2020. Available at: shorturl.at/dlyO7.

them apart from a rival club's supporters or from supporters from other cities. Most often supporters of a club or a faction within a club's supporters view themselves as unique and in a way superior to others. They tend to emphasise participation in sports and a healthy way of living and charitable actions.

*"The good thing about us is that we have fighting clubs and there the desire of man for primacy and violence is channelled into something good and useful, such as sports. We have several sports clubs and dozens or hundreds of champions in various martial arts that we are proud of: boxing, MMA, kickboxing, grappling... Brazilian Jiu Jitsu... This is the idea of martial arts in general. Better to be in the hall than on the street."*⁷¹

*"We do charity, there is humanity after all, before divisions along football lines. We have united to help sick children, for example, for fans with health problems. All [Levski] fan clubs deliver products to people in need. With money collected by themselves, not given by someone else... We collect between ourselves and donate."*⁷²

Hate is often demonstrated against other teams' fans, and Facebook groups and pages are abundant with insulting and derogatory language.⁷³ There is animosity even between factions of supporters of the same team. *"For me, the biggest nonsense I have seen is to fight Levski fans. One fan to beat another Levski fan or several other fans from factions to come and beat unorganised fans ... This is done because, for example, we unorganised fans see things differently, or in our opinion something is not right or, for example, they pushed my phone and told me to "stop filming" or "I'll take your phone or beat you up"... They want to impose themselves in some way and no one dares to say anything to them."*⁷⁴

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Transnational dynamics

According to the CSD study, Bulgarian football hooligans have established friendly ties with certain Western European or Balkan football club supporters, visiting games abroad or welcoming their fans to games in Bulgaria, thus exchanging experience and beliefs (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Sometimes local animosities of friendly clubs abroad can be the cause of violence against visiting Bulgarian supporters, leading even to fatalities (See for example Trifonova, 2020). In the present case study, transnational dynamics is less observed as a macro factor replicating itself at the meso level. One line of agitation, especially among Levski Sofia fans, is linked to the harmful influence of Russia on Bulgarian society. One interviewee said a lot of money is invested in fake news and that's why the EU is fighting Russian propaganda.⁷⁵

"Is it accidental that Levski and Botev, Zahari Stoyanov, Stambolov, Rakovski and so many Bulgarian revolutionaries are killed by Russian proxies or Bulgarian traitors?... Do you not understand that for

⁷¹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁷² In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁷³ Posts and comments in all observed groups throughout the observation period.

⁷⁴ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022.

⁷⁵ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

centuries we have been killed and “modelled” slaves of the Empire of Evil and Despotism – Russia... This animal, the Russophile, should be called by its real name, and it is: Bulgarophobe-traitor.”⁷⁶

One respondent mentioned that foreign films about skinheads influenced the culture of his supporters' group, including hairstyle and fashion. He also cited American drill music: *“This style is based entirely on how you hurt your opponent, you brag to someone about how you killed somebody, absolutely extreme things.”⁷⁷*

Nationalism, xenophobia and hate speech

In this case study, one specific factor has been identified as a meso-level driver of radicalisation among football supporters which was not part of the macro analysis. It can be roughly described as nationalism, very often degrading to xenophobia and hate speech (in online groups). As a rule, football supporters in Bulgaria tend to identify with patriotic and nationalist causes. (Dzhekova et al. 2015). This was confirmed in this research, with interviewees sharing the importance of the Bulgarian nation when it came to allegiance and loyalty.

“First, it can definitely be said that among Levski’s⁷⁸ supporters, patriotic sentiments are strong. Commitment to Bulgaria, to history, our organisation has funded many charitable initiatives in the educational aspect, more precisely the promotion of Bulgarian history among young people, maintenance of monuments... Ultimately, the Westphalian Peace Treaty created the idea of the nation state, the idea that the state is to be of one nationality, so when a person wants to be an active citizen and part of a community, it is normal to have an affinity to defend one’s own.”⁷⁹ “We do not want to dissuade the fans of the opposing team from being its fans, but we definitely want to dissuade the enemies of nationalism from their activities.”⁸⁰

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In the observed Facebook groups and pages, posts and comments commemorating national holidays and figures have been regular, collecting the greatest number of positive interactions (along with posts about team wins on the pitch).⁸¹ Controversial historical figures linked to Nazism have also been mentioned.⁸² These sentiments are sometimes directed at topical political developments. For example, a visit of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov to North Macedonia in January 2022, aimed to improve bilateral relations and possibly open the way for North Macedonia’s launch of European Union accession negotiations, invoked negative reactions and warnings.⁸³ (The national narrative in Bulgaria is that Macedonians have a Bulgarian historical and cultural background, which they fail to recognise, and Bulgarian public opinion is in favour of vetoing North Macedonia for EU membership talks until

⁷⁶ Comment under a post in Ultras Levski dedicated to the anniversary of the death of Vasil Levski, 19 February 2022.

⁷⁷ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021.

⁷⁸ Levski Sofia football club is named after Vasil Levski (1837-1873), believed to be Bulgaria’s most prominent revolutionary and fighter for liberation from Ottoman rule in the late 19th century.

⁷⁹ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁸⁰ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁸¹ For example, in the observed period, there were posts about the anniversary of Gotse Delchev’s birth (4 February) and Vasil Levski’s demise (18-19 February).

⁸² Post in Ultras Levski about historical figure Gen. Hristo Lukov, 12 February 2022.

⁸³ Posts in in National Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia, 17 January 2022.

controversies about history and the rights of Bulgarians in the country are settled (Atanasova, 2022)) Sometimes events from everyday life can provoke strong reactions by football fans, unifying them along ethnic, Bulgarian lines against other ethnicities. One respondent invoked the mass anti-Roma protests from 2011 (when an ethnic Bulgarian youth in the village of Katunitsa was run down and killed by members of a notorious Roma family linked to criminal activity). The protests were attended by fans of all major football clubs alike, expressing indignation at the perceived social injustice.⁸⁴

Nationalism can turn into xenophobia or outright racism among certain factions of supporters. As one interviewee shared, *"This [nationalism] was maintained. I even thought that these values were much more extreme, because we were instilled with nationalism, but more extreme one, towards racism. Black people, gypsies and all such ethnic groups, were not be tolerated if seen in the stand. It has happened more than once that people from the stand have been chased out."*⁸⁵ Xenophobia, racism and hate speech are visible in the observed Facebook groups and pages. Most often, pejorative terms and slurs for Roma people, Muslims, Jews or homosexuals, sometimes combined with threats, are used to express anger at footballers or management.⁸⁶

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DRIVERS AND INTERACTIONS AMONG DRIVERS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

The nature of the methodology used for this case study – namely, the element of observation of public Facebook groups and pages – points to the obvious intersection between the above analysed drivers and social digitalisation, one of the initially identified macro drivers by CONNEKT. One observation, as mentioned earlier, is that the online environment tends to enhance radical statements and provides thriving milieu for hate speech: extreme language was missing in interviews and abundant in comments on Facebook. Another intersection concerns political dissatisfaction and nationalism/racism/hate speech: anti-government and anti-establishment statements by football supporters often contain hate words. A combination of territorial differences and nationalism was also observed: one respondent said that *"Belonging first to the neighbourhood, then to the city and then to the state is fundamental for the group. This affiliation has always been a source of pride. For example, I will give the modern inter-neighbourhood wars in our childhood - to defend your neighbourhood was a matter of honour. Defending the colours and the name of your city and football club, defeating the enemy on the streets and in the stadium - this is a great reason to be proud. It is the same with our homeland, Bulgaria is in the first place when it comes to a national cause."*⁸⁷

⁸⁴ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021.

⁸⁵ In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021.

⁸⁶ Comments in CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS and Levski Sofia Zapad throughout the observation period.

⁸⁷ Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

Analysis Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

The meso-level research for this case study showed that four macro-level drivers of radicalisation are present at the group/community level too: social digitalisation, political grievances, territorial differences and transnational dynamics. The team identified one additional driver linked to nationalism and racism and manifesting itself in xenophobia and hate speech. Activities in the observed Facebook groups and views shared in the interviews demonstrate that the social networks driver is a very strong factor presenting a risk to incur violence. Political dissatisfaction is against football management and its links to the political class, corruption of the governing elites in general and political parties in particular. Bulgaria's communist heritage is viewed negatively. Territorial differences arise from perceptions of rivalry with competing supporters and factions or towns, as own groups are viewed as "unique". Transnational influences are seen in friendly relations of Bulgarian fans with certain Western European football supporters' groups and in the access to foreign far-right videos and materials. Negativism against foreign influence (mainly Russia) is also observed.

One observation of previous research and the macro-level analysis was confirmed at the meso level: extreme supporters are less active because of lower attendance levels and interest in football in general and the Covid-19 pandemic. However, risks of far-right radicalisation are discernible in the "patriotism" and nationalism cherished by fans and certain factions specifically. Violence is accepted as a legitimate means to an end. A very important conclusion of the meso-level analysis is that online communication has the tendency to magnify extreme sentiments among football supporters' groups, resulting in xenophobia and hate speech.

PREVENTION INDICATORS RESULTING FROM THE MESO ANALYSIS

As regards prevention, according to the macro-level research, related phenomena such as hate crime, football hooliganism, racism, discrimination and xenophobia have not been in the focus of the dedicated P/CVE strategy, but are approached within a broader scope of policy themes such as crime, education, protection of human rights, diversity, social policy, and integration. Tackling football hooliganism particularly has been mainly geared towards preventing violence between rival football clubs (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Some representatives of law enforcement, juvenile delinquency services and the judiciary acknowledge the connections between football hooliganism and far-right extremism. However, other police representatives consider far-right extremism and football hooliganism to be separate issues despite significant overlap identified in studies and numerous attacks against different minorities, including LGBTQI people.

This separation of the issues is also obvious in cases where institutions different from law enforcement work with football hooligans, such as juvenile delinquency services. Despite the consensus that youths are a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to radicalisation, there are no avenues for an approach not dominated by law enforcement or correctional approaches. As long as the issue is seen as related only to sports, the local juvenile delinquency bodies can work on such cases. Once there are

indications of radicalisation, the case moves to the purview of law enforcement or security services. Drawing from the meso-level analysis, a useful prevention avenue would be to pay particular attention to hate speech in the education system and to try to limit hate speech in social networks.

MICRO-PATHS REPORTED FROM MESO ANALYSIS

According to the above cited CSD study, “For the majority of interviewed football fans violence is a determining factor for the identity of hooligans. Violent conduct of some football supporters is sometimes interpreted as being determined by one’s ‘nature’.” As one football fan put it: ‘I’m just that kind of person. Even if I wasn’t a football fan, I would have committed hooligan actions. This is my nature’. Another respondent compared football hooliganism with war in peacetime and the desire of men to fight with opponents, make ambushes, dispatch scouts, capture banners and scarves.” The study also states that “Characteristics such as low level of education, poor professional realisation, maladjusted behaviour in childhood (behavioural problems), and attention difficulties are also predictive of potentially aggressive behaviour.” (Dzhekova et al., 2015).

The meso-level research showed that family is a strong determining factor in the building up of values systems among fans, especially visible in the interviews. Most respondents shared that “traditional family values” are something they have been brought up with and that family ranks high as an object of their loyalty, together with club and nation.⁸⁸ In this light, possible micro-paths into the next level of research could be individual and emotional drivers, including within the family and within the specific educational environment. Indeed, according to Bulgaria’s Ombudswoman, Bulgaria ranks among the top countries with violence and bullying at school, with 50% of the children having reported psychological violence at school in 2021.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021; In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021; Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

⁸⁹ “Омбудсманът: Пандемията е задълбочила проблема с насилието в училище [The Ombudswoman: The pandemic has deepened the problem with violence at school]”, bTV News, 8 February 2022. Available at: <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/ombudsmanat-pandemijata-e-zadalbochila-problema-s-nasilieto-v-uchilishte.html>.

General Conclusion

This report has tried to identify how CONNEKT's macro-level drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism operate on the meso/community level among young football supporters. The processes were analysed within the WP5 pre-defined social context of urban and peri-urban spaces: urban areas where social interactions take place in a dimension of daily relationships. The research used as a method online observation of public Facebook groups and pages and was complemented by interviews with fans. Some conclusions which can be drawn is that risks of far-right radicalisation are discernible in the "patriotism" and nationalism cherished by fans and certain factions specifically and shared online. Violence is accepted as a legitimate means to an end. A very important conclusion of the meso-level analysis is that online communication has the tendency to increase extreme sentiments among football supporters' groups, resulting in xenophobia and hate speech. The implications for prevention are that it will be useful to pay particular attention to hate speech in the education system and to try to limit hate speech in social networks. A relevant micro-path into micro-level research would be to investigate the increasing violence, physical and psychological, happening at Bulgarian schools and the psychological and emotional drivers leading to it.

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Facebook groups/pages observed

CSKA SOFIA HOOLIGANS: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/cskasofiahooligans/>

Levski Sofia Zapad: <https://www.facebook.com/%D0%9B%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%A1%D0%BE%D1%84%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%97%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%B4-518199714891473/>

National Club of the Supporters of Levski Sofia: <https://www.facebook.com/NKPLevski/>

Ultras Levski: <https://www.facebook.com/UltrasLevski1914/>

Interviews

In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 23 December 2021

In-person interview with a supporter of Levski Sofia held on 4 January 2022

In-person interview with a supporter of CSKA Sofia held on 27 December 2021

Written responses to the questionnaire by a supporter of Beroe Stara Zagora received on 21 February 2022.

ANNEX I – Observation Guide for Case Studies 1 and 2

Centre for the Study of Democracy

CONNEKT Work Package 5

Observation Guide for Case Studies 1 and 2: Ultra-conservative Facebook groups and pages and Far-right Facebook groups and pages of football supporters

Goal

The observation of online Facebook communities and their interactions will be one of the methods used to analyse the role of drivers of radicalisation on the community or meso level. Online observation will be applied to communities as part of Case Study 1 on Online ultra-conservative communities and Case Study 2 on Far-right groups within football and/or MMA clubs. The insights of the online observation will be supplemented with data from three semi-structured face-to-face interviews with key individuals active in the communities of each case study. The online observation will aim to answer the following research questions:

- How do identified macro factors of radicalisation relevant to these communities influence and manifest in their interactions and core narratives? Following are questions related to the specific drivers for each case study:

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Driver	CS1: Online ultra-conservative communities	CS2: Far-right groups in football supporters
Political dissatisfaction	<p>Are target groups identifying with their country/nation?</p> <p>How do they understand democracy, rule of law, human rights issues?</p> <p>What are the most important values for them: family, tradition, freedom (e.g. from pandemic-related restrictions and/or medical intervention such as vaccination)?</p> <p>How do they perceive the upholding of these values should happen: complaints to institutions, peaceful protest, violence?</p> <p>What political parties and/or activist organisations do they support?</p>	<p>Are target groups identifying with their country/nation?</p> <p>How do they understand democracy, rule of law, human rights issues?</p> <p>What are the most important values for them?</p> <p>How do they perceive the upholding of these values should happen: complaints to institutions, peaceful protest, violence?</p> <p>What political parties and/or activist organisations do they support?</p>
Transnational dynamics	<p>Are target groups giving examples of positions/beliefs/practices from abroad</p>	<p>Are target groups mentioning collaboration with far-right groups from</p>

as correct or as wrong? Which international actors are they mentioning (e.g. Russia, conservative evangelist organisations in the US, etc.)? Is there any evidence that group members/page followers endorsed a position/belief/political action after they heard of it in being implemented or professed in another country?

abroad (e.g. other football supporters know to be ideologically influenced)?

Social digitalisation	Are target groups influenced from what they read in social networks? Are they citing and/or rehashing/reposting fake news or conspiracy theories? Can they distinguish between scientific evidence and unconfirmed claims?	Are target groups influenced from what they read in social networks? Do target groups organise themselves via social networks for football games? Do they communicate with other football fan groups via social networks?
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Religion	Do orthodox denominations of religion play a role in forming the positions/beliefs of target groups (e.g. Evangelism, Catholicism)?	X
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Territorial inequalities	X	Do target groups from one region (e.g. fans of Plovdiv football clubs) display more or less intense support for far-right beliefs than target groups from other region (e.g. Sofia or Stara Zagora)? Do ultras from localities which are more economically disadvantaged show higher incidence of far-right beliefs?
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• How are the contexts identified by CONNEKT present in (or relevant to) these communities?

CS1: Online ultra-conservative communities

CS2: Far-right groups in football supporters

Contexts tested

- Political and social participation
- Socialisation / education
- Urban and peri-urban spaces
- Ethnic community

- Ethnic community
- Socialisation / education
- Urban and peri-urban spaces
- Political and social participation

- How does the online environment influence interactions between the participants (e.g. citing “right” or “wrong” positions/beliefs/practices picked from social networks; how the content of specific posts correspond to certain comments; how the format of the online environment predispose certain interactions)?
- What are the common narratives of these communities and how do these common narratives develop and get reproduced in the online space?
- To what extent is there space to discuss or challenge common narratives of the groups?
- How popular are the Facebook sites and groups of these communities and how active are participants in them (in terms of posts, likes, shares, comments)?

Sources of information and criteria for selection

Only open and publicly accessible Facebook groups and pages will be considered as sources of information. The data gathered will be used to analyse the narratives espoused and the interactions within the communities, including the role of macrofactors of radicalisation in informing narratives and how they manifest in community interactions. In case these information sources prove insufficient to answer the research questions posed, the team will identify additional sources to include in the analysis.

For Case Study 1 on Online ultra-conservative communities the targets will be Facebook groups and pages organised around the protection of traditional family values from encroachment by liberal “gender ideologies” and groups and pages propagating COVID-19-related conspiracy theories and advocating against vaccination. Under Case Study 2 on Far-right groups within football and/or MMA clubs will target online groups around the team will examine Facebook groups and pages of supporters of various teams across the country.

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Method

The team will select Facebook groups and pages based on the following criteria:

- Public groups and pages of organisations active in promoting causes associated with the communities (e.g. traditional family values, protection of the children and anti-vaccination activism).
- By the name of the groups, where it directly indicates affiliation of members with a specific ideology or cause associated with the communities.
- Related groups and pages as suggested by Facebook and its CrowdTangle tool (the extension function).⁹⁰

Once the initial pool of groups/pages is identified, the team will use CrowdTangle to make the following lists:

- List A containing the five groups with most members and the five pages with most followers (Case Study 1 Ultra-conservative);
- List B containing the five groups and five pages with most interactions (likes, shares, comments) (Case Study 1 Ultra-conservative);

⁹⁰ An explanation of how this function works is available here: <https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/2566227-the-crowdtangle-chrome-extension>.

- List C containing the five groups with most members and the five pages with most followers (Case Study 2 Far-right football supporters);

List D containing the five groups and five pages with most interactions (likes, shares, comments) (Case Study 2 Far-right football supporters).

The next step will be to consult independent experts about which of the List A and B groups/pages produced by CrowdTangle are the most influential and relevant for the purposes of the WP5 research; based on their opinion and internal discussion, the team will select 2-3 groups and 2-3 pages to be the object of observation of Case Study 1. Similarly, experts dealing with football hooliganism in the Ministry of the Interior will be consulted about which of the List C and D groups/pages produced by CrowdTangle are the most influential and relevant for the purposes of the WP5 research; based on their opinion and internal discussion, the team will select 2-3 groups and 2-3 pages to be the object of observation of Case Study 2.

The method employed will be non-participant or unobtrusive observation of the public posts and interactions of the selected communities. The method was chosen in order to mitigate negative outcomes that are likely to occur in the event of revealing the aim of the research. There is widespread mistrust among the selected communities towards civil society, which is often described as an advocate of the very harmful ideologies that these communities stand against. In addition, non-obstrusive observation will allow the team to observe the organic development of interactions and narratives among the communities. As the main target group of this project is youth between 12 and 30 years old, the research team will look at public posts/comments by profiles falling into this category – either profiles explicitly stating age in their profile information or profiles which can be inferred to fall into this category by the content of the respective post/comment. In addition, the interviews which will be conducted with members of online ultra-conservative communities will serve to fulfill the age requirement – the interviews will be conducted with youth between the ages of 12-30.

The period covered by the observation will be set to three months (15 September – 15 December 2021), as the team's initial assumption is that it will be sufficient to generate data for analysis and since this timeframe is expected to present a rich basis for analysis. This timeframe will allow a balanced coverage of both a pre-election and a post-election period in Bulgaria (general and presidential polls were held on 14 November). The presence of elections will, on the one hand, provide more data for analysis (a wealth of interactions in the form of posts, comments and reactions), but on the other hand the opinions expressed may be somewhat more influenced by the dynamics and topics of the elections. The latter should be kept in mind when collecting and analysing the data.

The core team will consist of three observers (coders) relying on relevance (purposive) sampling of posts/comments. In this thematic approach, the codes used will correspond to the drivers assigned by CONNEKT in the WP5 methodology but also as suggested by CSD for each of its case studies: Case Study 1 (Ultra-conservative communitiies): political dissatisfaction, transnational dynamics,

social digitalisation, religion; Case Study 2 (Far-right football supporters): political dissatisfaction, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, social digitalisation. It will be possible to assign more than one code/driver to a single post/comment, if relevant.

In order to avoid bias, two coders will initially code a 10% random sample of posts/comments and then compare their results. Where there are discrepancies (e.g. a post was included by the first coder but not included by the second one, or differing codes were assigned to a comment), the third coder will provide an additional opinion which will be complied with. This will serve as a calibration exercise for the first two coders, who will afterwards be able to divide between themselves the quantity of all posts/comments in the selected observation period and work separately.

The end result of the observation will be a selection of relevant posts/comments for each case study, with assigned codes (drivers), which will serve as a basis for the data analysis.

In addition to this qualitative aspect of the observation, the team will make use (as an illustration) of quantitative data offered by CrowdTangle (number of likes, shares, responses, etc.) in order to justify the choice of Facebook groups and pages which will be the subject of the qualitative analysis.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

The employed research approach is in line with CONNEKT's ethical requirements. Initially, the method of participant observation was considered for the research on these two case studies. However, due to the widespread mistrust towards civil society as carriers of alien values, especially among the target groups, non-participant observation was selected instead. One of the main ethical concerns related to non-participant observation of online communities is the issue of informed consent. However, as a number of scholars have argued, ethical research of online communities is possible also in the absence of informed consent (Willis, 2019). In this sense, the distinction between public and private is a key distinction. As Townsend and Wallace have noted "working with social media data, there are some conditions in which researchers will be more ethically bound to seek informed consent, such as when accessing data which social media users expect to be private". (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). For the research on the online communities, the CSD team will only look at interactions between users in common online spaces which can reasonably be considered as public (organisational pages and open and public groups), without examining individual profiles or including individual profile names in the analysis of the data.

DATA PROTECTION AND GDPR

No personal data will be specifically gathered from the non-participant observation and all data gathered during the research will be anonymised in the final report, in line with CONNEKT's Data Protection Policy document (D1.2).



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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