CONNEKT

REGIONAL**REPORT**

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

Florian Bieber and Lura Pollozhani (Ed.)

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INTRODUCTION

The CONNEKT project, which is implemented in eight countries in the MENA and the Balkan region (Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria) analyses the contexts of radicalisation and violent extremism at three levels: macro, meso and micro. The findings of the macro level have already been disseminated, and showed the perspective and approaches of institutions, both state and non-state, to the prevention and countering of violent extremism and radicalisation (Bieber and Pollozhani, 2021). The meso level research of the CONNEKT project builds on a long process of selection and deliberation of case studies which were identified as important with a combination of actors and emanating from the first level of micro research. As a result, 24 case studies were chosen, covering a wide and diverse range of communities and activities which were seen as being vulnerable to radicalisation. The 24 case studies, or three per country of study, cover topics such as online Salafi communities, football fan clubs, female preachers, socio-economically marginalized communities, as well as positive case studies where the anger and frustration of youth is channeled in healthy and helpful ways.

The research was conducted in the eight countries, involving 39 focus group discussions and 74 interviews in the MENA region, and 42 interviews and 19 focus group discussions in the Balkans. The age group of the project, which is the age group of 12-30 was covered, but there were also exceptions based on the case study, therefore in the case of the two schools under one roof in Bosnia and Herzegovina second and third grade students were included. In other cases, such as the female preachers in Jordan, an older cohort was also included due to the particularity of the case. The research did not go without its challenges. As already identified in the micro level research, the topic of radicalisation and violent extremism is a highly sensitive topic in all of these countries, therefore there were issues in terms of access, for instance the inability to enter the prisons in Jordan, or issues of limited or biased information.

The data that the meso level research offers is rich and nuanced and offers us more insight into the dynamics of radicalisation and violent extremism. The authors of the MENA regional report, Tasnim Chirchi and Khaoula Ghribi, highlight a phenomenon they term "the triangle of anger". In their definition, the triangle of anger is constituted at "the intersection of the lack of economic development, youth unemployment and the ineffective role of education in tackling the consequences of the issues" (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2022:25) that affect youth in the region, that makes them vulnerable to radical ideologies and recruitment processes. Indeed, the data from the region reveals increasing frustration of young people with their political and economic opportunities, and a general sense of injustice and marginalisation. Even though the cases in the MENA region are quite diverse and involving different genders and age groups, the driver of economic deprivation is one of the leading drivers. Religion in the MENA region often gets noted as a factor contributing to the solution of radicalisation, namely the lack of proper religious educations is considered as one of the contexts which expands the availability of radical interpretations of religion. An additional issue is that the state itself is often seen as a source of violence in these countries, making them feel like they are there against youth rather than to protect them.

In the Balkans, the picture is different, with religion being seen as one of the main drivers of radicalisation. The driver of religion however, as in the micro level research, is often tied in with other drivers, including transnational dynamics, as in the case of Kosovo the global radical networks are considered important. The case of Bulgaria and North Macedonia, on the other hand, also show the increase of the influence of transnational conservative communities, which include conservative Orthodox groups, therefore having a wider interpretation of religion. Due to the multi-ethnic nature of the countries involved, ethnicity and the social marginalisation that often accompanies minority ethnic groups, also gives nuance to the results and makes them differ from the MENA region. Notably, the driver of territorial inequalities which is seen as prominent in the Balkans becomes so due to the marginalisation of certain ethnic and racial communities. In Bulgaria, the Roma community is especially vulnerable due to their socio-economic marginalisation as well as a target of hate speech. Dissatisfaction with the political systems and situation is something that the youth of the two regions share. There is frustration with political elites, but there is also frustration with the divisive systems in the Balkans, particularly that of Bosnia and Herzegovina as identified by the authors of the regional report, Damir Kapidžić, Muamer Hirkić et al.

The two regional reports also highlight two new potential drivers, drug use in the case of the MENA region, and nationalism, xenophobia and hate speech in the case of the Balkans. The use of drugs is seen in conjunction with the lack of cultural and leisure spaces for youth, which marks a lack of alternative spaces for young people. In the Balkans, nationalism was already identified as a potential additional driver at the macro level, but it becomes even more evident at the meso level, particularly with the football fan groups, as well as the conservative radical groups. As a result of the case studies, and the different groups of generally male collectivities such as football clubs, the issue of toxic masculinity, which was apparent in the Balkans at the macro level, has now also appeared at the meso level in the MENA, showing an additional aspect to the research. However, other than this aspect, the lens of gender is largely missing in the research. As the authors of the MENA regional report note, even in the case of the female preachers in Maan, Jordan, the case reflect the informal networks of education and social services enabled by the female preachers rather than highlighting gender issues or utilizing a gendered approach. Lastly, what remains highlighted in both regions at both level of analysis is the relevance of context, and more particularly the context created by the political volatility that marks both regions, as well as the limited opportunities that are available to youth.

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

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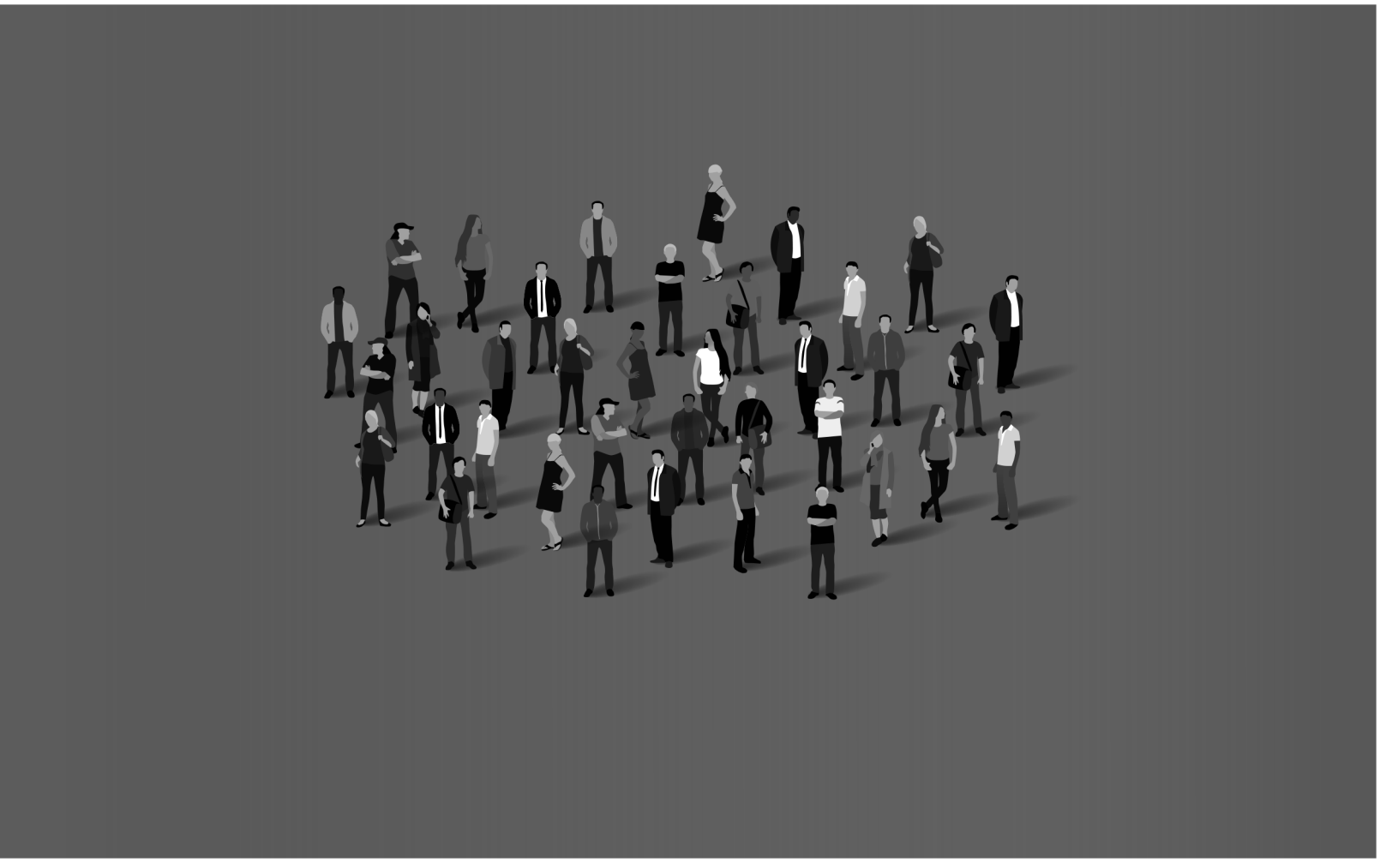

INTRODUCTION

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 (VE) 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 Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Balkans are studied in relation to seven pre-identified drivers: religion, economic deprivation, political issues (claims and grievances), culture and leisure opportunities, digital socialisation, territorial inequalities, and transnational dynamics. The project maps and investigates the 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.

Starting the analysis at the macro level to meso level and micro level, the findings inform each other; that is, the findings of each level are included at the next stage as a starting point and form an interactive background for the knowledge created. The project thus develops innovative research, bringing a 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-centred research on the topic, the project adopts a participatory and inclusive approach engaging communities/youth/women as significant stakeholders in building a better understanding of the dynamics of the radicalisation of youth in the Balkans and the MENA regions.

This report is the result of meso-qualitative research that was carried out on the territories of the different countries studied through in-depth interviews, as well as focus group discussions with young people from a variety of local communities and interviews with community leaders and local stakeholders. The current report summarises and compares the findings of the meso-level research activities throughout 12 case studies from the MENA region countries participating in the project: Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. The meso-level analysis is based on the study of social contexts, which reveal the interactions and interrelations of the individual with meso-institutions and backgrounds: family, neighbourhood, school, peer groups, religious and ethnic communities, and political parties. The case studies compared within this report were selected according to the relevance and the results of the macro analysis on the drivers of radicalisation. These case studies consist of "subnational community contexts" that allow research teams in each country to determine the social factors that drive VE patterns and the relationships between national, community and individual dimensions.

The first section of the report will explain the methodological framework and research activities used. This will include explanations of some limitations of the research, which are important for the reader to have in mind when considering the text. The following section will highlight the social, economic and political contexts of the case studies that will help the reader to understand the selection of case studies as well as the interpretation of the findings. The next section will be a broad analysis of the most relevant

drivers of radicalisation and VE that emerge from the findings of data collected at the meso level. This will include a comparative analysis highlighting the degree of convergence or difference between the results of the 12 case studies, but also the intersection between macro-level and meso-level findings. This comparative analysis will help formulate preliminary policy directions that will conclude the present report.

METHODOLOGY

The wide geographical scope of the project necessitated a flexible methodological framework. In the MENA region, this framework guided data collection and analysis of 12 case studies in relation to the subject matter of the research project. The case study methodology allows for a more refined and detailed understanding of social phenomena as well as observing social dynamics at the meso level of research and analysis. According to this methodological framework, the drivers interact with specific social contexts and take into consideration the multiplicity of stakeholders and narratives on radicalisation and VE in the countries covered by the project.

Research activities in the MENA region included 12 case studies, 39 focus groups, 74 in-depth interviews and 208 participants (young people and local stakeholders). The 12 case study reports, upon which this comparative analysis is based, presented an analysis of the meso-level drivers of VE in each studied local community. The qualitative field research was conducted by the Generations for Peace (GfP) in Jordan, University Moulay Ismail (UMI) in Morocco, the American University in Cairo (AUC) and Jasmine Foundation for Research and Communication (JFRC) in Tunisia over a period of five months (from November 2021 to March 2022).

Although CONNEKT focuses on young people between the ages of 12 and 30, there are case studies that deal with a lower or higher age range. This was due to the nature of the case studies selected – such as in one in Jordan focusing on "Female Preachers in Ma'an", where there were participants aged 60 years; or due to limited access to the core age group – such as another case study from Jordan focusing on "Refugees in Northern Jordan", where there were participants of 10 years of age. In addition, some case studies limited the age of the target groups from 18 to 30 and did not cover youth from 12 to 18 – such as the case study on the "Amal" organisation in Morocco.

Regarding the research activities, and to respond to fieldwork constraints and challenges, several partners had to adapt the planned activities and organise additional ones for optimal data collection. For instance, the case studies of Tunisia covered two types of activities, which are in-depth individual interviews (young people + local community leaders) and discussion groups and organised some female-only discussions in some of the case studies. They also separated the age groups for ethical reasons in order protect the younger group aged from 12 to 18 to allow them to better express themselves. Ethical considerations in terms of obtaining consent and/or assent from participants (or their parents/guardians) and data collection were respected for all the case studies.

To collect comparable research results from the 12 case studies, all the research teams used the same questionnaire, which they were, nonetheless, able to adapt to their contexts. The questionnaire contained nine sections of questions covering indicators of the social drivers and contexts tested by CONNEKT. The formulation of these questions was based on the results of the previous phase of the project (macro level). These questions were designed from the broadest societal field (local community) to the narrowest (family) and ended with a question directly about VE. As this stage of the CONNEKT project is centred on the identification of meso-level drivers, the research focused on the meso-level institutions (family, school, local

associations, local branches of political parties, local mosques, local social groups, etc.) with which individuals (young people) interact and their perceptions of these interactions, as well as their thoughts and perception on the drivers of radicalisation and VE in their context.

TABLE 1. Details of Research Activities by Country and Case Study

Country	Research Activity	Participants	
		Number	Nature (Age range)
Egypt	06 Discussion Groups	34	Young People (12-30 y.o.)
	09 In-depth Interviews	07	Local stakeholders
		02	Young People (19-21 y.o.)
Jordan	09 Discussion Groups	46	Young People (10-30 y.o.)
		19	Adults (33-60 y.o.)
Morocco	09 In-depth Interviews	09	Young People (18-30 y.o.)
	04 Discussion Groups	21	Young People (14-30 y.o.)
Tunisia	15 In-depth Interviews	10	Young People (13-21 y.o.)
		05	Local stakeholders
	07 Discussion Groups	55	Young People (13-30 y.o.)

CASE STUDIES

The meso 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 reports underline the important role of communities and explore the methodological practices which create meaningful spaces for dialogue and consultation.

Meso-level research necessitates that we deal with and define the concept of community. How did the project partners address and operationalise the concept of community? Community as an entity has characteristics that are: physical or non-physical, functional, and symbolic. Within CONNEKT, community is defined as a "social context", "cultural construct", and a "network of individual and collective interrelations". In this social context we observe: interactions between the members of the community; interactions between individuals and meso-level institutions that are significant for their lives and interactions (family, neighbourhood, school, local authorities, etc.); and collective practices for achieving common goals, both discursive and behavioural.

While community is usually defined and operationalised as linked to a geographical location, the concept of community in our project allows both for a geographical definition when applicable, and for conceptualising community regardless of physical location, when relevant. This definition of the social context means it is not specifically tied to geographical location in general, although it can be. However, in a context 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 resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, our project also covered digital communities (as part of observing the driver of digital socialisation). Undoubtedly, taking into consideration online communities made community detection and analysis more challenging and necessitated special methodological and ethical adaptations.

The methodological guidelines document shared with all research partners specified that the concept of community can be operationalised as a social context that allows the observation of collective and individual practices (behaviours) for achieving common goals. This social context is not specifically limited by geography. Moreover, it refers to a relational network focused on interactions, interrelations between individuals, individuals and meso-level institutions, as well as to discursive reality: perceptions, values and beliefs shared in communicative contexts. In this framework, the case studies consisted of "sub-national community-level contexts" that allowed the research teams to "determine the social factors that feed VE patterns and the relations between national, community and individual dimensions."[1] Each country team initially selected five

[1] Definition endorsed by the CONNEKT project in its methodological reference document.

case studies, i.e., five meso contexts in which they considered that research might bring relevant results. These were narrowed down to three final case studies per country.

The cases were selected according to the following criteria:

- Relevance: with respect to each national context: attention was given to those cases that were indicative for each country, seeking to bring added and improved understanding of the social contexts of radicalisation in the country.
- Comparability: the empirical content obtained from the case studies was selected on the basis of its potential for being susceptible to comparison between the different national realities. Although not all countries needed to cover all types of contexts and issues relevant to the project, there was a minimum comparability between more than one country.
- Feasibility: the case studies were selected taking into account the practical considerations related to fieldwork implementation.
- Prevention: each analysis contained insights that were relevant to further research on prevention.

The following table groups the case studies for the MENA countries studied, as well as their selection criteria or the drivers expected to be examined.

TABLE 2. Drivers and/or Social Contexts Expected to be Analysed by Country and Case Studies

Country	Case Studies	Selection Criteria
Jordan	Karak Area	· Economic deprivation · Territorial inequalities · Cultural and leisure activities · Employment and labour relations
	Refugees in Northern Jordan	· Education, leisure and cultural opportunities · Transnational dynamics · Digital socialisation · Cultural and leisure opportunities · Socialisation/education
	Female preachers in Ma'an	· Religion · Digital socialisation · Territorial inequalities · Transnational dynamics · Socialisation/education · Employment and labour relations · Urban and peri-urban spaces
Morocco	Amal Organisation	· Territorial inequalities · Socioeconomic situation
	Ultras Siempre Paloma football supporters	· Political issues · Economic deprivation · Digital socialisation · Cultural factors

	Al-Adl Wal Ihsane Association	· Religion
Tunisia	Feriana	· Transnational dynamics · Political issues · Cultural and leisure opportunities
	Hammam-Lif	· Frustration · Socialisation/education · Punitive justice system · Digital socialisation
	Sidi Abdelhamid	· Dissatisfaction with, and disconnect from, the political system · Socioeconomic deprivation · Religion
Egypt	Alwarraq Christian Community	· Religion (large Coptic Christian population) · Economic deprivation · Culture and leisure opportunities · Political grievances · Territorial inequalities
	Bahtim Informal Community	· Socioeconomic deprivation/grievances · Political grievances · Lack of official access to basic services
	Alexandria University	· Political context (violent confrontations between the youth and the security services + important political activism) · Socioeconomic grievances · Education

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT ON METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

We would like to highlight that data collection in the MENA region was an arduous task as the process was fraught with difficulties due to the variable limitations in access to communities. Below is the list of such limitations reported by the local partners:

- Target group members belonging to a religious group did not want to take part in the discussions and consultations (Morocco).
- Access to target group (prisoners) was denied by central authorities after initial acceptance (Jordan).
- Target group members were overcautious because of harsh security measures in the target community (Tunisia).
- Case study selection did not go through the participatory consultative process followed in choosing all the other case studies and hence did not benefit from the input of experts (Egypt).

It is also worth noting that the human rights/freedoms situation in the four countries is variable, allowing for different degrees of intellectual freedom and freedom of expression. This situation has an impact on

knowledge production traditions and the academic habitus[2] in terms of depth and degree of detail regarding the data collected in the four countries, as well as the clear connections established between contexts and the drivers considered. For example, in the Tunisian context, where democratisation has been underway for 10 years with the highest level of public freedoms out of the four countries being analysed, fieldwork has produced much more detailed and clear results as well as more engagement from civil society and official governmental institutions. This comes as a result of public policies and social issues having been the object of open public debate in the past years. The selection of case studies as well as the degree of local and official engagement have been subject to significant limitations in the three other countries, such as being denied access to the target group (prisoners in Jordan), difficulties getting clearance or permission to do fieldwork (Jordan and Egypt), and difficulties to communicate with some target groups (Morocco).

[2] Academic habitus refers here in the sense of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to the academic practices established in each context, in relation to dealing with institutions, collecting data and sharing information without fear of reprisals, addressing issues of social accountability of power structure, etc. The academic habitus lies at the intersection between knowledge and power. The concept of habitus in Bourdieu's approach is "a system of durable, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu 1977, original emphasis) that mediates between the subjective and objective world. It embodies the social memory of society or a societal field, on the one hand, and an individual's perception, thinking, and acting, on the other (El-Mafaalani, 2012: 76-77)" (Matthies and Torka, 2019: 348).

With regards to Tunisia, for example, CONNEKT's country report, while reporting the state of the art of research in Tunisia on radicalisation and VE has noted the following: "The academic world and the production of knowledge in the field of humanities were completely disconnected from the sphere of political action, apart from where individual professors may be called on by the regime to help draft laws or advise. Knowledge production was subject to rigorous and strict control, and prevented from challenging the authoritarian regime. This estrangement between the world of politics and academia did not disappear after the revolution. Tunisian academia's participation in shaping public policies remains modest, despite the quality, experience and expertise of many Tunisian professors in Tunisian universities" (Chirchi, Kherigi and Ghribi, 2020: 5).

For more on the concept of *habitus*, see *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), by Pierre Bourdieu.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Following the results of the macro-level research, the meso-level data collection focused on variable and different contexts of social interaction.[3]

CONTEXTS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

Socialisation/education: Educational contexts in society, both formal and informal, are mechanisms of transmission of ideas, values and identities.

Employment and labour relations: Unemployment as a factor that limits access to a decent level of social welfare.

Urban and peri-urban spaces: Urban areas where social interactions take place in a dimension of daily relationships.

Cultural and leisure activities: Artistic and cultural expressions as mechanisms of intervention and reflection on social realities. Leisure activities of a diverse nature (cultural, educational, sports, artistic, etc.) are specific contexts of social interaction for young people.

Punitive justice system: Institutions, mechanisms and practices that apply punitive measures on individuals who have committed crimes.

Ethnic community: The activation of ethnic belonging implies sharing a certain identity, which can transcend national borders.

Political and social participation: The dimensions in which a society articulates the participation of its citizens, whose deficit calls into question the democratic quality of that society.

The cases selected in the four MENA region countries were expected to help observe the interaction of several social factors in each of these contexts, which they have done to variable degrees.

Comparative analysis showed that these social contexts appear to be more significant in activating/deactivating the drivers of radicalisation. Moreover, the drivers being tested have accumulated effects that prevent us from considering any mechanical causality between one factor and the occurrence of VE. Thus, when addressing these various contexts in relation to understanding the drivers of VE on the meso level, the researchers aimed to answer the following questions:

- Which drivers are activated by which specific contexts?
- Which drivers are deactivated in specific contexts?
- Examples (transnational driver/strong local religiosity deactivating the attraction of an extremist

[3] These contexts of social interactions were identified and defined in agreement with the methodological document of Working Package 5 of the project, jointly produced by the Scientific Coordinator and the WP5 Coordinator (IEMed and the JFRC).

religious narrative; or the absence of political participation preventing the peaceful expression of a sense of marginalisation and injustice).

The MENA region contexts are marked by common social and economic challenges well reported and analysed in previous research. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report (2016) states that

> "[…] The region faces well-known challenges such as low economic diversification, an imperative need to improve education systems and infrastructure, complex political and governance scenarios and persistently high barriers to the economic and social wellbeing of important sections of society. The fragile and unstable situation in several MENA countries and the geopolitical tensions in the region have added to the complexity and urgency to addressing those challenges in a sustainable manner." (OECD, 2016: 3)

An important indicator of this situation was the wave of social and political protests that swept the region one decade ago (starting from the year 2011). Indeed, the problems and social and economic demands formulated by the youth of the region during the so-called Arab Spring have remained without real solutions in the past decades. For instance, regarding employment, the New World Bank Report (16 May 2022) highlights that "employment in MENA countries grew 1% per year on average within private sector firms, which is much lower than the 5% average among middle-income peers. Female labour force participation of 20% is the lowest in the world, along with the high youth unemployment rate estimated at 26%." The MENA region has indeed the largest youth population in the world, with more than half of the population under the age of 25 (Oxford Business Group, 2016: 25). The demographic weight of young people in the region could be a strong contribution for the region in terms of economic growth. However, existing research about youth in the region consistently reports a deep sense of lack of social justice in the absence of development. This is further exacerbated by an increasing sense of alienation and exclusion as they have very few opportunities for influencing decision-making processes in a context marked by a deepening gap between the political class and citizens. Unemployed, marginalised and unable to express their needs and opinions through a positive and active political participation, young people in the region show mounting levels of anger that could present high risks for the stability of the countries of the region (Berrada, 2022).

JORDAN

According to the report of the Jordanian research team (Generations for Peace) on meso-level drivers, economic deprivation is the most prominent driver impacting dynamics of VE in Jordan (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022). This factor was thus one of the most significant criteria of relevance for at least two of the case studies. The authors emphasise through the Al-Karak case study a "challenging socio-economic context (that) has left a mark on the city, and has and continues to be 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" (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022:9). The authors highlight that "Karak" city has historically (1989, 1996,

2021) been the scene of social and political protests (increase of fuel and commodities prices, bread riots, the Hirak) (Andoni, 1989). An example is the 11-day city wide curfew in light of the 1996 so-called "bread riots" (Andoni and Schwedler, 1996). The authors explain, moreover, that "since the emergence of the Arab Spring, Jordan has witnessed an active tribal Hirak – which translates to a social movement" (Economic Research Forum, 2021), and claim that "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"(Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022: 9).

The authors highlight the fact that the tribes are the most significant actor in the city or as they put it "the most important social political structure in the governorate" (Gubser, 1985, cited in Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022: 9). In this context, the authors see the possibility of examining the impact of drivers such as political grievances, or educational, leisure, and cultural opportunities (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022). In addition to this, the city of Karak provides the authors with the possibility of examining the role of religion thanks to its "historical record of Christian-Muslim's peaceful coexistence and interdependence" (Luck, 2017, cited in Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022: 9). They highlight that this case study will help analyse "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" (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022: 9).

The second case study in Jordan (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal, and Štikovac-Clark, 2022) focuses on Syrian refugee camps.[4] The authors emphasise that although "field work in Jordan negates any strong correlation between Syrian refugee youth and violent extremism (VE) (Bondokji, Wilkinson and Aghabi, 2016) (…) Jordanian authorities have captured members of a Daesh cell that attacked a Jordanian army post near Rukban camp in 2016 (Al-Khitan, 2017)" (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022: 28-29). The authors further explain that "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" (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022:30). They document the perceptions of Syrian refugees on the impacts of "the shortage of opportunities" and how that shortage impacts on their educational and employment prospects as well as their social integration.

The third case study focuses on the women preachers in Maan, and deals with the state management of the religious sphere where they identify "a loose structure in which informal preachers operate" (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022: 56). According to the research team in Jordan, these female preachers have direct access to families and youth formally and informally. The researchers explain that this case study was selected due to the potential that informal preachers have for negatively influencing youth in a climate of frustration with socioeconomic conditions in Ma'an and institutional negligence of their

[4] Jordan hosts over 1.3 million Syrian refugees – nearly 20% of the country's population (UNHCR, 2022). As of March 2022, there were 674,268 Syrian refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with Amman, Mafraq, and Irbid governorates in the north of the country hosting the largest numbers (UNHCR, 2022). Of these, 130,000 live in Za'atari, Emirates Jordanian Camp, and Azraq Camp (UNHCR, 2022). 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.

role. The Jordanian city of Ma'an, located 220 km south of Amman, has many reasons to stand out in its national context. The southern city, surrounded by endless hot and dusty vistas, has been described by international media (such as The Economist and Al Jazeera) as "a hotbed of ISIS" (cited in Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022). According to the Jordanian government, Ma'an has the highest recorded unemployment rate in the country, averaging almost 17%, with figures believed to be closer to 30% for those under 25. It is also the poorest governorate in the country, where many live below the poverty line (Osborne, 2017). In addition, Ma'an has a strong tribal heritage and a history of disagreements with the government, which show the dissatisfaction that the people of Ma'an have with formal state institutions.

EGYPT

The research team from the American University in Cairo (UAC) selected three cases studies in line with the research findings of the Egypt Country Paper on the macro-level drivers. This paper "highlighted the degree to which poverty and marginalisation are directly linked to poor education, unemployment and the vulnerabilities and exposures that potentially influence an individual's perceptions and inclinations towards religious radicalisation and VE activities. These marginalised communities (whether urban informal areas or impoverished villages and towns in the mainland or the borderlands) are rife with criminal activities (drug trafficking/drug use/theft etc.)." Within these contexts, the research team in Egypt focuses on the role of religious-social and educational organisations which are active in deprived areas provided for the local communities in the absence of state support. These organisations have become "an integral substitute welfare system for residents in socio-economically deprived areas who lacked sufficient access to state resources" (Kassem, 2023). According to the authors, "many of these communities, particularly those in the inner cities are classified as 'informal settlements'... not officially recognised by the state and typically lack, and are even denied, basic services and city infrastructure" with "a constant risk of eviction, poverty related health problems, high crime rates and a high exposure to domestic as well as criminal violence" (Kassem, 2023).

The research team examines the impacts of the government's crackdown on these organisations since 2013 and the vulnerability of youth to radical narratives in a context marked by the absence of any socioeconomic or educational alternative. The researchers focus for instance on Bahtim, which is located 30 kilometres north of Cairo, in the larger district of Shubra el-Kheima. Over the past 40 years, Shubra el-Kheima rapidly transitioned from a largely agricultural to an urban area due to the growth of industrialisation and urbanisation. The researchers explain that "in the case study of Bahtim, the shut-down of all Islamist-related meso-level institutions, appears to have created a void that has reshaped the dynamics of this informal community and the nature of violence and drivers within it" (Kassem, 2023).

The research team in Egypt also examines the case study of El-Warraq which is "an informal settlement in the governorate of Giza, part of Greater Cairo... (with) a high unemployment rate and a low level of educational achievements (Shaheen, 2012)" (Kassem, 2023). Another characteristic of Al-Warraq is that it hosts a large population of Coptic Christians. Within this social framework, the case study examines the role of religion, or rather the positive role of religion in preventing radicalisation and strengthening both the individual and community resilience.

The third case study in Egypt focused on the context of Alexandria University, which was the scene of frequent youth protests. The research team interviews a group of students from the Alexandria University where students have been known to be highly politicised before 2014. The research team addresses their perceptions of the context of social interaction in the targeted and socio-economically deprived informal community (which) affects the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (economic deprivation, social exclusion) (Kassem, 2023).

TUNISIA

In Tunisia, the research team of the Jasmine Foundation selected the three case studies of Hammam-Lif, Feriana and Sidi Abdelhamid based on macro-level research findings. These three popular regions are among the areas where the drivers of VE are present. The first case study focuses on Hammam-Lif, which is a northern suburb of the capital suffering from economic and social marginalisation. Its underprivileged neighbourhoods experience a high level of crime and delinquency among young people. Hammam-Lif is also one of the neighbourhoods where VE networks erupted in Tunisia before 2011. In 2006, Tunisian security forces arrested several young people accused of having joined terrorist groups involved in the attacks of Soliman in 2007, and the majority of those accused came from Hammam-Lif, the same neighbourhood that was home to Abu Yadh, the leader of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (CSIS, 2016, cited in Chirchi, Kherigi and Ghribi, 2020: 3). Several interlocutors from the interviews identified youth between the ages of 16-30 in Hammam-Lif as particularly vulnerable to the threat of VE, especially unemployed youth or those living in poor neighbourhoods and coming from a vulnerable socioeconomic situation.

The second case study focuses on Feriana, which is a sub-governorate of 36,504 inhabitants in the Western south of Kasserine along the Algerian border. In 2015, the poverty rate in Feriana (36.9%) was more than twice as high as the national rate (15.2%), while the youth (15-29 years old) unemployment rate is extremely high at 60.79% (INS, 2020, cited in Chirchi, Aloui and Ghribi, 2022). Moreover, other socioeconomic indicators show that youth have limited access to education and social and cultural activities. The Tunisian research team chose to focus on this case study because of Feriana's proximity to the mountainous border area with Algeria, which may constitute a vulnerability, given the presence of VEOs and their activity linked to smuggling. Militant groups as well as Tunisian and Algerian paramilitary groups have taken refuge in this border area. These groups are closely linked by their networks of fighters and the smuggling economy. The authors also highlight the relatively high secondary school dropout rate in Feriana. Namely, in 2017, 181 out of 1,955 students (almost 10%) dropped out of school. The authors also note a significant lack of spaces for youth to express themselves or explore their talents (according to INS statistics, from 2007 to 2018, the number of youth centres across Kasserine governorate ranged from 10 to 12) (ODCO, 2017).

The macro-level research findings in Tunisia have already shown that territorial inequalities are at the heart of what the authors of the macro-level research papers described as the triangle of underdevelopment, economic and political grievances and regional disparities. As the authors highlight, "this triangle has emerged as a major driver of both criminal violence and VE. The geographical map of developmental

indicators is identical to that of the territorial distribution of networks and pockets of VE. The areas with low developmental indicators, employment rates and infrastructure are the same areas with high rates of crime, street violence and school dropouts" (Chirchi, 2021: 17). According to this model, the internal regions in Tunisia suffer from deep and long-standing economic grievances and lack of opportunities, which have created a high level of vulnerability to radicalisation in terms of high-level acceptance of radical narratives in the marginalised communities in the interior regions of Tunisia.

The third case study selected by the Tunisian research team is the delegation[5] of Sidi Abdelhamid, which is situated in the Sousse governorate and has a total population of 52,787. Although most research findings point out to the interior regions as zones of vulnerability to radicalisation and VE, the research team chooses this delegation situated in the coastal city of Sousse because it presents an interesting social-economic polarisation. Namely, while the delegation is within a prosperous city offering social and economic opportunities, there are also urban and peri-urban[6] dynamics of informality and marginalisation of a significant number of communities producing similar dynamics of radicalisation as in Tunis, the capital. The governorate of Sousse produced 7% of Tunisian foreign fighters, and out of those, 89% came from the delegation of Sidi Abdelhamid. There are some concerns that since the fall of ISIS, these foreign fighters could return and pose a renewed threat.

Youth aged between 20 and 29 years represent 19.04% of the population of Sidi Abdelhamid. They also represent a large portion of the unemployed population, as over 52% of youth in general, and 18% of undergraduate youth, are unemployed. Early school dropout is a key area of concern for youth since Sidi Abdelhamid. Socioeconomic grievances that emerge from the combination of economic hardships with real or perceived relative deprivation and marginalisation, grievances tied to unemployment and deteriorating economic conditions, are key sources of vulnerability in Sidi Abdelhamid, which are especially problematic when combined with a strong sense of marginalisation and relative deprivation when compared with other better-off areas in the governorate.

MOROCCO

In Morocco, the research team of the University of Moulay Ismail selected three case studies to examine the meso-level dynamics of radicalisation and VE (Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022). Each case study focuses on a major issue related to radicalisation. Thus, one of the case studies is focused on the role of religion, through attempts to reach out to the group Al-Adl Wal Ihsane. The team explains that the importance of their case study "lies in the role of this politico-religious group in the socialisation of young people regarding ideology" (Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022: 29). The researchers state that since its creation, this group "tried to found Dawlat khilafa (a caliphate state) and do(es) not recognise the legitimacy of Imarat Muminin (the position of Commander of the Faithful) in Morocco" (Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022: 112). At the core of this issue lies an ideological as a well as a political tension between what the

[5] Delegations are the second level of administrative divisions in Tunisia, the first being governorates, and the third being sectors.

[6] Peri-urban areas are zones of transition from rural to urban land uses located between the outer limits of urban and regional centres and the rural environment. For more, see *Peri-Urban Landscapes; Water, Food and Environmental Security* (UNESCO, 2014).

researchers identify as "the Islam of the state" and "the Islam practised by the group". According to the Moroccan research team, "the politico-religious movement has a history of conflict with the Moroccan state" and is excluded "from participation in political activities at the national level" (Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022: 29). They state that focusing on this case study "can contribute to the understanding of the ideology of the group and its relationship with the radicalisation of young Moroccans" (Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022: 29).

The second case study focuses on a football fan club (the Ultras) and its members' perceptions of VE. This case study offers an interesting possibility of comparing the role of football fan clubs in the MENA region but also in the Balkans. The Ultras are active in the northern region of Morocco located in the city of Tetouan. This group is a platform for youth to express their anger and conflict with political institutions, and to formulate their demands for rights (Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022). These groups adopt a rhetoric fraught with violence, which is inspired by other football groups in the region, most notably the Egyptian Ultras group (Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022). Nonetheless, the researchers report that the perception of its members is that the group's activities work to improve the economic and social conditions of youth, locally and regionally.

As for the third case study, it focuses on the perceptions of a group of youths active in an association called Amal, which operates in the north of Morocco. This group highlights youth issues such as their perception of youth economic and social marginalisation (exclusion) from all human rights as well as the absence of socio-cultural spaces for young people in some neighbourhoods as a driver of radicalisation and VE. The organisation's activity is focused especially in the field of combating violence against women. Amal also works in cooperation with other organisations to promote human rights in Morocco. The association involves young people as key actors in carrying out its activities at the level of the Fez-Meknes region, as well as at the national level. According to the research team, Amal provides the opportunity for these young people to use effective methods to transform situations of violence into alternative discourses of tolerance and acceptance of different social groups.

POLITICAL SYSTEMS

With regards to political systems, the four countries under study present significant differences: Jordan and Morocco are constitutional monarchies, while Tunisia and Egypt are constitutional republics. Tunisia had a republican regime with a semi-parliamentary system until 2021 while Egypt has a semi-presidential regime. Egypt and Tunisia experienced two popular revolutions during the so-called Arab Spring that the region witnessed in 2011. Egypt engaged in a short-lived democratic transition before experiencing a coup d'état carried out by the military in 2013. Tunisia experienced the longest democratic transition in the region (2011-2021) before facing a political turning point in July 2021, when the President of the Republic dissolved the elected parliament and suspended the work of the revolutionary Constitution, which was unanimously approved by the Constituent Assembly. Since July 2021, the President of the Republic has held all powers, announcing the return of a presidential system based on the authority of a single individual. The new political system was confirmed in the 2022 Constitution, which was endorsed by the President and submitted to a popular referendum.

These political systems influence the contexts and drivers tested in the research implemented by the CONNEKT project. The most remarkable common characteristic between all these political systems is the dissatisfaction of young people with the political, economic and social conditions. In addition, young people are also frustrated with their political leaders based on their expectations regarding the choices that their leaders make and feelings of injustice and marginalisation by their states (main political actor). For example, the research findings confirmed that young people from Tunisia and Egypt especially, and to some degree in Jordan (protest in Karak) and Morocco (football fans' club), have a tense relationship with police officers who represent the symbol of the state on the ground, in addition to the deep feeling of exclusion expressed by youth. Although the case studies do not all make explicit reference to the political system, they do provide important background for their findings.

For instance, the Jordanian research team highlights political riots and protest, which are central in the case of Al-Karak, as well as the administrative and procedural limitations to the Syrian refugees' status, but also emphasise the state initiatives for their social integration. The Moroccan case study of the group Al-Adl Wal Ihsane focuses on a group that refuses to take part in the political processes. As for the association "Amal", youth express their frustration with their exclusion and give it a political character by mentioning their deprivation from human rights. Moreover, in the discussion on the drivers of violence, they identify the state as a source of violence.

In Egypt, the researchers point out the tense political context in Alexandria, where the students played a central role, and highlight consequences of the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Alexandria and Bahtim. As for the case on the Christian community of Al-Warraq, they mention the youth perception of political grievances they are experiencing as a religious minority. With regards to Tunisia, we find that the political context is highly present. The case studies of Hammam-Lif, Feriana and Sidi Abdelhamid reveal strong historical narratives of regional inequalities as well as long-standing economic, social and political grievances that are central in local discourses. The role of the state and perceptions of public institutions, and services are central in these discourses. Thus, they will be linked to the perceptions of social injustice and the social, economic and political grievances driving the radicalisation of youth in Tunisia.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

The 12 case studies in the MENA region share the characteristics of scarcity of economic and social opportunities for youth. The youth participating in research activities in different case studies said that the state did not provide them with equal economic opportunities, and they perceived discrimination between social classes or between the regions in which they live and other regions of the country. Young people also explained, in most of the case studies, that they suffered from multidimensional exclusion: social, economic and political. Young people cited a deep lack of cultural, leisure and educational opportunities in their local contexts. Moreover, they pointed out that the state does not give them the opportunity to participate in building local public policies.

In the examined social contexts of the region, economic deprivation appears a central driver that may potentially lead to the radicalisation of youth and to VE in connection with the other factors, whether directly

or indirectly. There is consensus throughout the region that the economic situation is closely related to other significant problems such as poor-quality education and unemployment. These interrelated conditions heavily contribute to heightened perceptions of social inequalities and relative deprivation, as well as vulnerabilities that have the potential of leading to resentment, radicalisation, and other kinds of violence.

THE DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM AT THE MESO-LEVEL

In the debate on whether ideological or contextual factors cause the appeal of radical narratives in the MENA region and the Balkans, the project has opted for not prioritising one type of factor over the other, but rather to consider the complexity of the recruitment processes in innovative ways by intertwining the ideological and contextual factors. The project aimed to examine how this complex interaction between these factors works in differentiated ways according to the examined specific/local social contexts. Overall, the project results confirm the important role of contextual factors in activating/deactivating the drivers of radicalisation. Contextual factors seem to be prominent in nearly all the case studies. Thus, the role of religion as a push factor of radicalisation and VE appears to be much more nuanced than previously supposed, and especially much less mechanical and straightforward. Religion seems also to play variable roles in the eyes of the participants of the research, both as a possible driving factor and as a resilience factor.

Moreover, although transnational push factors of radicalisation appear to be present and real, as highlighted within the macro-level analysis (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal, and Štikovac-Clark, 2021; Mouna, Errifaiy and Fadil, 2021; and Errifaiy, 2021a, Chirchi et al., 2021; Kassem, 2021, and Mouna and Errifaiy, 2021b), when we explore the different social contexts examined in the region, the local push factors appear to have a more significant role in the recruitment processes. These local factors intersect with each other as well as with the socio-political local contexts, as will be further explored in this report. The dominance of the local context confirms what has been emphasised by David Sterman and Nate Rosenblatt in "All Jihad is Local", where they state that "grand theories on the causes of radicalization miss essential local differences. While regional patterns exist, jihadist recruitment draws upon specific local dynamics that vary even within the two regions examined here. There are no shortcuts to countering the appeal of ISIS and related groups: Local contexts must be properly understood to formulate effective counterterrorism and counter-radicalization responses" (Sterman and Rosenblatt, 2018: 4).

The meso-level and macro-level research results also revealed factors that the project did not consider at the beginning such as the role of alternative socialisation platforms like football teams' fan clubs as well as online groups in the radicalisation of youth. In Tunisia, radical networks have sought to mobilise a well-known football fan group in Hammam-Lif as an efficient recruitment vehicle (before 2011) using youth anger against perceived deprivation and marginalisation. In Morocco, the football fan group analysed appears to be both potentially contributing to the radicalisation of youth as well as offering the possibility of channelling youth violence towards more constructive expression of anger through sports and civic participation. Only a few case studies focused on dynamics involving gender and gender issues.

POINT OF CONVERGENCE

The case studies show how youth in the MENA region understand radicalisation and its drivers. The country reports detail the economic, psychological, political and social drivers affecting the radicalisation of youth. Comparative analysis of the cases and the drivers in the four different countries shows that there are common patterns regarding youth and radicalisation drivers: the significant role of local contexts as contributing to the marginalisation of youth, the common sense of marginalisation and perceived injustice, a multi-dimensional exclusion of youth illustrated by the lack of opportunities for employment, and the decreasing role of education in ensuring social mobility. This, in turn, causes pressing social and economic grievances as well as mounting levels of anger and frustration with the established political structures. This context of alienation, anger and frustration has a strong impact on the acceptance of radical narratives by individuals and especially youth.

We note that the results of the 12 case studies all share the factors of lack of economic opportunities, low political participation of young people and lack of access to education/high levels of drop-outs, as well as lack of access to culture and entertainment opportunities. The factors of inequality between the regions within the different countries, transnational dynamics and the feeling of injustice and marginalisation are present in approximately more than 70% in the case studies analysed.

Transnational Dynamics

The MENA region case study reports show that **transnational dynamics** are active in the countries studied but **local grievances** are much more important. **Transnational dynamics gain salience only in conjunction with local grievances.** For instance, there is an objective confluence between them as shown by the case study of Feriana in **Tunisia** (Chirchi, Aloui and Ghribi, 2022), where the geographical position of the region combined with its deep multi-dimensional marginalisation and deprivation is what makes it a hub for radicalisation networks in the country.

The Jordanian research team also highlights the importance of the local grievances in interaction with transnational dynamics as a driver of VE in the case study on Syrian refugees. These dynamics stem from the impact of digital socialisation on articulating a deep sense of victimhood among refugees. According to the researchers, digital social networks feed widespread victimisation narratives and perspectives of injustice as they increase the spread of tragic field realities for refugees in Syria (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2022: 24), also making them vulnerable to radicalised narratives.

A Common Sense of Marginalisation and Injustice

The perceptions of **relative economic deprivation** and social exclusion appear to be amongst the main factors of vulnerability at the local level. Although already clear in the macro-level analysis, meso-level research details help capture **a common and strong sense of marginalisation and injustice.** For instance, in Feriana, in "response to the absence of economic opportunities and basic services or any development initiatives by the central state for more than six decades, participants often expressed

many times their deep feelings of resentment against the state" (Chirchi, Aloui and Ghribi, 2022). Economic deprivation is also mentioned in several other reports as a major concern for the youth in the region (Egypt, Morocco and Jordan).

Specifically, young people in the region feel **frustrated** with perceived **social injustice** (Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan), **corruption** (Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco) and **deep political and social and economic marginalisation** (Tunisia, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt) due to the lack of political and economic development in their respective contexts. They feel **marginalised, excluded and disempowered.** This disempowerment is **deeper in contexts where political and civic participation is more limited,** which highlights the **lack of civic and political participation** among youth in different degrees across the region and most specifically highlighted in the Tunisian case studies. These factors are interconnected and their interaction can be best described as the "triangle of anger" connecting the lack of economic development with issues of education and unemployment in the MENA region.

Triangle of Anger: Development, Employment and Education

The intersection of **the lack of economic development, youth unemployment and the ineffective role of education** in tackling the consequences of the issues around them represents what we can call **"a triangle of anger"**, where young people's vulnerability is formed and violent discourse is fuelled by the activation of recruitment networks. This triangle is motivated by the weakness of the state in providing public services, in addition to issues in providing quality education particularly observed in the absence or weak presence of critical thinking in the educational programmes.

This **pattern** confirms findings from previous research: "Most provinces in North Africa with high rates of ISIS fighter recruitment were economically and politically marginalized. They had high rates of underemployment, lack of political representation and poor access to social services compared to their national contexts. The geographic origins of ISIS recruits from North Africa suggest the group took advantage of long-standing frustrations in marginalized communities to mobilize fighters" (Sterman and Rosenblatt, 2018: 5). More specifically, the role of education appears to be central in relation to the drivers of radicalisation. It is also worth noting that research by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, n.d.) and other (Boudihaj and Sahli, 2022) acknowledge that the contexts and conditions of education in the countries of the MENA region share several commonalities, including the poor-quality education (measured by the poor rating international assessments of learning outcomes, such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS), the mismatch between skills and labour market requirements, the inflexible learning opportunities, and the weak education system.

In the case studies of Tunisia, we find a relationship between education and social class discrimination associated with territorial inequalities. Adolescents and young adults participating in the research activities considered that schools in highly populated neighbourhoods such as Hammam-Lif, and Sidi Abdel Hamid and internal regions such as Feriana suffer from a lack of capabilities and equipment, in addition to the lack of clubs and cultural and leisure activities. Interlocutors from these neighbourhoods said that they feel that the state discriminates against poor areas in comparison with schools in upscale neighbourhoods and coastal regions. Furthermore, the participants in discussion groups in the case study of Hammam-Lif stated that there is no reason for them to continue their education, as "the education system no longer offers a real

chance of social mobility" (Chirchi, Aloui and Ghribi, 2022). Conversely, we find that the Syrian refugees in Jordan view access to education as a condition for "social mobility and for a career aspiration" (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022). In Jordan, there is a reference to difficulties in accessing educational opportunities due to a shortage of schools in non-urban areas, especially in the case of Syrian refugees who are residents in remote camps.

As a common thread between the different MENA countries involved in the CONNEKT research, there is an indication in most of the case studies of the high cost of education as families bear the bulk of education-related expenses with the retreat of the role of the state to ensure equal access to quality education for all. Several of the input reports indicate a deterioration of the quality of public education and the necessity of activating its role in the prevention of radicalisation on a societal level through good quality education (critical thinking, citizenship, life skills, etc.) that is more accessible to all. In addition, findings from case studies from both Tunisia and Egypt highlight the problem of early school dropouts, which is often caused by the difficult economic conditions of families in Egypt (case study Community Al Warraq) or scarcity of job opportunities for university degree holders in Tunisia (case study Community of Feriana). Many young people and adolescents in Tunisia leave school early because they are persuaded that even the most qualified in their fields of study are at risk of being unemployed. These sentiments are in line with research findings under the MENA-OECD Investment Program (O'Sullivan, Rey and Mendez, 2011) which supported the idea that "a striking feature of unemployment in MENA is that it is also high among the most educated: over 43 percent of those with tertiary education are unemployed in Saudi Arabia; 22 percent in Morocco; 14 percent in Tunisia; and over 11 percent in Algeria" (O'Sullivan, Rey and Mendez, 2011: 4).

In the reports of Tunisia and Morocco, we find that violence is practised in educational spaces by the educational staff or colleagues. It is a kind of socialisation that leads to the normalisation of violence in schools causing a deepening of the crisis of the education system in the countries of the region, as these spaces produce meanings that are opposite to those expected from them such as learning how to peacefully resolve conflict through developing the skills of dialogue and critical thinking. In Tunisia, young participants reported that resorting to violence is the only way to protect oneself as a student as the adults do not provide any sort of protection for those who are victims of violence and bullying at school (Chirchi, Aloui and Ghribi, 2022).

In the same context, the education systems in the region fail to provide students with the necessary practical skills that would help raise their employment opportunities and better navigate their paths through life (theoretical teaching versus life skills). The 2018 World Bank report on education in MENA countries indicated that these countries present a gap in terms of the Human Capital Index (HCI), which measures how countries are preparing their citizens for a productive future (El-Kogali and Jrafft, 2020). Furthermore, a UNICEF study (n.d.) stresses that in the MENA region "education systems are failing, leaving learners without the skills they need for a prosperous future."

In the case of the study on Al-Adl Wal Ihsane in Morocco, the participants mentioned that religion is among the areas that have been undervalued in recent years in the educational curricula. This has led adolescents to be easily indoctrinated by extremist religious discourses, including those leading them

to be radicalised both religiously and politically.[7] Some participants in the case of Feriana in Tunisia also indicated that educational curricula, at all levels of education, do not provide them with sufficient knowledge about religion that would protect them from the religious ideas used by violent groups when recruiting members. Participants in some case studies in Egypt[8] and Tunisia mentioned that the constructive meanings produced by education and the life skills with which educational curricula equip young people play a pivotal role in preventing involvement in extremism and VE. It is more difficult to recruit young people who are trained in analysis, critical thinking, and the meanings of tolerance and dialogue.

Urbanisation, Youth and Protest

The dynamics engaged by the triangle described above are more evident in the urban contexts throughout the case studies examined in the MENA region. In the cases of Hammam-Lif and Sidi Abdelhamid, which are part of the Tunisian capital's urban suburbs and those of the second largest city, Sousse, respectively, it was found that there are deep disparities in infrastructure, economic opportunities and services between each of these urban centres (Tunis and Sousse) and their neighbourhoods. These disparities provide fertile ground for perceptions of marginalisation and injustice, and exacerbate young people's sense of exclusion from economic, political and social circles, despite the geographical and social proximity of the centre of strength (the capital). All of these factors contribute to fuelling violence in these urban suburbs and neighbourhoods.

In the case study reports, the urban setting of the case study is highlighted as a significant social context in two different ways in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan. The urban context is similar in the reports of Tunisia (Hammam-Lif and Sidi Abdel Hamid) and of Egypt (Bahtim). In Egypt, in areas adjacent to the capital, researchers said that communities are more vulnerable to violence and drug use, and they are generally hotbeds of extremist groups. In the cases of Tunisia's and Egypt's neighbourhoods or areas where there is no urban security, residents, especially youth, suffer from social stigma that increases the tension in their relationship with the state and their anger at its policies that exclude them from participation and deprive them of basic rights. In Jordan, the urban context mentioned by the research concerns the Syrian refugee camps, especially the remote camps where basic services are scarce and access to the necessary facilities is difficult.

In this respect, the demographic configuration is a very important variable that can be linked to both peaceful and violent protests in these countries. Urbanisation and the "youth bulge" are one of the predictors of protest. According to Sawyer et al. (2022: 125) "demographic changes associated with the transformation from traditional to advanced economies are the basis for many of today's theories of violent and non-violent protest formation." They add that "both levels of urbanization and the size of

[7] "The speakers believe that the religious became a secondary element in the education 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' (female participant, online in-depth interview). They believe that the absence of this element in school programs pushes young people to practice and exercise several forms of violence" (Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022: 36).

[8] The report of the Al Warraq community describes the following: "It was discovered that radical (religious) beliefs can be more easily and unquestionably accepted as the truth by people due to the lack of independent and critical thinking in the educational process, the marginalization of independent creativity, and a lack of cultural awareness. As a result, the type and quality of education and cultural opportunities available to the youth directly affect the youth's ability to pursue their employment aspirations and steer clear of radicalisation" (Kassem, 2023).

the 'youth bulge' have shown to be reliable measures for predicting protest events in a country" (Sawyer et al., 2022: 125). Rather than being the signs of "ideological regression" or indoctrination "these two processes result from modernization" (Sawyer et al., 2022: 125). They emphasise that "it seems logical to hypothesize that the combined effect of the rise in urbanization and the increase in the youth population, urban youth bulge, would be a more relevant predictor for protests" (Sawyer et al., 2022: 125). As previously highlighted, the percentages of youth in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan correspond to this predictor and the level of youth protest also corresponds to the authors' hypothesis.

Fieldwork research activities also pointed out unemployment and poverty as one of the main push factors relevant to radicalisation. The implications of these factors are not, however, limited to economic demands. Unemployment is at the heart of a social context marked by a multi-dimensional exclusion affecting youth identity and social roles. This means that economic exclusion also becomes cultural and political exclusion, which exacerbates feelings of alienation and frustration, and cause a loss of the sense of belonging. This deep alienation pushes young people to seek alternatives for socialisation and take on pathological forms of alternative belonging: belonging to the margins, belonging to underground culture, to gangs and criminal groups, to football fandom, and closed online groups. These contextual factors thus facilitate adopting radical ideas and extremist ideological responses to their frustrations. This shows that rather than being explained only by ideology and indoctrination, radicalisation is better understood contextually, which sheds a different light on the role of religion.

Religion

While at the macro level, religion was the main driver being addressed in several country reports, meso-level research through the case studies shows a more nuanced and refined analysis of the role of religion. Namely, religion is identified as a preventive factor more than a driver and more emphasis is given to the lack of religious education as an explanation of the acceptance of radical religious narratives. The role of religion as a push factor is indeed where we observe crucial differences between the macro and meso level. While at the macro level religion is the main driver being addressed in several of the national contexts (Egypt, Jordan, Morocco), it is rather the lack of religious education that the participants invoked as what makes young people vulnerable to radicalisation (Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia). Moreover, religion is often seen as a preventing factor rather than a causing factor.

The interlocutors in the various case studies highlight that religion is used as any set of other ideas that can be used as a vehicle for such expression of grievances. Thus, from their point of view, religion appears as always attached and activated in contact with other drivers and not on its own. A complex relation between psychological, social and economic push factors is discussed in several previous research studies (Zoghlami and Toumi, 2019; Ayari, 2021). The youth in the studied contexts seem to seek religious expression of their frustration or are being manipulated through some religious ideas. VE networks tap into this frustration to co-opt and recruit young people by offering them symbols of social power and social recognition, alternative belonging to a group, money, social support, as well as a sense of agency in the face of deep social disabling alienation.

Digital socialisation

Macro-level research has identified social media as an important arena for the recruitment of youth in the MENA region. The meso-level case studies have further helped understand how and why this happens. Some of the results of the case studies in the MENA region (Tunisia: Hammam-Lif and Feriana) help refine the understanding of the role of digital socialisation in the radicalisation of youth. Digital platforms are not by themselves the source of radicalisation but facilitate recruitment and the influence of radical narratives. In fact, young people who lack critical judgement and are already vulnerable because of their social and economic contexts are the ones who have been identified by the participants as more prone to radicalisation online. In addition, young people suffering from a lack of social integration and recognition seek and find it online in closed groups where they are prey to radicalisation.

Several of the reports show that radicalisation is nurtured and bred through social media but it does not create the phenomenon. It exploits an existing vulnerability, as was evident in the Tunisian case studies of Sidi Abdelhamid and Hammam-Lif as well as the Jordanian study on refugees. For instance, in Sidi Abdelhamid's case study, it was found that "the religious extremist discourse mobilises the social and economic grievances of the poor neighbourhoods in Sousse to nurture their feelings of marginalisation and class polarisation through religious polarisation that is made easier through digital networks and the recycling of old extremist networks (Al Qaeda) for new mobilisations" (Chirchi, Aloui and Ghribi, 2022). In Jordan, the research team reports that discussion with urban Syrian refugees highlighted the risks of digital socialisation in radicalising youth. During a 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" (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022: 40). However, during the discussion, the participants emphasised that not all young people fall prey to extremist religious narratives online. They stated that youth are immunised or protected when they have "firm upbringing and a more solid religious teaching and beliefs" (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022: 40).

In addition, social media appeared to have a dual role: it can be a facilitator of radicalisation but also a space for learning and growth for youth (for example, Hammam-Lif in Tunisia). In the case study of Hammam-Lif, youth digital activities appeared to be "structured through regular and purposeful participation in well-organized closed groups where they follow and pursue objectives and topics of their interest" (Chirchi, Aloui, and Ghribi, 2022). They pursue several interests through these groups (learning new skills, gaming, music and art, hearing about life stories of inspiring influencers, etc.) and they also manage to broaden their social networks. However, the closed group mentality contributes to "closing off their horizons in terms of culture, tolerance and openness to what is different as they cultivate mono-cultural thinking and a closed group identity" (Chirchi, Aloui, and Ghribi, 2022). This can make them ready to accept extreme ideas when emanating from within their closed group. At the same time, these closed groups are fertile ground for the proliferation of all kinds on non-moderated ideas and excesses that are used by the extremist groups for recruitment, as highlighted by participants from Sidi Abdelhamid in Tunisia, who noted that, while the Salafi discourse has been weakened in the public space, it proliferates on social media in closed groups, where young people are an easy prey.

Drugs and VE

Regarding the three countries of the region, namely Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, we find that the issue of drug use among young people is highlighted in several of the reports. The authors link the use of drugs to the limited spaces and opportunities for entertainment and culture, the difficult social and economic conditions, and sometimes the lack of educational level. The absence of spaces for building constructive meanings (such as youth centres, local cultural centres, school extra-curricular clubs, civil society programmes, etc.) for youth and the spread of frustration and despair due to the limited economic opportunities and the political tension in the region are all mentioned in the reports as reasons driving young people to drug use. The reports also mention that these factors concomitantly lead youth to engage in networks of delinquency and crime, including networks of violence and VE. Limited religious knowledge among young people (especially in Tunisia, Egypt and to some extent Jordan) is mentioned in such contexts as a facilitating factor.

For instance, regarding the communities in Bahtim, the research team in Egypt explains that the lack of cultural and leisure opportunities available in their community has led many young people to spend a lot of their time on the streets and become susceptible to drug use and dealing. Young males particularly are more inclined to pursue drugs as a mechanism of leisure activity as it is the easiest and cheapest form of enjoyment in comparison to more traditional cultural and leisure pursuits. The youth of Bahtim have criticised the lack of police security response to drug dealing, drug use and violence. Participants in the focus group mentioned a police officer (whom they all know by name) who would take money from the drug dealers in order to let them continue their activities.

The research team in Tunisia describe the widespread use of drugs amongst youth that affects the Feriana community. The main reason for this is the need to escape the harsh local reality marked by the "lack of job opportunities and decent living, as well as the scarcity of spaces for leisure and self-expression through purposeful activities" (Chirchi, Aloui and Ghribi, 2022). The absence of spaces for incubating talents and cultivating hobbies increases the risk of satiating the need to escape from reality through drugs in a barren social environment in terms of opportunities and spaces. The radicalised youth in Feriana mostly suffered from social and economic deprivation and had previously taken part in risky behaviour such as drug addiction. Those who join or help violent extremist groups are not always very religious, some of them go from drugs to supporting VE and back to drug addiction and dealing.

In addition to these two examples, the Jordanian research team explains that in Karak, youth's idle time remains a strong factor limiting the constructive life prospects for young adults. As a result, they opt for less constructive pathways such as drug use, which was a prominent phenomenon. Focus groups' participants in Karak have stated that the use of drugs was widespread in their town. According to them this is caused by the social effects of unemployment and lack of alternatives. This contributes to feeding radicalisation extremism in a social context marked by the lack of cultural and leisure activities as well as perceptions of significant economic deprivation and territorial inequalities (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022).

POINTS OF DIVERGENCE

In addition to these common patterns between the case studies, comparative analysis has shown differences between the cases in the different countries and the drivers. The drivers did not receive the same focus; thus they sometimes have a different level of influence, or are sometimes defined differently by researchers of the country reports, which then also leads to different conclusions. For instance, the case studies dealt in different ways with political dynamics and political grievances. The Jordanian case studies emphasised political protest and political activism and tribal dynamics in the Karak, as well the dynamic within the refugee camps in Maan and the state's initiatives for their social integration. The Moroccan case study of the group Al-Adl Wal-Ihsane focuses on a group that refuses to take part in the political processes; as for the association Amal, young people express their frustration with their exclusion and give it a political character by mentioning their deprivation from access to human rights. Moreover, in the discussion on the drivers of radical violence, they identify the state as the source of violence.

The Egyptian case studies address some elements of the political context, such as the political dynamics between 2011 and 2015 including the confrontations of students of Alexandria University with security forces. These factors are mentioned as contextual elements that help understand the contexts of radicalisation, but the analysis of the direct drivers of radicalisation is focused on social and economic grievances as well as issues related to informal education and the retreat of the social role of the state. Namely, before 2015, instead of the state, charities, in particular those managed by the Muslim Brotherhood, were active in offering services in poor neighbourhoods. According to the Egyptian research team, from 2015 onward, following the crackdown on this movement, the most disenfranchised areas have become even poorer and without any social protection, which might lead the more vulnerable to radicalisation and VE.

In Tunisia, the meso-level reports highlight that the less youth frustration is channelled through clear political participation processes, the more they express dissent and grievances through violence. Violent protests happen more often in the areas where there is no access to peaceful political participation and where the channels of communication between local authorities (police, municipality, central government) are not effective. Moreover, in these areas young people also lack access to learning effective ways of making their voices and their grievances heard in meaningful ways through dialogue (Sidi Abdelhamid, Feriana). In the areas marked by more violent protests, there is a lack of civil society organizations (CSOs) in addition to spaces for constructive dialogue and a channelling of the demands of young people.

In relation to the social contexts examined by the meso-level analysis in CONNEKT in the participating MENA countries, the comparative analysis of the case studies shows that the role of the justice system was quite important in some, while absent in others. It is worth noting that in Jordan, the research team planned to speak to prisoners but could not carry out this research due to their permission being rescinded. In Tunisia, the role of the context of a punitive justice system was one of the factors highlighted through macro-level and meso-level research, especially through the Hammam-Lif case study. The case study shows that correctional institutions and prisons are not helping to reform young

delinquents but rather contribute to the chain of circumstances and causes that deepens the involvement of young people in the offences they take part in (theft, drugs dealing and drug addiction, VE, etc.).

The 12 case study reports do not give equal attention to the role of gender in the dynamics related to radicalisation and VE. Comparative analysis shows that this factor has been dealt with only in the reports from Tunisia (Feriana) and Jordan (female preachers in Maan). The case study of Feriana (Tunisia) highlights the economic dynamics as well as the social and cultural expectations with regards to masculinity in local communities where young men are expected to provide for their families in the total absence of economic opportunities. This imposed social role leads young males to resort to any kind of material provision that will help them to become providers, including engaging in informal economy networks that intersect and meet with the networks of radicalisation. Multi-level informality (economy, security) and risk-taking become rites of passage for males in the region. The report highlights certain common social representations of epic heroic roles of masculinity, which also appeared at the macro level in the Balkans, but we find also present at the MENA meso level in this case study.

The Jordan female preachers report focuses on the role of females in both home education (socialisation) and informal education in relation to religious education. The report explains the importance of focusing on the role of female preachers as the "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" (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal, and Štikovac-Clark, 2022: 32). However, more than on gender, the focus of this report is on the informality and lack of regulation of the role of female preachers as responsible for offering informal education in an institutional context where formal education is not playing its expected roles.

Another important difference between the reports is the theme of football fan groups or Ultras that have only been dealt with in the report on Morocco and Tunisia. The case study of Hammam-Lif in Tunisia and the Ultras in Morocco examined this theme. While the case study of the Ultras directly interacts with members of this football fan group, in Tunisia, the role of these groups is mentioned throughout the collected perceptions of the participants. The case study of Hammam-Lif in Tunisia included discussion with young members of football fan groups, the Ultras. The discussions with them revealed that local and group subcultures, like the football fans team, the Ultras, and rap (street art) groups were for them like "spaces and platforms for alternative socialisation" (Chirchi, Aloui and Ghribi, 2022). The members of such groups strongly identify and feel an intense sense of belonging. A deep sense of fraternity and solidarity marks their relations with friends within these groups while they engage in narratives and activities (drug use, riots with the police, etc.) in opposition to power and authority figures (the police, the state, the school).

In the absence of leisure and access to cultural opportunities, the football fan groups become spaces of self-expression for adolescents and young males. Both the Ultras groups and rap underground groups in Tunisia "mobilise violent verbal repertoires that often convey rejection of authority, messages about the grievances of their neighbourhood and their constant battle with the 'police' in response to

their brutality and what they perceive as severe abuse" (Chirchi, Aloui and Ghribi, 2022). This has great potential for preparing the ground for radicalising youth.

The Moroccan research team devotes one of the case studies to the Ultras in the country. The group is active in the northern region of Morocco located in the city of Tetouan. Discussions with members of this group helped highlight the role of sports in "the activism of Moroccan youth to claim rights." Through this case study, they aimed to focus on the perceptions of the category of Ultras towards violence and the interaction between the community and the political structures of the region. They note that the Ultras take a position on issues related to the social, economic and political demands of young people as well as on the treatment of these demands by public authorities. They also contribute to exerting political pressure, especially at the local level. According to the research team, the group includes marginalised youth, which contributes to addressing their multi-dimensional exclusion. However, at the same time, the groups' dynamism does not exclude the use of different forms of violent pressure in opposition to power structures (Errifaiy and Mouna, 2022).

Refugees in the region were only the focus of the research group in Jordan, which examined the perceptions of the refugees in the camp. The arguments mentioned by the participants regarding radicalisation and VE highlight the significance of contextual factors vis-à-vis ideological considerations in the radicalisation processes as well as the ground realities of a civil war. The report equally emphasises the government's initiatives for the social integration of the Syrian refugees in Jordan. While this report hints at the dynamics of citizenship, the role of ethnicity was not examined in the MENA context in the framework of this project. The combination of ethnicity and nationalism that was observed in the Balkans was not significant in the MENA region in relation to VE vulnerability amongst youth. There is, however, mention of other categories such as "tribes" in Jordan, although the interaction between the tribal dynamics and the studied social and political contexts was not explored.

LESSONS ON INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MACRO- AND MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

A comparative perspective of the results of the macro-level research and the meso-level case studies shows significant divergence between the drivers as perceived by institutional actors and the communities. The regional MENA report included an analysis of findings of macro-level research covering Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan. The authors of this report point out that the state policies and strategies focus on religion, particularly in the cases of Jordan and Morocco. However, research at the meso level shows that the drivers of radicalisation are far more diverse, complex and intertwined and do not warrant the dominant attention placed on ideology more than on the contexts of radicalisation in the region. Namely, meso-level research invites a more nuanced understanding of the role of ideology or religion allowing for a differentiated understanding of the drivers of radicalisation depending on the various local realities and contexts. In such a framework, religion seems to be a symbolic resource mobilised in different ways in varied contexts. It can be mobilised for radicalisation and VE but also mobilised for strengthening both individual and community resilience, as reported in several cases studies.

At the meso level, religion also appears as being an element of discourses that become a reference in the absence of relevant political-civic common narratives that help find an articulation of existing real challenges and complexities. Based on the case studies, religion is activated as a driver of radicalisation in gaps and empty spaces left by education and meso-level institutions (family, school, education system, religious institutions) as well as where critical thinking skills are lacking. This context is exacerbated when youth feel disempowered and deeply marginalised with no hope of improvement of their conditions and with no possibility to express their anger and frustrations in constructive ways through political-social dialogue and participation.

This disempowerment is fully matched by a pseudo-empowerment in violent radical narratives presenting what seems like plausible alternatives in the absence of hope for the improvement of the individual and collective conditions. What is remarkable is that those who are recruited by violent extremist groups have been described by the target populations as not possessing significant religious knowledge or as subscribing to alternative understandings of religion that are not widely shared by the societies of the studied countries. In any case, what we find at the basis of the religious views adopted by VE groups justifying violence is the perception of relative deprivation and of deep social injustices and inequalities blamed on the state.

Going from the macro-level to the meso-level social contexts, it is possible to observe the effects of the lack of public policies addressing the needs for human security for individuals and local communities. The pervasive perceptions in the region of deep social injustice and inequalities, of the lack of the necessary conditions of ensuring human dignity, such as employment for youth and the social protection of individuals and communities, are exacerbated by the retreat of the social role of the state in providing the conditions of human security and wellbeing. The discussion of the drivers of VE and

radicalisation examined through social contexts in the region has put forward the lack of equal opportunities for all in accessing good quality education, the lack of equal access to services as well as leisure spaces. Overall, the local level reveals the effects of the failures of public policies in the region in creating a sustainable model for resource management and development as well as addressing social-economic grievances and the needs for social inclusion of individuals and communities. The macro-level reports have highlighted the prevalence of the securitisation of social issues in lieu of opting for such policies, the negative effects of which are confirmed by data collected in the local social contexts studied at the meso level. Therefore, there is a big contrast between the perceived and real absence of the state in providing services in the local contexts, and its dominant presence when it comes to hard security.

The data collected at the local level reveals a multi-fold crisis in the relationship between citizens and states even if this crisis is not directly addressed in all the reports. Its manifestations are obvious in most of the local contexts studied, where the state is sometimes seen as "responsible for violence", as lacking in the provision of social services, or as only functioning for a limited portion of the population. In this context, the uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring are one of the indicators of the crisis created by this inequality. While the uprisings had divergent intensity and effects in the countries of the region, particularly affecting Egypt and Tunisia, the conditions that have given rise to them have not changed since 2011. The same expectations have yet to be fulfilled, including the need for the state to provide certain basic services (education, health, infrastructure), to refrain from violating human rights and to act to protect basic rights (civil and political, as well as economic and social such as right to employment). VE and radicalisation appear in this sense as a pathological manifestation of this crisis. Systems are failing, especially for young people who have been squeezed out of a system where the state is doing less providing and more punishing.

The various consultations with youth in the region demonstrate that social and economic push factors are also related to problematic contexts of socialisation marked by the marginalisation of both communities and social class. This problematic socialisation is not addressed by the education system or in any other way (recognition of subcultures, or of alternative arts, civic participation) that helps mitigate its effects on youth.

Macro-level analysis examined social media and new communication technologies as one of the drivers of radicalisation, but meso-level analysis presented a more nuanced and refined understanding of the role of social media networks where they appear as alternative platforms of socialisation. Through social media networks young people interact with others in several ways by sharing ideas and learning skills. However, social media networks are also where recruitment is more frank and sophisticated, on a much larger scale that is unmatched by other more moderate religious discourse or by official-institutional discourse. Digital platforms appear in this regard as having the potential of both facilitating the recruitment of youth and also strengthening youth resilience through access to a variety of alternative discourses.

CONCLUSIONS

Comparative analysis of the meso-level case studies in the MENA region shows strong links between macro-level and meso-level drivers as well as strong intersection with local social contexts, which in turn have a great effect on individual paths (for example, links between economic and psychological factors). These reports thus highlight the complexity of drivers of radicalisation in the MENA region. The wide scope of the sample size of 280 young people from the ages of 12 to 30 as well as wide geographical distribution of the case studies (12 geographical locations in the MENA region) support the conclusions that can be made regarding the dynamics at work in the radicalisation hotbeds in the MENA region.

The reports highlight the relevance of adopting an understanding of VE and radicalisation that takes into consideration the role of social contexts and the relationship between ideology and context. Intersecting macro- and meso-level analysis helps grasp the need to move away from grand theories that produce standard models of explanation of the drivers of radicalisation towards producing a refined understanding of the phenomena at hand that takes into consideration the differentiated local contexts. Only such a differentiated and nuanced approach can help in developing strategies to counter the spread of radical narratives.

The macro-level and meso-level data collection and analysis show that multi-level marginalisation (economic, social and political) is at the heart of social and political grievances that can be found in most of the social contexts studied. These contexts have in common high rates of underemployment, lack of political representation and poor access to social services. In this framework, transnational drivers, which have been highlighted as central in the macro-level reports, appear as only activated when intersected with real and long-standing feelings of frustration and anger.

The patterns of radicalisation seem more urban than rural. The reports point out different processes of exclusion that require different responses and, throughout, different categories of youth (students, youth at the margins of society, football fan clubs, delinquents, etc.) experience different forms of exclusion. However, urban dynamics and urban youth have been at the centre of various reports. Additional forms of exclusion appear to be caused by the transition from a rural to an urban context.

These levels of nuance have been possible thanks to a multi-level and dynamic research methodology including several types of research activities. This type of research revealed that the various drivers of radicalisation observed have roles that appear to be intertwined and interconnected in ways that prevent us from going back to mono-factorial and mechanical patters of causality focusing on only one driver amongst the drivers of radicalisation and VE in the region. Moreover, contextual factors are central in understanding in a precise way the social dynamics related to these phenomena. Finally, it appears that these contextual factors are most indicative of a deeper systemic crisis, where radicalisation and different forms of violence are amongst the symptoms of dysfunctions in the state-citizens' relationship.

This points to the fact that solutions have to match the complex and systemic nature of the problems of radicalisation and VE in the region in order to be effective. These solutions cannot ignore the recurrent demands for better human development conditions, as well as for meaningful and significant economic, social and political changes in the region. Furthermore, the solutions have to be holistic and address the improvement of the relationship between states and their citizens and widen the political participation of diverse groups.

Recommendations

Aside from the clear need for a new social contract that is an underlying requirement in the region, what can be done is to carve out both formal and informal spaces for young people where they can develop a sense of agency and power that is denied to them by the large structures that exclude and repress them. This means grassroots projects that work for a minimum of three years to build trust with young people. Preventing radicalisation can thus be done through a multi-fold approach matching the complexity of radicalisation and VE.

Better Public Policies and Services

- **Improve the quality of public services** in the education, health, access to culture and free spaces etc. Improvement of services must also centre on better access to marginalised communities.
- **Develop inclusive urban policies taking into account the transformations of cities, their real composition as well as marginalised regions and communities.** This includes improving the quality of transport, building leisure and cultural facilities, modern markets, and showrooms for local products, with the aim of managing them in a participatory and inclusive manner.
- **Reduce the unemployment rate** by reforming the structure of the administrative system and facilitating bureaucratic procedures that impede the launch and liberalisation of youth entrepreneurship and innovative projects and initiatives. In addition to enabling young people to obtain loans at a low interest rate.
- **Address the feelings of injustice and the frustrations resulting from it** by channelling their expression peacefully through meaningful legal channels of political participation as well as dialogue with youth and an active civil society.
- **Design public policies to strength the role of official religious institutions** by unifying and disseminating religious discourses that consolidate the teachings of Islam and its goals characterised by openness, moderation, reconciliation with human values and the supreme principles of human rights, which are rooted in the heritage of the Arab-Islamic identity.

A Specific Focus on Education and Social Inclusion

- **Invest in public education and provide an equality of opportunities** through education (accessible and good quality education for all).
- **Enrich school curricula with experiential learning and critical thinking** by developing spaces that allow young people to positively impact the physical space around them, while working with state institutions. Thus, creating more clubs and spaces for dialogue in schools and cultural/youth centres to discuss social, economic, religious phenomena, political developments, international dynamics, and so on.

- **Address the high numbers of school drops outs** through a second chance for education (the school of second chance) as well as through **investing in vocational training** that provides youth with skills that helps better prepare them for the job market as well as addressing the high levels of school drop outs.
- Schools ought to **work with CSOs** to address the needs for social inclusion by collaborating with associations and university students to create and manage clubs and extracurricular activities within schools that improve the relationship of youth with education.

Promoting and Supporting an Open Civic Space

- **Promote, help build and invest in a civic space** where there are accessible civic education tools that strengthen the capacities of youth for positive participation in the city.
- **Invest in civic education** in collaboration with civil society through fruitful collaboration, thus multiplying resources for channelling youth frustrations by preparing them to contribute to shaping public policies and taking part in the public sphere.
- **Involving local communities and youth especially in designing public** policies to improve their impact and bridge the trust gap.
- Create **empowered spaces where young people can build bridges with state actors** in a managed way that seeks to build trust, facilitate dialogue, and develop common rules of engagement through a whole process. Civil society thus acts as a broker, helping to prepare both parties for a positive exchange and dialogue on what matters.
- **Support efforts for positive social inclusion** by encouraging and recognising academically and professionally the experiences of youth volunteering and engaging in areas that promote social inclusion of marginalised youth.
- **Develop a sense of agency** that is denied to young people by the large structures that exclude and repress them by creating informal spaces. The way this can be done is through a three-fold approach: Listen to young people; Start from what inclusion means for young people themselves, and Allow them to shape programmes and run them themselves.
- **Strengthen participation of youth at the local level** as a good starting point. Young people may be very aware that the conditions in their area are poor, but if given the opportunity, they will take measures to improve them. Provide them with the space to reflect on what they would like their neighbourhoods to be and to develop projects to achieve change in collaboration with the local authorities. Small projects in which young people can have the space to develop a sense of initiative and agency, where they and local authorities learn how to communicate together, and where they can gain the practical experience and skills that a deficient education system is not giving them and that the lack of job opportunities denies them. Participating in local projects will allow youth to have a positive impact on their local areas, will build a sense of pride and ownership, and allow them to construct a different view of their place in the world. Local level is the best place to start rebuilding a model of relations between youth and state (a new social contract).
- **Work on the psychological and cognitive levels** to help change young people see themselves and the world around them. The empowerment of young people leads to their effective and responsible participation, and not vice versa. Before talking about the participation of young people in formal mechanisms, it is essential to help them gain self-confidence in order to achieve

something meaningful. In authoritarian contexts or areas of socioeconomic deprivation, this is particularly challenging given the prevalence of a sense of powerlessness.

- **Promote programmes that enhance autonomous and critical thinking** that helps the cognitive resilience of youth.

Improving Economic Development Perspectives

- **Better and more equitable resources management** that includes the informal economic sector and gives sufficient incentives for removing the reliance on the public sector.
- **Providing tax incentives for investments in underdeveloped** regions including through projects that support employment in underdeveloped regions that help promote the added value and contribution of each region should be incentivised and supported by the government.
- **Promote regional and local economic development** by facilitating the administrative procedures related to projects and making them accessible to citizens in the marginalised regions.
- **Break the isolation of marginalised areas** by creating serious and effective national twinning processes with other regions of the country and facilitating exchange between local groups and municipalities and strengthening cooperation between them. This could also be matched by a twinning process that creates human, cultural and economic bridges with other communities in Europe and the world. This opens the way for drawing on comparative experiences, conducting joint research and providing funding and grants for the benefit of marginalised communities and areas.

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

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INTRODUCTION

The CONNEKT project is a research and action initiative that aims to understand the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) among youth in the Balkans region. By analysing seven potential factors – religion, digital socialisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, political issues, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities – on a community level, the project seeks to establish a multi-dimensional map of the drivers of extremism among young people in the Balkans and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Additionally, the project aims to identify the interplay between these drivers in order to recommend tools and measures for the prevention of VE from a community perspective.

The CONNEKT research teams focused on four countries in the Balkans region: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia. The study aims to identify the main drivers of radicalisation at the community level and the ways in which they interact with each other in order to understand how radicalisation occurs among youth in the Western Balkans. The research teams in each country collected data through focus groups, in-depth interviews, online observations, and content analysis. Nonetheless, the report presents the findings from nine case studies conducted across the Balkans, with three case studies for each country – with the exception of one confidential case study from Bulgaria, where the project team determined that revealing all data could lead to further marginalisation of the community under study.

In summary, the study found that economic and political factors, religion, digital socialisation, lack of educational, cultural and leisure opportunities, nationalism, hate speech, and lack of trust in institutions and the unresolved status of individual countries are the main drivers of radicalisation among youth in the Balkans. The CONNEKT project found that economic deprivation, political grievances and nationalist ideologies are common drivers of radicalisation among youth in BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia. However, there are also differences in how these drivers manifest in each country, with religion, digital socialisation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics and political issues playing a larger role in certain countries. These findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to preventing radicalisation will not be effective, and that tailored strategies must be developed for each country and community.

The paper is structured in a systematic manner to present the research findings and conclusions of the regional outlook on the meso-level drivers of radicalisation. The methodology section provides an overview of the research methods used, including the number of case studies conducted, as well as the number of interviews and focus groups in each country. The next section also includes an explanatory statement on the methodological limitations for each of the cases. The social context of each country is discussed afterwards, along with the selection of case studies, providing the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the research setting. The drivers of radicalisation are then analysed in depth in each country, highlighting the main findings and their relevance for the context of each country. The points of convergence and divergence are also presented, allowing insights into the similarities and differences in the drivers of radicalisation across the countries under study. The paper concludes by presenting the lessons learned on the interactions between macro- and meso-level drivers and providing policy directions for future research and policy-making.

METHODOLOGY

A joint methodology for the meso-level research was identified and agreed on between the research coordinators and the individual teams before commencing fieldwork. The research focus is on the community level, conceptualised as spaces of personal social interaction that have specific identities and repertoires of communication and action, both with each other and towards other groups. Some of these communities are strongly institutionalised (such as schools), while others are highly informal (groups on social media). For the purposes of the research, individual communities were specifically selected according to previously identified drivers at the macro level. The case studies selection was also based on the following principles: relevance with respect to each national context, cross-country and cross-regional comparability, relevance for further research on prevention, capacity to use qualitative methodologies, and ability to obtain primary data. The research is qualitative in its nature and largely relies on data from focus groups and individual interviews. Additionally, content analysis and other tools were used, such as CrowdTangle. Ethics guidelines, integral to the CONNEKT Project, were followed, and informed consent or assent (in the case of minors) was obtained from each research participant.

CASE STUDIES

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** research was conducted on three cases: *Two schools under one roof; Organised groups of football fans; and Youth supporters of online Salafi influencers.* In the first case, interlocutors were second- and third-grade students in two schools of the Central Bosnian Canton that operate within the "two schools under one roof" system. The methods used included interviews and focus groups with students. Two focus groups (one in each school) were organised, with five participants in each, as well as five interviews (three with students attending classes in the Bosnian language and two with students attending classes in the Croatian language). For the second case study, two focus groups were conducted with football fans (four participants in Banja Luka and five in Mostar), as well as three interviews in Banja Luka and two in Mostar with all male interviewees. In the third case, the research team selected the two Salafi influencers with the most significant following on social networks. Then, their posts were observed for a period of one year, and the subsequent coding of the seven CONNEKT project drivers was performed. Additionally, the supporters' reactions to the comments and their approval/agreement with the views expressed were monitored and analysed. Although contact was established with associations and communities that support the work of Salafi preachers, the planned interviews and focus groups, which were supposed to represent the second phase of the research, were ultimately not completed, as there was no willingness from the community to interact with researchers. Finally, for all three cases, all participants had to be between 15 and 30 years old.

In **Bulgaria,** two case studies were published: *Online conservative communities;* and *Football supporters,* while the third one was not published for reasons of confidentiality, for which data that could lead to identifying a specific community will not be highlighted. As part of the confidential case

study, six young members from two marginalised communities were interviewed individually, and an additional five expert interlocutors were also consulted. Looking at the two published studies, the focus was on young people, so all the respondents for the first study were between the ages of 12 and 30, while, for the second, the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 30. In the first case, three respondents were over the age of 30, but their answers were included due to their relevance to the topic and additional data triangulation. Nevertheless, a total of eight interviews were conducted, as well as the content analysis of online groups. In the second case, a total of four interviews were conducted, as well as observation of public Facebook groups of football fans. The CrowdTangle instrument was used in both cases to identify relevant online communities.

In **Kosovo,** research was conducted for the following three cases: *Political grievances in the municipality of Mitrovica South; Transnational dynamics in the municipality of Gjilan;* and *Religious interpretations in the municipality of Gjakova.* During the selection of respondents for all three cases, the parameters of age (from 12 to 30 years), gender, religion, and balance between urban and rural areas were considered. In the first case study, there were 27 respondents; in the second 19 respondents, while in the third there were 24 respondents. For all cases, during the implementation of the focus groups, a schedule was made according to age, meaning that the first focus group was for young people aged 12-15 years, the second for young people aged 15-18 years, and the third for young people aged 18-30 years. In total, three focus groups were organised for all three cases with the addition of expert interviews (three for the first case, two for the second, and three for the third).

In **North Macedonia,** research was conducted for the following three case studies: *Commemorations of the 2001 Macedonian conflict in Tetovo; Football fan groups in Tetovo; and Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility.* In the first case study, the research team organised focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and media content analysis concerning the 2001 conflict in Tetovo. A total of 10 respondents participated in the focus groups, while five respondents took part in the interviews. For the second case study, two focus groups were conducted with the *Vojvodi and Ballistët* fan groups and four interviews were conducted with experts. The youngest respondent in the focus group was born in 2002, while the oldest was born in 1996. In the third case study, two focus groups were conducted – one with members of the State Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency – and the other with children who are part of CEF Volkovija Tetovo as children-protégés. A total of eight respondents participated in the first focus group, while 15 children participated in the second. In addition, three in-depth interviews were also organised with selected participants.

TABLE 1. Research methods and total number of focus groups and interviews

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	BULGARIA	KOSOVO	NORTH MACEDONIA
CS1: Two schools under one roof	CS1: Online conservative communities	CS1: Political grievances in the municipality of Mitrovica South	CS1: Commemorations of the 2001 Macedonian conflict in Tetovo
· Two focus groups (five participants in	· Eight interviews · Content analysis of	· Three focus groups (24 participants, 8 in each)	· Two focus groups (five participants in each)

each school; 10 in total) · Five interviews (three in one school, two in another)	online groups	· Three interviews	· Five interviews · Media and text analysis
CS2: Organised groups of football fans	CS2: Football supporters	CS2: Transnational dynamics in the municipality of Gjilan	CS2: Football fan groups in Tetovo
· Two focus groups (four participants in Banja Luka, five in Mostar) · Five interviews (three in Banja Luka, two in Mostar)	· Four interviews · Observation of public Facebook groups	· Three focus groups (19 participants, six in first, six in second, and five in third) · Two interviews	· Two focus groups (four participants in each) · Four interviews
CS3: Youth supporters of online Salafi influencers	CS3: [confidential]	CS3: Religious interpretations in the municipality of Gjakova	CS3: Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility
· Content analysis of social media profiles		· Three focus groups (21 participants, eight in first, six in second and seven in third) · Three interviews	· Two focus groups (8 participants in first, and 15 in second) · Three interviews

The tables below outline a brief overview of the case studies in each country, including selection criteria and drivers:

TABLE 2. Case selection and drivers for Bosnia and Herzegovina

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	Justification for the selection	Drivers
CS1: Two schools under one roof	· The political context of the case. · Influence on potential radicalisation and existing segregation.	· Political issues (claims and grievances)
CS2: Organised groups of football fans	· A history of public displays of violence. · A strong sense of identity or belonging to the group.	· Educational, cultural and leisure opportunities · Political issues

CS3: Youth supporters of online Salafi influencers	· Higher visibility in comparison to the official religious institution. · Online/virtual gathering places became places of socialisation. · Lecturers have the rank of superstars within their online communities on Facebook and YouTube.	· Digital socialisation · Religion

TABLE 3. Case selection and drivers for Bulgaria

BULGARIA	Justification for the selection	Drivers
CS1: Online conservative communities	· Far-right actors are rallying popular support through spreading propaganda and misinformation. · Influence on policy-making through alliances with other actors.	· Political issues · Transnational dynamics · Digital socialisation
CS2: Football supporters	· Hooligans are often used by political parties for political goals. · Dynamic far right, with rhetoric and tactics that moved away from violence and towards more veiled influence tactics, such as proliferation of online disinformation.	· Digital socialisation · Political issues · Territorial inequalities · Transnational dynamics
CS3: [confidential]		

TABLE 4. Case selection and drivers for Kosovo

KOSOVO	Justification for the selection	Drivers
CS1: Political grievances in the municipality of Mitrovica South	· Divisions in the city and varying levels of ethnonational political tensions. · Mono-ethnic and mono-religious character of the community.	· Political issues
CS2: Transnational dynamics in the municipality of Gjilan	· Geographic location – close to Kosovo-North Macedonia-Serbia border triangle. · Additionally, there is a significant diaspora in Switzerland and Germany.	· Transnational dynamics
CS3: Religious interpretations in the municipality of Gjakova	· Unique case for Kosovo due to plurality of religious practices and beliefs (Sunni, Bektashi, as well as different Tariqats within Islam, Catholicism and Christian Orthodoxy).	· Religion

TABLE 5. Case selection and drivers for North Macedonia

NORTH MACEDONIA	Justification for the selection	Drivers
CS1: Commemorations of the 2001 Macedonian conflict in Tetovo	· 2001 conflict is an important memory-related topic in the domestic public discourse. · Most contested issue from the history of Macedonian-Albanian interethnic relations in North Macedonia.	· Political issues, mainly ethnonationalism · Economic deprivation
CS2: Football fan groups in Tetovo	· Possibly critical social milieus that facilitate radicalisation of Macedonian youth. · Ethnic divisions in the local football fan scene.	· Educational, cultural and leisure opportunities · Political issues, mainly ethnonationalism · Religion · Territorial inequalities · Economic deprivation
CS3: Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility	· The danger of radicalisation in prison. · Children are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation, both online and offline.	· Political issues, mainly nationalism · Religion

TABLE 6. Intersection of drivers

	Religion	Digital socialisation	Economic deprivation	Territorial inequalities	Transnational dynamics	Political issues	Educational, cultural and leisure opportunities
Bosnia and Herzegovina CS1						X	
Bosnia and Herzegovina CS2						X	X
Bosnia and Herzegovina CS2	X	X					
Bulgaria CS1		X			X	X	
Bulgaria CS2		X		X	X	X	
Bulgaria CS3							
Kosovo CS1						X	
Kosovo CS2					X		
Kosovo CS3	X						
North Macedonia CS1			X			X	
North Macedonia CS2	X		X	X		X	X
North Macedonia CS3	X					X	

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT ON METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**'s first case study, the selection of participants was done by the principal of "two schools under one roof", which could limit the generalisability of the findings to other groups of young people. Additionally, the trust between the participants and researchers may have led to a social desirability bias in the responses – in the sense of saying what they thought researchers would "want" to hear. In the second case study, the researchers faced challenges in establishing trust and confidence with the participants, particularly in relation to the anonymity of football supporters and handling sensitive information. The researchers also had to navigate the heightened political and social tensions present in BiH society and distance themselves from any media or investigative reporting. In the third case study, the research team faced difficulty in gaining access to several target associations and individuals in Tuzla, Mostar and Sarajevo. This was due to prevailing mistrust of the target communities, but timing also proved to be a major obstacle as research was repeatedly delayed due to COVID-19 infections among researchers and community members. Interviews and focus groups for this case study could not be arranged, and the research plan and methodology had to be adapted accordingly. As a result, the research team focused on the online behaviour and experiences of the respondents or target audiences.

In the case of **Kosovo**, all three case studies focus on specific municipalities within larger districts. In the first case study, the research was initially planned to cover the entire region of Mitrovica but was later limited to only the municipality of Mitrovica South because of the high political grievances present in that area. In the second case study, the research was limited to the municipality of Gjilan because of its high per-capita number of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). In the third case study, the research was limited to the municipality of Gjakova because of diverse religions and religious interpretations present in the area. These limitations may affect the generalisability of the findings to other municipalities or districts in Kosovo.

In **North Macedonia**'s third case study, there were limitations in conducting direct meetings with the State Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency. Hence, the research was conducted online, and a written questionnaire was sent to them at their request. In **Bulgaria**'s first and second case study, researchers faced several challenges when conducting non-participant online observations. One challenge was that Facebook's tool CrowdTangle was not able to scrape content from comments under posts, which is where the main source of data would come from. Therefore, researchers had to manually observe posts and comments. A second challenge was that the selected group and page generated a large amount of content, making it technically impossible to track interactions for a longer period because of page crashing, so the team had to shorten the period of observation. Additionally, the team encountered challenges in their initially planned methodology involving two coders coding a sample of 10% of the data, but ultimately had to proceed with two coders going over the same data for the same period to ensure comprehensiveness of the data collected and avoid coder bias. Other challenges included delays in data collection due to the Bulgarian parliamentary elections and COVID-19, and some interviews were cancelled due to participants' unwillingness to be associated with the labels "extremism" and "radicalisation". In the third case study, the research team had to ensure that the report was confidential because respondents were from a marginalised community in the country, meaning that results could lead to an increase in the exclusion of individuals or groups.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Balkans region occupies a peripheral position in Europe and faces significant socioeconomic challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the constant outflow of young people due to socio-demographic pressures, such as high unemployment rates and low wages. Furthermore, there is a rise of right-wing narratives, which threaten the fragile inter-ethnic and inter-state relations. The unresolved issue of nation and state further complicates matters and produces a precarious living situation for young people who need to build their future there. The wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, which took place in the 1990s, have left deep wounds and continue to impact the region. Additionally, weak institutions associated with state-capture and corruption remain a significant challenge for the future.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

In the post-Dayton BiH, the ethnonational narrative is ever present in all segments of society. Spreading the divisive narrative does not contribute to the preservation of peace and stability but rather contributes to fuelling ethnonational tensions and divisions. One of the most visible examples of division is the education system, which is based on ethnocentrism (Trkulja, 2017). The segregated education is most present in schools referred to as "two schools under one roof".[1] This phenomenon represents "a part of a wider ethnonationalist politics of divisions in BiH, and the education system is a place where this is strongly manifested" (OSCE, 2018). Given that ethnonational divisions are present in these specific schools, **"two schools under one roof"** represents the first case study in which the possible drivers of radicalisation among young people were assessed. The research team presented the experiences of "two schools under one roof" in the Central Bosnia Canton,[2] which became a polarised area after the war (1992-1995) and where there is the highest number of these cases as well as attempts to establish new parallel schools where children are segregated along ethnonational lines. The practice of "two schools under one roof" is a violation of international conventions as well as of domestic laws and has been characterised in many court rulings[3] as discriminatory and damaging both for children and for society as a whole.

The divisive narrative is firmly transmitted to all segments of BiH society and is closely connected with subcultures in BiH as well. The subcultural groups of football fans in BiH are often driven by ethnonational political ideas, and stadiums become and remain training grounds of various political centres of power. Thus, football stadiums in BiH have become widely used for expressing nationalist passions where hate speech is present in a wide range, from direct call for violence and hate towards

[1] More information available at: https://ndcmostar.org/bs/dijalog-o-obrazovnim-politikama/, accessed on 5 January 2023.

[2] The Central Bosnia Canton (SBK) is one of ten Cantons in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[3] In August 2021, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina found discrimination against children in all schools that are organised according to the principle of "two schools under one roof".

people of a different ethnonational origin. In this regard, many media reports[4] confirm that violence based on nationalism is often present at matches in BiH, and some conflicts have had tragic/deadly outcomes. Based on the above, it was important to examine the drivers of radicalisation through the second case study on a sample of a **subcultural group of football fans in BiH,** given that they advocate nationalism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia and homophobia in many cases.

The third case study consisted of examining the use of social media in spreading potentially radical ideas among youth in BiH with special focus on the role of Salafi religious lecturers. Namely, with the increase in popularity of different social media platforms, the number of online groups and websites whose contents are offered by Salafi influencers as well as the number of **supporters of online Salafi influencers (especially among young people)** is increasing in BiH. The popularity of Salafi influencers in BiH has the potential to negatively influence young people through increasing exclusivity and building uncritical thinking.[5] Thus, in the third case study it was important to identify and map the main drivers of radicalisation within a digital environment through active monitoring of online lectures of the most popular Bosnian Salafi influencers.

Historical events in BiH (especially pertaining to the war from 1992 to 1995) are interpreted in distinct ways in different parts of the country in relation to the three largest ethnonational groups (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats). Different interpretations of events are woven into all levels of society, both in the private and public sphere. Therefore, it can be said that in BiH society a general focus on political tensions and relations among the three largest nationalities results in ethnonational and religious discrimination, as well as segregation. They are often the result of nationalist policies pursued by national political parties. Such problems complicate the position of certain groups within the society, which suffer the consequences of very difficult post-war socioeconomic conditions. Problems of direct and indirect discrimination and segregation prevail practically in all areas of life but especially in the areas of education, employment, solving housing issues, and access to health services and social protection. The connection between (non)exercising rights and ethnicity makes it difficult for those who do not belong to ethnic groups that prevail locally or nationally to have access to rights and opportunities in many of these areas.[6]

Political system

The efforts of the international community in stopping the war in BiH (1992-1995), establishing peace and stability through the Dayton Agreement, were based on the systemic use of ethnicity as well as on creating institutional solutions that needed to satisfy demands of parties claiming to represent the three main constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats). It is the emphasis on ethnicity and on the provision of rights to constituent peoples that strengthens political parties that rely on ethnicity and exploit national identity as a means to promote division and delay the integration of BiH society. National political parties represent the rights and interests of exclusively one constituent people, while

[4] More information available at: Koji su uzroci navijačkog nasilja? (slobodnaevropa.org), accessed on 16 January 2023.

[5] All Salafi influencers offer daily advice and instant solutions in all spheres of life.

[6] More information available at: CRI (2005) 2 (coe.int), accessed on 16 January 2023.

accusing other constituent peoples of the overall poor situation in the country. It can be said that the paradigm of divisions is woven into the very organisation of the country, which is deepened by political parties in order to remain on the BiH scene and achieve their agenda.

Economic and social opportunities

Difficult socioeconomic conditions that prevail in society reduce the possibility for people to exercise their rights equally and fully. Half of the population in BiH lives in some sort of social exclusion, is exposed to the risk of poverty, and does not have the opportunity to completely participate in the economic, social and cultural life – implying that they do not enjoy the social prosperity because they do not have access to basic rights. Socioeconomic problems especially affect various vulnerable groups, youth and elderly. Their difficulties relate to problems of access to employment, health services, pensions, and adequate education. Ethnonational divisions affect the economic and social conditions of citizens, and ethnic minorities often experience hostility from the local population. Such intolerance is often prompted by statements and actions of local political leadership. Also, all those who are labelled as "Others" (e.g., migrants and Roma) are in an unfavourable socioeconomic position, which is characterised by extreme poverty and marginalisation. Even though their position is partially related to difficult economic conditions that prevail in the country, the position of "Others" is additionally worsened by the prejudice and discrimination they suffer at the level of the whole society.[7]

BULGARIA

Populism and radical right policies have become an inextricable part of the political landscape in Bulgaria. Even though it can often be read in the media that Bulgaria has been affected by violent manifestations of Islamic radicalisation and extremism, in the last couple of years political unrest and protests, as well as the migrant/refugee crisis, have provided a favourable environment for the revival of far-right organisations. As expressed by Dzhekova (2020), many reports warn that far-right radicalisation and extremism are more widespread and result in greater violence compared to so-called Islamic radicalisation, but they are not in the focus of the public. Similarly, the findings of the third (confidential) case study in Bulgaria indicate that most of the factors that contributed to the spread of Salafism in the early 2000s are no longer relevant to the current reality of these communities, or at least do not appear to contribute to similar processes. Nonetheless, the current challenges faced by these communities are related to ongoing political issues and economic deprivation. Hate speech, hate crimes and incidents against ethnic, religious and sexual minorities are associated with various far-right organisations. However, the lack of political will to tackle right-wing radicalisation is noticeable. Therefore, far-right supporters are increasingly united in the online sphere through conservative communities spreading political discontent, and calling for demonstrations and protests. Online far-right communities bring together traditionalists and

[7] More information available at: CRI (2005) 2 (coe.int), accessed on 16 January 2023.

conservatives and are often a training platform for false information and propaganda (especially those referring to opposition to liberal values). Therefore, it was necessary for the researchers to identify drivers of radicalisation/extremism in **online far-right communities** whose activities are mostly directed towards national and ethnic minorities (such as Roma and Turks) through the rhetoric of exclusion of "Others", even though they share joint citizenship, rights and even history with the dominant majority.

Nationalism, xenophobia, homophobia and racial resentment are present among sport fans. Football supporters are often described in the media as "violent football hooligans who are openly homophobic and often attack homosexuals…"[8] A popular case that was covered by the media in 2019 involved an incident during a qualifying match for the European championship at the stadium in Sofia where the English national team suffered racist insults from the Bulgarian radical right, which caused the match to be stopped.[9] Open violence toward minorities, Nazi salutes, and homophobia are only some of the problems that connect the most popular Bulgarian football clubs, which is why the second case study involved **young football supporters** (football fans of Levski Sofia and CSKA Sofia, which are the most popular nationwide, and football fans of Beroe Stara Zagora, which is one of the most popular clubs outside the capital Sofia). The third case study involved **two socially-stigmatised communities** that are among the most marginalised and neglected areas in Bulgaria. What is characteristic of the third research case study (marked as confidential), which included members of minorities in neighbourhoods of towns, is that on the one hand they are considered to be in danger of (Islamic) radicalisation while, on the other, this minority goes through a high level of stigmatisation and marginalisation and is often a target of far-right groups. Therefore, the case study analysed how social context predisposes a part of the members of the socially-marginalised community to certain manifestations of Salafist ideas.

Recent media reports,[10] and especially reports from international organisations, warn about an increased trend of nationalism, xenophobia and homophobia in Bulgaria. Hate crimes are not a new phenomenon in Bulgaria and reflect a wider increase in discrimination. However, the way in which Bulgarian authorities, encouraged by radical right parties, treat the wave of hate crimes (especially against migrants, ethnic and sexual minorities) disenables all citizens to equally exercise human rights. Hate crimes are usually not investigated as crimes against victims due to their ethnic origin, migrant status or sexual orientation; instead they are often described as criminal offences motived by "hooliganism" (Amnesty International, 2015). Failure of the state to secure justice for hate crime victims favours the creation of an atmosphere in which nationalism, xenophobia and homophobia spread in all segments of society (especially in far-right communities that nurture "traditional values" and are closed to "Others" and "Different", as well as among football fans who through cheering, banners and chanting publicly spread hate speech and violence). Discriminatory violence has long-lasting effects on individuals who are targeted directly, on their communities (e.g., Roma), and on wider society.

[8] More information available at: https://www.dw.com/en/bulgarians-turn-to-right-and-left-wing-parties/a-16770894, accessed on 16 January 2023.

[9] More information available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/football-fandom-and-fascist-generals-bulgarias-radical-right/, accessed on 16 January 2023.

[10] More information available at: Youth's vulnerability and resilience to far-right narratives - Blog - Center for the Study of Democracy (csd.bg), accessed on 16 January 2023.

Political system

Since 2015, there have been two far-right parties in the Bulgarian parliament, whose characteristics Smrčkova (2015) defines as follows: a fundamental rejection of democracy, of individual liberty, and of the principle of equality and equal rights, and their replacement by an authoritarian system based on race, ethnicity or religion. The ideology of the radical right adopts a strong nationalist ideology built on anti-Roma, anti-Turkish, anti-immigrant, and anti-Islamic rhetoric. Minorities, foreigners, and Islam are predominantly spoken about as threats to the Bulgarian nation and state, and it is precisely the radical right that positions itself as an advocate of a stronger state and protector of national rights (Dzhekova et al., 2016). Between 2013 and 2015, Bulgaria experienced political turmoil and widespread protests, which, combined with the migrant crisis, created favourable conditions for the re-emergence of far-right organisations. These groups have formed paramilitary formations that patrol near the Bulgarian border with Turkey. In 2017, the far-right coalition Patriotic Front (PF) entered government, resulting in a lack of political will to address right-wing radicalisation and an increase in hate speech. The recent parliamentary elections in 2021 saw another far-right party, Vazrazhdane (Revival), gain a seat in parliament. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that normalisation of the far-right's discourse in public and everyday life contributes to social problems. It is most clearly visible in a contrast between reactions of international institutions on one side and events in Bulgaria on the other. The European Commission (EC) has warned that it had started a procedure due to systemic weaknesses in the fight against racism and xenophobia and systemic violation of European Union (EU) law (European Economic and Social Committee, 2015).

Economic and social opportunities

The social dialogue in Bulgaria is developing in an unfavourable environment. The low level of economic development and accompanying unemployment, poverty, high level of corruption and political crises contribute to the increase in violence in society as a whole. At the same time, the decrease in social security contributions and the absence of social services (especially for ethnic minorities and refugees), decreased economic prosperity, inadequate employment, and poor living standards have deepened inequality in society. While socioeconomic issues should not be disregarded, they are only additional factors that contribute to the rise of violence in society as a whole. For instance, the Roma communities are believed to turn to religious radicalisation as a means of obtaining financial or material assistance and a sense of belonging in a society that generally alienates them. Therefore, when examining the effects of poverty on institutional responses to radicalisation, it cannot be separated from ethnic vulnerabilities.

KOSOVO

It has been clearly identified that religious contexts can be the major driver of violent radicalisation at the national level. It was also highlighted in the research that political grievances have a marginal effect and power but are still important. The case of **political grievances in the municipality of Mitrovica South** has been selected due to the legacy of armed conflicts and Kosovo's transition to an

independent country together with ongoing ethnonational tensions in this municipality. These ethnonational tensions reflect on the entire country as well. Due to the division of the city (June 1999), both the municipality of Mitrovica South and the municipality of Mitrovica North are mostly monophonic in ethnic and religious aspects (the South consists of a majority of Albanians and Muslims and the North consists of a majority of Serbs and Christian Orthodox). This political status caused economic deficiency and poverty, a high level of unemployment, and ethnonational anxieties and fears. What is important to underline is that these tensions have no characteristics of local religious conflicts. According to the researchers in this case study, radicalisation and VE in Mitrovica South, and also in the whole of Kosovo, is mostly part of a global extremist political Islam that has not emerged from the local environment or local religious traditions. Instead, local grievances have been exploited by some organisations from the Gulf region and some local radical religious leaders that are preaching radical interpretations of Islam.

The second case study on **transnational dynamics in the municipality of Gjilan** has been chosen to analyse transnational dynamics because of its specific social context. This municipality is situated in the cross-border territory between Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia and has an enormous diaspora in Germany and Switzerland. Gjilan's population is mostly Albanians declaring themselves largely as Muslims. The municipality of Gjilan represents one of the focal points regarding the transnational dynamics in the whole of Kosovo. Many inhabitants have their families in North Macedonia and Serbia. In this case, religion plays an important role related to radicalisation and VE, linked to transnational dynamics and digital socialisation. This specific social context is a very good basis for scrutinising radicalisation and VE. It is important to underline that there are significant influences of people from the Middle East changing the cultural landscape of this municipality and influencing already existing religious beliefs and traditions, especially in the context of political linkage with religion.

The third case study on **religious interpretation in the municipality of Gjakova** involves a social context defined by a plurality of religious practices and beliefs. Among the Muslim inhabitants, there are two main traditions of Islam, namely the Bektashi order and Sunni Islam. The Christian community is Catholic, but there is also a small community of Protestants and a few people who belong to the Serbian Orthodox group. The observed social context related to multi-religiosity is generally characterised by a high level of common living, but with some issues related to social and religious gaps. The religious gap is exemplified by the misinterpretation of Islam, which also represents the major factors of radicalisation and VE in the municipality of Gjakova. The low level of education and unemployment in all three municipalities are important social factors that threaten the social resilience of these communities and their developments in general.

Political system

After the dissolution of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, and a war that resulted in the establishment of an international protectorate, Kosovo became an independent country in 2008. In Kosovo, the police, military and paramilitary forces made by Orthodox ethnic Serbs fought against predominantly Muslim ethnic Albanians. Kosovo is a mostly homogenous country with Albanians constituting around 92 percent of its population. Still, Kosovo is diverse in the context of the ethnic and

religious affiliation of its population. Although a majority of Albanians in Kosovo are Muslims, there are also Catholic and Protestant Albanians, together with Orthodox and other religions. In this context, it is important to underline that most Albanians overcame religious differences and divisions by establishing a secular Albanian national identity based on linguistic unity.

Others who live in Kosovo include the Serbian, Bosnian, Croat, Turkish, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. The contemporary politics of Kosovo is created in a framework of a multi-party parliamentary representative democratic republic, whereby the President is the head of state, and the Prime Minister is the head of government. Parliamentary elections are held every four years, with the most recent elections being in 2021. Regarding the political context, Kosovo, as well as other countries in the Balkans, is a relatively young democracy going through a long transitional period from building systems of the rule of law, human rights to the free market economy. In the last few years, the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue, a set of talks facilitated by the EU between the governments of Serbia and Kosovo, has generated an overall sense of uncertainty due to contestations to Kosovo's statehood. These negotiations started in 2011, three years after Kosovo's declaration of independence, and mark the first discussions between the two sides since the declaration.

Economic and social opportunities

Although there is a correlation between social unrest and poverty, poverty alone is not a significant factor in embracing VE in Kosovo. Many individuals who became radicalised or went to Syria to join violent extremist groups were not from economically deprived backgrounds. However, a lack of job prospects, equal employment opportunities, and adequate education can drive some youth to seek spiritual comfort within extremist groups. For instance, unemployment and social immobility were particularly significant in the case of foreign fighters. The relationship between religion and socioeconomic factors such as education and unemployment shows that employment and education are crucial in building social resilience against radicalisation and VE. In Kosovo's context, low education levels make individuals vulnerable to manipulation by radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islamist beliefs. Similarly, high levels of unemployment limit access to decent social welfare and have led to the recruitment of youth by radical imams to join the wars in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the misuse of bad economic conditions by certain Middle East charity organisations has also led to the recruitment of youth for the Syrian war.

NORTH MACEDONIA

The social context of North Macedonia is coloured by the inter-ethnic relations, particularly between two communities, the majority ethnic Macedonians, and the largest non-majority community in the country, ethnic Albanians. The fragile relations have influenced not only public discourse, but personal discourse as well, regarding issues of ethnic identities, cultures and historical matters. These issues are not only present within Macedonian society but also affect its neighbouring societies; in other words, the main conflict between Macedonians and Albanians since 2001 remains a divisive issue for the whole of Macedonian society, which is proven by the case study on **commemorations of the 2001**

Macedonian conflict in Tetovo. According to Trajanovski (2021), violence at and after commemorative events in Macedonian contemporary society is not a novelty per se. In the past years there have been controversies along religious, ethnic and national lines, and the legacy of the 2001 conflict presents one of the most heated memory-related issues in the domestic public discourse and the most contested issue in the history of ethnic relations between Macedonians and Albanians in North Macedonia. The conflict resulted in over 200 casualties and 100,000 internally displaced persons, and was resolved with the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which led to a major institutional restructuring of the Macedonian state. Nonetheless, understanding the social and political developments related to this conflict can help to understand current drivers of radicalisation in the country.

The issue of violence is also contextualised within the second case study on **Tetovo's football fan groups.** The social context of North Macedonia can be considered as unique, particularly when speaking about inter-ethnic relations in the town of Tetovo. Football fandom in the post-conflict region of former Yugoslavia is linked to nation-building processes and the establishment of symbolic and physical borders between nations. In North Macedonia, inter- and intra-ethnic animosity and violence between football fan groups have been documented since the early 1990s, with some fan groups identified as promoting hate speech, political and religious extremism, and having former members who became foreign fighters in Syria and Ukraine. In the social and cultural context, these specific subcultures are rich fields for researching VE and radicalisation within society in general. There is also an implied link with political actors, which is specific within societies in the Western Balkans.

In the context of institutional dynamics in North Macedonia, it is important to underline the case study on **prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility.** It represents an important study related to radicalisation's potential in Macedonian society within the prison system. The State Directorate for Execution of Sanctions in North Macedonia is working to prevent radicalisation in prisons by training staff and reaching out to potentially radicalised inmates. The National Strategy for Penitentiary System Development aims to ensure a professional approach to the supervision of penal and correctional institutions and to establish a probation system. The new National Strategy for the Development of the Penitentiary System continues to promote and upgrade the penitentiary system to ensure a safe environment with proper education and professional training, support for personal development, and constructive use of free time. These efforts are aimed at preventing radicalisation leading to forced extremism in prisons. There are two types of penitentiary institutions in Macedonia – penitentiary institutions and correctional-educational institutions. In total, there are 11 penitentiary institutions in Macedonia, including 4 penitentiaries and 7 prisons. The only ward for women offenders is located in Idrizovo Penitentiary in Skopje, and there is currently only one correctional-educational facility for juveniles in Volkovija, Tetovo.

Political system

The Republic of North Macedonia has a complex ethnic structure and is in a strategically important geopolitical location in the Balkans. Recent events, such as the Prespa Agreement signed between Greece and North Macedonia and the Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria, mark significant milestones in the country's EU integration process. Ethnicity is still the

main political cleavage and remains important for political mobilisation. The population in North Macedonia is quite diverse, but Macedonians and Albanians represent the two major groups. Nonetheless, the country's ethnic composition and balance has changed since its dissolution from former Yugoslavia. The Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed to end the 2001 conflict, and constitutional changes were made to improve the status and rights of Albanians living in Macedonia. While ethnic relations have improved since 2001, there is still potential for radicalisation and extremist groups to gain followers on both sides.

Economic and social opportunities

The high unemployment rate and unfavourable economic circumstances for youth in North Macedonia contribute to the process of radicalisation. When individuals perceive a lack of opportunities to achieve a better future, they may become more vulnerable to manipulation by extremist groups. As a result, these conditions increase the likelihood of radicalisation among the youth. This highlights the importance of addressing economic and social issues to prevent radicalisation and promote stability in the country. In some cases, families of convicted foreign fighters have received financial assistance from the government, such as welfare assistance and child allowance. However, one of the past incidents involving the prosecution of three individuals with ties to terrorism, including the son of a prominent doctor and hospital owner, showed that economic deprivation is not always a factor in radicalisation at the individual level.

THE DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM AT THE MESO LEVEL

Religion

Religion is a potentially relevant mechanism for the spread of radical ideas in the third case study in BiH – (young) supporters of online Salafi influencers. Namely, the main topic of all social media posts of Salafi influencers refers directly or indirectly to Islam and the interpretation of Islamic rules in a way that is understandable to all followers. In their posts, videos and comments, Salafi influencers often use sources that are unverified works of other scholars in interpreting religious ceremonies and performing prayers (mostly from similar Salafi circles), which can be problematic and present an "introduction to radicalism". A frequent topic in their speeches relates to the way Islam addresses temptation or punishment. Their followers support Salafi influencers as religious leaders who enjoy the respect and authority of like-minded people. The content that Salafi influencers publish on social media uses religion as a guiding theme. In addition, the driver of religion has strong links with other drivers (such as the cultural one), primarily due to validation of certain lifestyles through religious texts, which can be at odds with established, mainstream social practices in BiH society. For example, many posts include information and/or guidance on aspects or practices of everyday life, such as dressing, rules of interaction for women and towards women, as well as the use of facilities, such as restaurants, hotels and sports centres.

In the case of Bulgaria, religion interconnects to the status of being a marginalised community. Due to discriminatory stances of the Bulgarian majority population towards socially-marginalised communities, the members of these communities tend to put their trust in various religious denominations that offer socialisation, spiritual leadership and a value system. This role was previously played by Protestantism or evangelicalism, and more recently by radical interpretations of Islam. Salafism and followers of Salafism are particularly attractive to members of socially-marginalised communities in Bulgaria because they show them respect through religion, and provide them with a feeling of belonging and proactive communication (Mancheva and Dzhekova, 2017), unlike the rest of Bulgarian society, which excludes them on every basis. Due to insufficient integration policies and targeted social programmes, which would facilitate their integration, religion is the point of gathering for those members and it is even more pronounced than among the rest of Bulgarians. Members of socially-marginalised communities who are followers of Salafism respect religious rituals and dogmas, regularly visiting places of worship/mosques, which symbolises an active social connection and a relationship of mutual assistance. Given the aforementioned, it can be said that members of socially-marginalised communities brought together by Salafist ideas tend to lead an active religious life, and have their own ritual rhythm motivated by a conviction of belonging to a "purer" Islam.

In Kosovo, religion is the main driver of radicalisation, as all three case studies clearly show that religion, in particular misconceptions of religion, is the driver that not only impacts VE and radicalisation but also influences social and political processes. It is important to underline that the historical shift of Kosovo as an independent country and change of political and other systems (just as in other countries of the Western

Balkans) created serious identity crisis among many citizens. This crisis is 'used' by various religious leaders to promote radical Islam in order to gain as many followers as possible. In most cases, religion as the major driver is linked to globally radical Islamist ideologies and groups planting the seeds of religious hatred, inter-religious animosities and radicalism. Various misinterpretations of Islam are directed at young people, who lack knowledge about other religions and cultures as well. Kosovo has a high level of religiosity among inhabitants practising traditional Islam, but there are mosques in which radical Islam is preached, and radical Islamist preachers are quite influential. Hence, some youth identify with them and the concepts they are preaching. Religion is also a significant aspect of life for many people in North Macedonia. Case studies suggest that while religion can be a catalyst for radicalisation and VE, it is only one factor in the complex web of ethnonational tensions between the two largest communities in the country, namely Macedonians and Albanians.

Digital socialisation

Social media represents a relevant mechanism for spreading radical ideas in the third researched community in BiH – (young) supporters of online Salafi influencers. Social networks can serve as a tool for socialisation of individuals with radical or extremist ideas and as an echo chamber where such ideas are amplified. The popularity that Salafi influencers have among (young) followers is a result of the ability of influencers to incorporate the latest audiovisual trends into the produced content. Furthermore, this content is produced in an innovative way to grab attention and engage a greater number of followers. Visual appeal, the language – which is adapted to the targeted population –, the translation of extracts from religious works (most commonly from Arabic into Bosnian), attractive topics, control of comments (only affirmative comments are approved), and the charisma of the lecturer who exudes authority – leave an impression of a serious media content that is only a click or like/comment away from young people. Due to their popularity, online Salafi influencers build up a large number of followers, and media attention is given to them. In this sense, 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.

Social networks also serve as a strong platform for organising online far-right communities in Bulgaria, motivating new members via sharing videos and other content. Lately, the agenda used by online conservative communities in Bulgaria is focused on two significant topics: opposition to the promotion of liberal family values as well as opposition to COVID-19 measures. By publishing content with very often unverified information even when they do not call for violence, online conservative communities damage Bulgarian society because their actions cause intolerance and polarisation. The spread of misinformation and the blind belief of followers in the content that, promoted by ultra-conservative communities on social media, speaks of insufficiently developed critical thinking and lack of media and information skills to recognise such content as biased. What is clear is that ultra-conservative communities use social media to call for participation in protest actions in the streets, and they do not use Facebook only as a platform but also as a starting point of ideas they implement in the real world.

Additionally, digital socialisation is the most important driver of potential radicalisation of football fans in Bulgaria. The online environment is attractive because it tends to increase the extreme feelings of football

fans, allowing them greater anonymity and freedom, which is why respondents consider social media to be very influential (especially in fan circles where everyone wants to prove themselves). Fan groups use online groups and pages to mobilise new fans, glorify their clubs but also to spread political messages and express their dissatisfaction with political parties. Moreover, they also usually express hatred towards fans of other football clubs. Observation of the Facebook groups and pages revealed that football fans mostly express themselves through offensive messages and comments at the expense of rival football clubs and their supporters. In that way, the posts on social media become an important driver in the assessment of potential radicalisation, because explicit online visual content can be a trigger for conflicts at matches. Additionally, it is important to note that the narratives, ideologies and methods that hooligans use outside football stadiums could also be seen as pivotal for the radicalisation processes.

Economic deprivation

Socioeconomic problems, coupled with prejudice, stereotypes, hate speech and violence, which most of the population in Bulgaria manifests towards socially-marginalised communities – particularly the Roma community –, are some of the leading causes of accepting Salafism by some of the members of these communities. They find a way out of difficult social conditions and an escape from a marginalised position in Salafi circles that offer them respect and a feeling of togetherness, i.e., everything that members of socially-marginalised communities are not offered by the social majority in their own country. Unemployment and economic deprivation in general are very significant in the context of building the social resilience of the entire society towards radicalisation and VE. In all cases, it reduces access to a decent life and therefore many radical groups manage to recruit some unemployed and poor youth to fight in wars, for example in Iraq and Syria, or join and socialise with certain radical groups. Similarly, problems of poverty and social exclusion present the most serious obstacle for the social resilience of youth in North Macedonia. In this respect, economic deprivation is one of the drivers that deeply influences young people to join radical social movements or subcultures that are very much affected by individuals' or their families' economic deprivation.

Territorial inequalities

The project team in Bulgaria singled out territorial inequalities as possible triggers of radicalism among young football fans. A typical characteristic of football clubs and their fans in Bulgaria is that they tend to create a big rivalry with other clubs and fan groups. Often, the rivalry is caused by regional differences because, for young people in Bulgaria, the neighbourhood is the most decisive factor that determines their club allegiance (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Hence, the fan groups in Bulgaria try to affirm their identity through confrontation with other fan groups. Based on the above, it can be concluded that territorial differences arise from perceptions of rivalry with the opposing fans and factions or towns, as own groups are viewed as "unique". Accession and a "loyalty test" to a fan group are reflected in causing damage to the opposing club, physical attacks on opposing fans or on minority groups. When young people pass this "test", which is a rite of passage, they become a part of the faction, of a fan group with whom they deeply identify and share a feeling of togetherness. By joining, the fan faction becomes a point of unity, mutual support and loyalty to the club, i.e., it plays a vital role in shaping the individual ideological system of (young) supporters.

Researchers have also considered the link between territorial inequalities and radicalisation in North Macedonia to be significant. Specifically, the focus has been on the societal, political and media attention given to several municipalities based in Skopje and Macedonian towns, which are deemed to form the most significant predispositions in this regard. Other cities, particularly those with an Albanian majority, such as Tetovo, are neglected in many social, economic and cultural aspects – precisely because of the ethnic component.

Transnational dynamics

In the case of Bulgaria, transnational dynamics represent one of the drivers of radicalisation in the case study of online conservative communities. Namely, online conservative communities often use foreign propaganda and fake news (from the Russian state, Christian organisations, far-right political parties, non-partisan organisations, etc.) in their social media posts to oppose liberal values or measures against COVID-19. Such content contains inaccurate, unverified and untrue information, but supporters consider it to be true, verified and accurate. Even though football fans express rivalry towards other clubs in Bulgaria, transnational influences are seen in friendly relations of Bulgarian football fans with certain Western European football supporters' groups and in the access to foreign far-right videos and materials on social networks. Also, the project team in Bulgaria identified transnational dynamics as one of the drivers of radicalisation in a case study (marked as confidential) involving two socially-marginalised communities. Influences of the Salafi interpretation of Islam were "imported" in Bulgaria from Western Europe. Some members of socially-marginalised communities who accept the Salafi interpretation of Islam even identify as members of another nation and speak other languages instead of Bulgarian (Mancheva and Dzhekova, 2017). The acceptance of Salafism by some members of socially-marginalised communities enables the de-stigmatisation and re-stigmatisation of members of these communities and the joining to a wider community that is transnational and provides an identity beyond the marginal status and the discriminatory attitude they experience in the local community.

In Kosovo, too, transnational dynamics influence radicalisation and VE, and represent one of the major drivers of VE and radicalisation of Kosovar society, especially bearing in mind that many extremist ideological groups and individuals entered the country from abroad. Many organisations with a humanitarian and religious background entered this country and produced a significant influence on inhabitants through a variety of literature, religious courses, building religion symbols, and so on. As stated in the national report, the municipality of Gjilan is characterised as one of the focal points of the transnational dynamics because it is situated close to the triangle of borders between Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia, which is the "perfect field" for the movement of various extremists. This driver, as indicated in the study of the municipality of Gjilan, presents a fundamental factor of radicalisation and VE among youth. Global extremists' movements and groups, as well as radical imams from abroad, have actively advocated fundamentalist interpretations of Islam that are in most cases the very opposite of what is traditional Islam in Kosovo.

Political issues (claims, demands and grievances)

The education system in BiH advocates an ideology of division, based on the politics of cultural differences led by the ruling ethnonational groups. "Two schools under one roof" is a symptom of

ethnonational divisions in which pervasive discrimination, inequality and segregation of children based on their ethnicity and nationality are practised. Findings from the research reveal that the divisions built on politicised nationalism serve as the basis for establishing a divided community of "two schools under one roof". The political ideas behind this institutionalised form of division can be clearly identified as drivers of potential radicalisation among young people in BiH. Moreover, many researchers warn that ethnonationalism and hooliganism go hand in hand with sport in BiH society. Football fans use ethnicity to justify their existence while their fandom groups serve as a catalyst for belonging to a politically-fragmented country. They use ethnic origin as a narrative for division and legitimising provocations and violence towards opposing fans.

Based on the data of the research, political ideologies proved to be a significant driver of radicalisation in organised groups of football fans. Deeply-rooted nationalism, divisive narratives and mutual hate are articulated in stadiums in BiH, and conflicts between fans often require police intervention. Because of such violent episodes, football matches are often played "behind closed doors" in stadiums. The violence seen at football matches highlights the fragility of tolerance between the country's three ethnic groups and how easily intolerance can escalate into violence, often fuelled by far-right and nationalist groups. Data showed that organised groups of football clubs' supporters remain a potential arena for radical and divisive political attitudes, ethnonational polarisation, and political instrumentalisation.

In the case of Bulgaria, far-right ideology is also built on nationalist rhetoric. Specifically, this rhetoric is aimed at preserving the Bulgarian identity, believing that socially-marginalised communities are a threat to the country. In this regard, the number of incidents involving right-wing nationalists has been increasing in Bulgaria in recent years. As police and investigative institutions avoid working against right-wing radicalism, such decisions favour the intensification or the normalisation of violence and hate speech in the public domain, especially towards socially-marginalised communities. Therefore, political problems are one of the fundamental drivers of potential radicalisation in the case study on **"socially-marginalised communities"**, which is related to another investigated case study on **"online conservative communities"**. Violence against minority groups is often brought into relation with informal right-wing extremists who gather in online conservative communities. They are also proactive organisers of demonstrative violence of everything that is not in accordance with their agenda. The research shows that, in online conservative communities, the focus is on protecting traditional family values, opposing measures related to COVID-19, and so on, through posts, videos and comments, and so on. That is, in the online sphere, members of conservative communities led by the far-right ideology are against all liberal values and everything that is marked as "harmful" to the Bulgarian identity.

When analysing the data, political grievances appear to be one of the identified drivers of radicalisation of young football fans in Bulgaria. Football fans expressed political dissatisfaction, which manifested itself as a factor of radicalisation at the meso level. Negative perceptions of the current leadership of football authorities, which are mostly connected to the political establishment of the country, and general indignation against the corrupt government and political parties were the basis of their political dissatisfaction. In the online sphere, football fans openly and intensively criticise authorities and ruling

political parties, considering them to be the main culprits for inadequate social conditions. There were also calls on other supporters to "demolish" such a system, which ultimately often ends in violence and hatred in their arena in the real world, i.e., in stadiums.

Political demands are strictly connected to VE and radicalisation in the context of the legacy of armed conflict and Kosovo's post-war political situation. In the ethnically-divided city of Mitrovica, political demands are significantly higher than in other towns in Kosovo and this division creates many obstacles with serious consequences for the citizens in this community. The city of Mitrovica has ethnonational political tensions due to its division into two parts, which occurred after the war in Kosovo in 1999. The division was officially recognised in 2008, with the adoption of the Law on Local Self-Government. Mitrovica South is now predominantly Albanian and Muslim, while Mitrovica North is predominantly Serbian and Christian Orthodox. The local political context produces anxieties, which have contributed to a very complex social environment mostly regarding unemployment and poverty among many people in Mitrovica South, which can, in turn, increase some individuals' vulnerability towards radicalism and VE.

In the case of North Macedonia, socio-political demands are the most potent means for radicalisation and VE. While the issue of political grievances does have a long history in North Macedonia, recent years have shown that the legacies of the 2001 conflict continue to influence the public discourse in the country, especially in the context of ethnic relations. This context, when used in a public political sphere, is a very influential factor of radicalisation and VE. Political parties, organisations of war veterans, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are deeply involved in commemorative segments that are connected to the 2001 conflict for both ethnic groups, Macedonians and Albanians, often being instrumentalised by political parties. This is achieved through the participation of high-ranking party officials in commemorative events, which serve as a tool to mobilise the party base, while lower party echelons utilise such events to demonstrate their allegiance to the party. On the other side, football fans' groups might also represent social and cultural spots where radicalisation and extreme violence are present, especially among young people. This occurs due to the fact that these subcultures are very often linked to the political actors, political ideologies and political agendas, feeding the rivalry in the inter-ethnic context.

Educational, cultural and leisure opportunities

The lack of educational, cultural and leisure opportunities are potential drivers of radicalisation of football fans in BiH. Disenfranchised youth join fan groups because belonging to a group enables them to feel a sense of togetherness, gain power, get rid of boredom, and overcome everyday frustrations. In a country of divisions, love for football, love for the city, excitement for victory, and the togetherness nurtured by fans give a sense of a collective identity. Apart from group values, history and ethnic nationalism are the basis of values of some fan groups, which are no strangers to hooliganism, crime, aggression and violence.

It is crucial to emphasise that this driver holds significant importance within the subculture of football fans. According to the research, it is related to the need to belong to a group and the capacity of an

individual to socialise and spend time with their friends and fellow members. Football fan subcultures in North Macedonia dominantly view the importance of their ethnic, cultural and religious identities and it is a way for them to manifest it. Enormous influence of "trash culture" (low-quality and culturally-impoverished content that often includes vulgarity) supported by social networks and various indoctrinations in the education system, not only in North Macedonia but in the other Western Balkan countries as well, do not create enough innovative and interesting spaces for a majority of young people to spend their leisure time, and meet with other cultures and cultural identities. That is why the lack of educational, cultural and leisure opportunities, linked to poverty and deprivation, is a very significant driver of radicalisation and VE.

Specific socio-political drivers: nationalism, xenophobia, racism and hate speech in Bulgaria

Although it was not primarily examined through the study, the research team identified one specific factor that exists in all countries, but is mostly highlighted in the case of football supporters in Bulgaria: the driver of nationalism, very often degrading to xenophobia and hate speech in online groups. It is closely connected to the driver of political issues, and has similar manifestations in several other cases, but is more extreme in the Bulgarian case. For example, in Facebook posts, in addition to information about football results and victories, there are frequent posts and comments on national holidays or posts about controversial historical figures, which gather positive reactions. At the same time, there are frequent negative announcements about events from everyday life that can cause fierce reactions from football fans, uniting them along ethnic Bulgarian lines against other ethnic groups. The research team concluded that xenophobia, racism and hate speech are visible in the observed Facebook groups and pages. Most often, pejorative terms and slurs are used for Roma communities, Muslims, Jews, or homosexuals. A particular way that football fans understand nationalism involves the idea of a "Greater Bulgaria", i.e., that the Bulgarian nation needs to have a bigger role from the one it currently has on the international level, which represents a Bulgarian irredentism in relation to the territorial claims in its neighbourhood. Despite territorial differences within the country and hatred among fan groups, nationalism is a topic that unites fans. Under the disguise of "true patriots", fan groups nurture nationalism, xenophobia, racism and hate speech, considering "Others" a burden to Bulgarian society.

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE (SIMILAR CASES) AND POINTS OF DIVERGENCE (DIFFERENT CASES)

When looking at the drivers of radicalisation in BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia, there are some points of convergence and some points of divergence.

Points of convergence in the report include:

- Religion being a driver of radicalisation and extremism in BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia.
- Social media being a tool for the spread of radical ideas and for organising among young followers/supporters in BiH and Bulgaria.
- Economic deprivation being a major driver of radicalisation and VE in Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

- Football fan clubs and stadiums in all four countries being potential venues for radicalisation and extreme violence.
- Nationalism and xenophobia, which are present in all countries.
- In BiH, the lack of educational, cultural and leisure opportunities is identified as a potential driver of radicalisation among football fans, while in North Macedonia a lack of alternative opportunities for leisure and cultural engagement is identified as an important driver of radicalisation among football fans. In Bulgaria, an additional driver of radicalisation among football supporters was identified as nationalism, xenophobia, racism and hate speech, which could also be seen as a potential driver in other countries under study.

Points of divergence in the report include:

- In BiH, religion is primarily a driver of radicalisation among young supporters of online Salafi influencers, while in Bulgaria members of socially-marginalised communities tend to turn to Salafism for socialisation, spiritual leadership, and a value system. In Kosovo, religion is linked to global radical Islamist ideologies and groups, while in North Macedonia religion is closely tied to ethnic identity.
- Economic deprivation is a major driver of radicalisation and VE in Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia, but the specific ways in which it contributes to radicalisation may differ.
- The role of social media as a tool for the spread of radical ideas also varies between the countries. In BiH, Salafi influencers use social networks to attract followers and have become virtual gathering places for the sharing of ideas, while in Bulgaria online conservative communities use social media to organise and disseminate their agenda, often spreading misinformation, and causing social divisions.
- The role of territorial inequalities as a driver of radicalisation also varies between the countries. In Bulgaria, territorial differences and perceptions of rivalry with opposing fans and factions can lead to physical attacks and damage to opposing clubs, while in North Macedonia territorial inequalities and a focus on certain municipalities can lead to neglect in other towns, which can influence community resilience towards radicalism and extremism.

It is important to note that each of the drivers of radicalisation may interact with each other in complex ways, and the relevance of each driver may vary depending on the context and the community under study.

LESSONS ON INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MACRO- AND MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

Both the macro and meso levels of analysis examine the drivers of radicalisation in the Balkans. Both levels identify religion, digital socialisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, and political issues as drivers of radicalisation. At the macro level, the focus is on institutional perceptions of factors that contribute to radicalisation, such as grievances, experiences of exclusion or marginalisation, and lack of knowledge about other religions and cultures. At the meso level, the focus is on group-level factors that contribute to radicalisation, such as online Salafi influencers, socially-marginalised communities, inter-ethnic relations and animosities, and football fans. The meso level also highlights the role of social media in organising and spreading extremist ideas and amplifying extreme emotions.

In terms of similarities, both levels identify religion as a driver of radicalisation, particularly Salafism, which is often seen as a source of socialisation, spiritual leadership, and a value system for marginalised communities. Both levels also identify economic deprivation as a major driver of radicalisation, particularly among young people. Social media is also identified as a key driver of radicalisation in both levels, being used as a tool for the spread of extremist ideas and to organise and mobilise groups. In terms of differences, the macro level also highlights the role of personal characteristics, such as lack of knowledge about other religions and cultures, in driving radicalisation, while the meso level highlights the role of structural factors, such as socioeconomic problems, territorial inequalities, and political grievances, in driving radicalisation. Overall, both levels of analysis provide important insights into the drivers of radicalisation in the Western Balkans, highlighting the complex interplay between individual and group-level factors, as well as the role of social, economic, political and cultural factors in driving radicalisation.

CONCLUSIONS

The report explored the drivers of radicalisation among youth in the Balkans and presents recommendations for preventing VE from a community perspective. The study focused on four countries in the region: BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, with nine case studies conducted across the Balkans (three case studies per country).

Religion was identified as a driver of radicalisation among youth in BiH, Bulgaria, and Kosovo. In BiH, young supporters of online Salafi influencers interpret religious ceremonies and perform prayers using unverified works of other scholars, leading to an "introduction to radicalism". In Bulgaria, members of socially-marginalised communities turn to Salafism as a source of socialisation, spiritual leadership, and a value system. In Kosovo, religion is linked to globally radical Islamist ideologies and groups and is directed towards young people who lack knowledge about other religions and cultures.

Social media plays a significant role in the spread of radical ideas among youth in the Balkans. In BiH, Salafi influencers use social networks to attract followers and have become virtual gathering places for sharing radical ideas. In Bulgaria, online far-right communities use social media to spread their agenda, often disseminating misinformation and causing social divisions. Social media also contributes to the potential radicalisation of football fans in Bulgaria, amplifying extreme emotions and allowing for the spread of hate speech against rival teams.

Economic deprivation was identified as a major driver of radicalisation and VE in Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia. In Bulgaria, socioeconomic problems and prejudice towards marginalised communities lead some members of these communities to find solace in Salafi circles. In Kosovo, economic deprivation and unemployment can drive people towards radicalism and VE, particularly among youth. In North Macedonia, poverty and social exclusion are major obstacles impacting society's resilience towards radicalisation and VE, and can lead young people to join radical movements.

Territorial inequalities and transnational dynamics can also play a significant role in driving radicalisation in the Balkans. In Bulgaria and North Macedonia, territorial differences and perceptions of rivalry with opposing fans and factions can lead to physical attacks and damage to opposing clubs. Transnational dynamics, including foreign propaganda and fake news, can contribute to radicalisation in Bulgaria, where online conservative communities oppose liberal values and measures against COVID-19. However, the acceptance of Salafism by members of socially-marginalised communities in Bulgaria enables them to de-stigmatise and join a wider, transnational community that provides an identity beyond their marginal status in the local community.

Lastly, political claims and grievances play an important role in the Balkan context. In BiH, the education system is said to advocate an ideology of division based on the politics of cultural differences led by the ruling ethnonational groups, which serves as a basis for potential radicalisation among young people. Far-right ideology is a major issue in Bulgaria and attempts to preserve Bulgarian identity,

leading to incidents involving right-wing nationalists, violence and hate speech towards marginalised communities in the public domain. In Kosovo, socio-political demands are strictly connected to VE and radicalisation in the context of the legacy of armed conflict and post-war political situation. In North Macedonia, the ongoing issues surrounding ethnic relations and political history contribute to potential radicalisation.

POLICY DIRECTIONS

Based on the findings of the CONNEKT project, which aimed to understand the drivers of radicalisation and VE among youth in the Balkan region, the following policy directions to tackle the issue on the community level in BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have been identified:

- Address the socioeconomic issues that contribute to radicalisation, such as poverty and unemployment. This can be done through targeted policies and programmes that provide education that leads to employment, or specific education that is aimed towards recognising employment opportunities. Additionally, strengthen the linkages between schools and local employers in all countries.

- Increase access to educational and cultural opportunities for young people, particularly in disadvantaged communities, to provide them with alternatives to joining extremist groups. This can be done through continuous financial support for local organisations and NGOs, as well as through investment in community centres.

- Address the issue of territorial inequalities that contribute to radicalisation by implementing policies and programmes that promote greater equality and inclusion. These can be programmes of affirmative action and community development or programmes that encourage mutual exchange between different territorial parts, e.g., between poorer areas and richer parts, and parts with different ethnonational composure.

- Counter the spread of extremist ideologies online by investing in digital literacy programmes of youth in secondary education (for instance, similar to media literacy programmes offered by UNESCO).

- Address the issue of nationalism, xenophobia, racism and hate speech in all countries by promoting education and awareness-raising on the dangers of these ideologies. This could be done by providing youth with the necessary resources to implement their own thematic projects.

- Develop programmes and initiatives that promote dialogue and understanding between different ethnonational and religious groups in BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia, in order to reduce the risk of radicalisation. The dialogue should also be facilitated among participants from the same ethnonational groups in order to detect and determine behavioural patterns that should not be encouraged (towards "Others").

- Consider the implementation of early intervention and prevention programmes (e.g., together with football clubs and football fan associations) that target young people at risk of radicalisation and provide them with alternatives to joining extremist groups.

- Encourage transnational cooperation and information sharing among governments, civil society and the private sector through the establishment of professional networks. These networks could focus on specific issues, such as the role of social media in radicalisation.

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CONNEKT

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

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

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

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

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