



Joint Study on Drivers of Radicalisation in Balkans

Tommaso Communale



The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, under Grant Agreement no. 870772



Consortium Members



CONNEKT REGIONAL REPORT

Published by the European Institute of the Mediterranean

D7.5 JOINT STUDY ON DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION IN BALKANS

Tommaso Communale, Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD)

This publication is part of the WP7 of the project, led by the University of Graz (UNI-GRAZ)

Editors: Lura Pollozhani, UNI-GRAZ and Florian Bieber, UNI-GRAZ

Reviewers: Lurdes Vidal Bertran, CONNEKT's Scientific Coordinator

Editorial team: Mariona Rico, IEMed and Aida Traidi, IEMed

Layout: Núria Esparza, IEMed

April 2024

This publication reflects only the views of the author(s); the European Commission and Research Executive Agency are not responsible for any information it contains.

Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed).



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
METHODOLOGY	4
THE DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION IN THE BALKAN REGION	7
CONCLUSION	14
REFERENCES	17



Introduction

The Balkan region has been a focal point of concern regarding radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) in recent years. To address this critical issue, comprehensive research has been undertaken to explore the diverse drivers at play across various levels of analysis, including: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, political grievances, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities. This comparative analysis delves into three distinct levels – macro, meso and micro – to understand the multifaceted nature of these drivers. In particular, this study investigates the complex combinations and intersections of these drivers to enhance the understanding of radicalisation in the Balkans.

At the macro level, the report investigates the interplay of religion and political grievances as potential drivers of radicalisation. The traditional view of religion as the dominant catalyst for extremism has evolved, and the analysis illuminates the shifting landscape, emphasising the role of regional religious institutions in preventing violent extremism (PVE). The study also explores the significant impact of political grievances, with context-dependent manifestations in the Balkans, closely tied to weak states, political unaccountability, corruption, and low trust in institutions.

3

Shifting the focus to the meso level, the role of digital literacy and transnational dynamics as drivers of radicalisation is examined. Lack of digital literacy has emerged as a key factor in the spread of extremist ideologies through social media and online platforms based on the selected case studies, which focused on online communities particularly. The analysis underscores the uneven approaches to address this issue across the Balkans. Additionally, the report highlights the influence of transnational dynamics in exacerbating the problem, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this has shaped prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) strategies.

At the micro level, the emphasis is placed on economic deprivation, political grievances, especially among youth who show political apathy, and the critical aspect of gender dimensions for understanding the drivers of radicalisation and VE in the Balkan countries. The analysis uncovers gender disparities in concerns about radicalisation, participation in religious activities, economic self-perceptions, safety perceptions, and trust in institutions. These patterns provide essential insights for designing more effective strategies tailored to different gender groups.

This comparative analysis aims to not only discuss the key drivers but also to highlight the ways in which these drivers interact. By understanding the intricate relationships between these drivers, researchers and experts can provide informed recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners to develop holistic and interconnected strategies that address the multifaceted nature of radicalisation in the Balkans. In the following sections, the report will delve deeper into each level of analysis, exploring the specific drivers and their combinations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges at hand.



Methodology

This report draws upon previous reports¹ examining drivers of radicalisation and VE at the macro, meso and micro levels of analysis. The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of the methodologies employed in each stage while addressing the pertinent limitations.

ANALYSIS OF DRIVERS AT THE MACRO LEVEL

The regional analysis was primarily grounded in the findings of the four country studies (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia). The objective of the analysis was to uncover both commonalities and distinctions, while also assessing the potential for drawing region-wide conclusions regarding the drivers. A total of 70 interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with a diverse range of stakeholders, including government representatives engaged in P/CVE efforts, civil society organization (CSO) members, religious leaders, and subject matter experts, across the four target countries. The collected insights on drivers were assessed by CONNEKT national researchers and subsequently served as the foundational material for the regional analysis. This research approach centres on a qualitative analysis of the reports, specifically focusing on the institutional context as well as the relevant drivers that can be associated with the intensification of radicalisation and VE.

4

ANALYSIS OF DRIVERS AT THE MESO LEVEL

A unified methodology for the meso-level research was collectively developed by research coordinators and individual teams prior to conducting fieldwork. This research particularly concentrates on the community level, encompassing both strongly institutionalised communities (e.g., schools) and informal communities (e.g., social media groups). Individual communities were selected based on drivers identified at the macro level. The selection of case studies adhered to specific principles: relevance to the national context, cross-country and cross-regional comparability, significance for further prevention research, capacity for qualitative methodologies, and accessibility for primary data collection. The research, inherently qualitative, predominantly relies on data garnered from focus groups and individual interviews. Additionally, tools such as content analysis and CrowdTangle were employed. Ethics guidelines integral to the CONNEKT project were consistently followed, with informed consent or assent (in the case of minors) obtained by the research participants.

METHODOLOGY OF THE CASE STUDIES

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina** conducted research comprising three case studies: “Two Schools Under One Roof”, “Organised Groups of Football Fans” and “Youth Supporters of Online Salafi Influencers.” The methods included interviews and focus groups with students as well

¹ Bieber, F. and Pollozhani, L. (Eds). (2023) *CONNEKT Regional Report on Meso Approaches to the Study of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Mena and the Balkans*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean; Bieber, F. and Pollozhani, L. (Eds). (2021) *CONNEKT Regional Report on Macro Approaches to the Study of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in MENA and the Balkans*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

as Salafi influencers with the most significant following on social networks. Notable challenges included limitations in participant selection, trust-building with participants, and mistrust within communities, which led to delays and necessitated adaptations in research methodologies.²

- In **Bulgaria**, three case studies were conducted: “Online Conservative Communities”, “Football Supporters” and a confidential case study. The latter entailed individual interviews with six young community members and expert interlocutors, primarily focused on individuals aged 12 to 30, integrating content analysis of online groups. Challenges during non-participant online observations included limitations related to Facebook’s CrowdTangle tool and delays due to elections and the COVID-19 pandemic. Certain interviews were cancelled due to participants’ reluctance.
- **Kosovo’s** research comprised of three case studies: “Political Grievances in Mitrovica South”, “Transnational Dynamics in Gjilan” and “Religious Interpretations in Gjakova”. Respondents were chosen based on age, gender, religion, and urban or rural residency. Each case involved multiple focus groups and expert interviews. Limitations encompassed the confinement of case studies to specific municipalities, impacting generalisability.
- In **North Macedonia**, the research featured three case studies: “Commemorations of the 2001 Macedonian Conflict in Tetovo”, “Football Fan Groups in Tetovo” and “Prisons and the Volkovija Facility”. The methods included focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and media content analysis. The third case study encountered challenges related to constraints in conducting direct meetings with the State Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency, necessitating online research via written questionnaires.

ANALYSIS OF DRIVERS AT THE MICRO LEVEL

The findings resulting from the micro-level analysis of drivers stem from non-representative national surveys carried out through face-to-face interviews in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia during March and April 2023. The survey encompassed 52 questions tailored to investigate the seven drivers of VE, as outlined by CONNEKT: education, culture and leisure opportunities, transnational dynamics, religion, political grievances, economic deprivation, and digital socialisation. The primary objective of the survey was to gain insights into various factors associated with PVE.

While the results provide valuable insights into the drivers, it is essential to interpret them with caution due to specific limitations. Firstly, the use of a non-representative research sample restricts the generalisability of the findings to the national level, emphasising their primary utility in providing policy insights for PVE. Secondly, the collected data does not offer a comprehensive exploration of

² For detailed information on the methodology used for the cases studies mentioned in this section, see Bieber, F. and Pollozhani, L. (Eds). (2023) *CONNEKT Regional Report on Meso Approaches to the Study of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Mena and the Balkans*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

the micro-level impact of the predetermined drivers. Therefore, supplementing the quantitative findings with subsequent qualitative investigations to gain a deeper understanding of how respondents perceive specific factors related to PVE is advisable. This qualitative data remains open for further exploration by future researchers and scholars, emphasising the importance of systematic additional studies to achieve a more comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the results.



The drivers of radicalisation in the Balkan region

RELIGION AND POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

At the macro level, the Balkans present a complex landscape where religion and political grievances intertwine as potential drivers of VE and radicalisation. Recent developments have led to a profound shift in the traditional understanding of religion as a primary catalyst for radicalisation, challenging established notions. While radical interpretations of Islam were historically viewed as the dominant drivers of extremism, particularly in the post-9/11 era,³ contemporary research and evolving expert perspectives have reshaped this narrative.

One prominent shift has been the rising influence of regional religious institutions on the P/CVE agenda. This shift signifies a growing collaboration between officially recognised religious communities, thereby introducing a new dimension into the discourse. In countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, institutionalised religious communities have established a framework for cooperation through mechanisms like the Interreligious Council (established in 1997). Officially recognised religious communities have also been endorsed as actors in the fight against various forms of VE in the state's Strategy for Prevention and Combating Terrorism from 2015. Nevertheless, the scope and intensity of their P/CVE-related activities vary within the country. For instance, while the Islamic Community adopted a P/CVE strategy in 2016 and has actively organised related events and initiatives, the Bishops' Conference focuses more on humanitarian activities without explicitly addressing P/CVE issues.⁴

Similarly, North Macedonia has set up an institutional framework to facilitate cooperation among recognised religious communities, which has found practical application in the state's P/CVE agenda. However, grasping the dynamics of radical or non-institutionalised religious interpretations remains a significant challenge, particularly following events like the storming of the Macedonian parliament in 2017. Experts affiliated with state institutions are generally less inclined to consider religious drivers as pivotal to violent escalation. In contrast, experts from civil society and academia show a deeper awareness of the nuances of religious interpretations, highlighting the radical aspects of Orthodox Christianity as potential drivers of radicalisation and VE.⁵

The case of Kosovo, as detailed in the country report, underscores the intricate interplay between officially recognised religious communities and the non-institutionalised interpretations of religious tenets. The Islamic Community of Kosovo, in particular, has been proactive in countering radical

³ Kapidzic, D. et al. (2021) *CONNEKT Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers: Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kambovski, V., Georgieva, L. and Trajanovski, N. (2021) *CONNEKT Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers: North Macedonia*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

interpretations of Islam by engaging in the drafting of state P/CVE strategies, participating in various international P/CVE projects in Kosovo, and launching tailored initiatives and projects. The European Union (EU) has commended the efforts of the Islamic Community of Kosovo in combating radicalisation, although there are varying expectations among state experts regarding its role in P/CVE. Notably, a discourse surrounding religiously-driven radicalisation within non-Islamic contexts, particularly among segments of the Serbian community in Kosovo, is gaining prominence.⁶

In Bulgaria, state strategies for P/CVE recognise religious communities, but the actual impact of their involvement remains uncertain. Notably, the country report highlights prevailing prejudices against the Muslim Roma community, suggesting a proclivity for radicalisation. However, civil society experts and scholars challenge these assumptions, contending that framing religiosity as the primary factor for radicalisation among Muslim Roma is an oversimplification of the complex dynamics of Muslim and Roma communities in Bulgaria. Additionally, the country report identifies a growing trend of far-right and conservative discourse on religion since 2018. This shift is exemplified by fervent debates over Bulgaria's ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2018 and the 2019 Strategy for the Child 2019-2030.⁷ The far-right organisations' arguments pertained to an alleged abandonment of traditional family values in the two documents: creation of "new genders" and legitimisation of the possibility children being easily taken away from their parents on the grounds of rights abuse.

8

A common thread among these cases is the tension between officially recognised religious communities and individual and other informal interpretations of religious tenets. The latter is often considered more prone to radicalisation and to encouraging the subsequent emergence of violent extremist groups. While officially recognised religious communities actively participate in state-sponsored P/CVE agendas, the scale and scope of these activities exhibit variations based on national contexts and religious communities. In essence, the intricate dynamics between religion, extremism and politics in the Balkans require multifaceted analyses.

Shifting the focus to political grievances, their impact also exhibits variations across the Balkans. Political grievances are context-dependent drivers that manifest differently across the four countries due to their distinct socialist legacies, histories of VE, armed conflicts, and evolving political landscapes in post-socialist times. These grievances primarily revolve around a lack of political representation at the institutional level within the state.

A cross-national trend involves political grievances as just one facet of the broader challenges associated with weak states, such as political unaccountability, state capture, high levels of corruption, and low trust in institutions. In Kosovo, tensions between political parties have materialised over issues such as the use of the hijab in schools and religious instruction in public

⁶ Peci, L. and Demjaha, A. (2021) *CONNEKT Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers: Kosovo*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

⁷ Dzhokova, R., Ralchev, S. and Stoyanova, N. (2021) *CONNEKT Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers: Bulgaria*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

schools, resulting in several protests over the past decade. The social mobilisation against these decisions has been interpreted as a means of fuelling extremist discourse in the public sphere.⁸

In North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, partisan activities intersect with ethnically exclusive domains controlled by entrepreneurial elites. These activities often target the ethnic “Other” through divisive rhetoric, resulting in polarisation, political incentives, and the weaponisation of public discourse, as suggested by experts not affiliated with state institutions in both countries.⁹ Bulgaria’s political landscape offers an example of the potential extent of such divisive rhetoric, notably, the mainstreaming of far-right ideologies into institutional behaviour or the adoption of such policies by mainstream parties.¹⁰ Far-right groups in positions of political power can mobilise hooligans for political objectives, as seen in Bulgaria. Additionally, these groups can harness the activities of informal groups, or the so-called “patriotic organisations”, a trend observed in both Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

A common pattern emerges, where far-right ideologies embrace more public visibility, while radical religious organisations tend to operate discreetly. Nevertheless, recent events, such as the activities of the fringe organisation Christian Brotherhood in North Macedonia, have pierced the veil of obscurity. An additional observation across the Balkans is the positive role, when it comes to preventing radicalisation, of ethnic parties representing minority groups in Bulgaria and North Macedonia. These parties have enhanced the political representation of minority groups, thereby mitigating the risk of radicalisation within these communities.¹¹

9

The dynamic interplay of religion and political grievances unfolding in the Balkans necessitates a nuanced understanding. These intertwined drivers shape the landscape of VE and radicalisation in the region, demanding in-depth analysis and a multifaceted approach to prevention and intervention. While recognised religious communities and state institutions play pivotal roles, the contributions of CSOs and academic scholarship remain indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of these drivers. Similarly, the variances in political grievances across the Balkans necessitate context-specific interventions and policy measures.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

Digital space plays a crucial role in the context of radicalisation and VE in the four studied Balkan countries. At the macro-level, while lack of digital literacy is recognised as a significant driver in such countries, research on this issue has been uneven, with varying approaches in their respective legal systems. Digital literacy, along with media literacy and media pedagogy, has been identified as a tool to counteract radicalisation through social media and digital content, but the understanding of these concepts and the actions taken by state actors and CSOs differ significantly. In this regard, the focus of state and CSO activities can be categorised into two main domains.

⁸ Peci, L. and Demjaha, A. (2021) op. cit.

⁹ Kapidzic, D. et al. (2021) op. cit.

¹⁰ Dzhekova, R., Ralchev, S. and Stoyanova, N. (2021) op. cit.

¹¹ Kambovski, V., Georgieva, L. and Trajanovski, N. (2021) *CONNEKT Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers: North Macedonia*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean; Dzhekova, R., Ralchev, S. and Stoyanova, N. (2021) op. cit.

The first domain involves the use of social media and the Internet as channels for spreading radical religious messages and interpretations. This phenomenon is consistent across all four states, albeit with distinct characteristics. For instance, in Kosovo, YouTube lectures by radical imams are identified as a primary indoctrination channel. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, researchers have identified a prominent online figure from Salafi circles who capitalises on their online presence to gain a large following. Similar instances of spreading fundamentalist ideologies online were reported in North Macedonia.¹² State institutional approaches to addressing this issue are still in the early stages of policy development. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the state's Communications Regulatory Agency has only recently begun raising concerns about the dissemination of violent and terrorism-related content online. Meanwhile, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AVMU) in North Macedonia has taken steps to combat the online spread of radical religious interpretations, albeit not explicitly addressing digital and media illiteracy in its 2019 Regulatory Strategy.

The second domain involves transnational dynamics related to online disinformation campaigns and vulnerabilities. These dynamics have become especially pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, aligning with the research period in the four states. Reports highlight the lack of digital literacy among the local population, particularly the youth, making them susceptible targets of disinformation campaigns. CSOs play a critical role in addressing this issue, bridging gaps left by state institutions and contributing to a deeper understanding of the motivations behind these campaigns. In Bulgaria, for example, experts from CSOs noted the low digital literacy among the state's youth. However, in the case of Bulgarian Roma, access to the Internet has been associated with the radicalisation of children who have more opportunities and have met their basic needs. There is also a noted vulnerability among Bulgarian youths to far-right narratives due to exposure to hostile online content and uncritical consumption.¹³ A similar trend was observed in North Macedonia, where "infodemics" related to the pandemic influenced nearly three quarters of the population. This situation was seen as a potential arena for malign foreign actors. CSOs in North Macedonia have actively engaged in countering these narratives, such as the Fighting Fake News Narratives platform and the Center for Social Innovations Blink42-21, which published a video game to enhance citizens' resilience to disinformation.

Transnational dynamics represent another significant driver in the Balkan region, with interviewees in all four countries acknowledging its importance in understanding radicalisation and VE. These dynamics encompass the influx of foreign funding and ideologies promoting VE, the influence of diaspora communities, and the impact of transnational organisations on domestic P/CVE strategies. In Kosovo, for example, transnational radical interpretations of Islam have led to various activities within the state, including building religious structures, providing scholarships, diaspora networking, and disseminating radical content online. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, regional networks of far-right Serb nationalist groups, operating across Serbian, Russian and Republika Srpska territories, recruit foreign fighters for conflicts in Ukraine.

¹² Kapidzic, D. et al. (2021) op. cit.

¹³ Dzhhekova, R., Ralchev, S. and Stoynova, N. (2021) op. cit.

Bulgaria has experienced conservative disinformation campaigns targeting liberal and democratic values. Moreover, critical global terrorist events, such as the rise of ISIS, have resonated with the Bulgarian public. The influence of diaspora communities in Kosovo has an impact similar to that of the diaspora in Bulgaria, particularly among Bulgarian Roma communities in Western Europe. Vulnerabilities within these diaspora communities raise questions about the responsibilities of states beyond their borders, emphasising the need for cross-national cooperation. Lastly, transnational dynamics have also influenced the P/CVE agenda at the domestic level in North Macedonia, with major international organisations shaping state agendas and CSO activities.

This combined narrative underscores the interconnected nature of digital literacy and transnational dynamics as drivers of radicalisation in the Balkans. While digital literacy, or rather its lack, plays a foundational role in propagating radical content through online platforms, transnational dynamics create the overarching context within which this radicalisation unfolds. Consequently, strategies aimed at countering radicalisation must take into consideration the combination of these two drivers to tailor comprehensive strategies in an effective collaboration and cooperation among different stakeholders.

ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION AS MACRO- AND MESO-LEVEL DRIVER OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The analysis of economic deprivation as a driver of radicalisation and VE at both macro and meso levels within the Balkan context reveals manifold interpretations. At the macro level, discussions surrounding economic deprivation are often associated with poverty and its connection to broader social marginalisation. While economic deprivation is acknowledged as significant, no consensus exists regarding its role as a decisive driver of radicalisation and VE. In Bulgaria, experts affiliated with state institutions generally downplay its significance, pointing to the lack of a direct correlation between poverty and radicalisation. However, scholars offer an alternative perspective, emphasising that, when combined with ethnicity and social marginalisation, economic deprivation becomes a more pivotal factor, primarily concerning the Roma communities in Bulgaria.

A similar perspective emerges in North Macedonia, where economic deprivation is associated with poverty, although experts tend to link it more with the reintegration and resocialisation of foreign fighters. This institutional approach is promoted in the national P/CVE strategy, with an emphasis on reintegration processes coordinated by an interdisciplinary group. This approach, however, lacks a clear focus on the economic aspects of reintegration. Despite these interpretations, it is essential to consider that these discussions unfolded during a notable media event in North Macedonia, where charges of terrorism against a prominent individual garnered significant attention. Experts' arguments dismissing economic deprivation as a means of radicalisation in this context lacked comprehensive research or long-term insights.

In Kosovo, reports take a slightly different approach, with various opinions pointing towards a lack of economic deprivation, namely a state of relative well-being, as a determinant of radicalisation. Unlike Bulgaria and North Macedonia, poverty is not seen as a significant driver of radicalisation, as even state representatives and officials confirm that most radicalised individuals from Kosovo did

not come from economically deprived backgrounds. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, experts acknowledge poverty as an indirect trigger that operates in conjunction with other drivers. They underline that poverty can be observed as an indirect factor, particularly when combined with other key drivers such as education, mirroring the situation in Bulgaria. Here, experts, mainly those affiliated with non-state institutions, pinpoint several sub-categories of economic deprivation, such as marginalisation, hopelessness, and economic exclusion as significant individual triggers for radicalisation. While the interpretation of economic deprivation in the four states is nuanced, dominant institutional approaches align with the cross-sectoral expert consensus: economic deprivation alone is not a decisive driver of radicalisation.

At the meso level, the context becomes more intricate. In Bulgaria, socioeconomic challenges intertwined with prejudice, stereotypes, hate speech, and violence directed towards socially marginalised communities, particularly the Roma community, are identified as leading factors in the acceptance of Salafism by certain members of these marginalised groups. For them, Salafi circles offer an escape from difficult social conditions and a sense of belonging, elements often missing within their marginalised social status. In this context, unemployment and economic deprivation, which present substantial challenges for the entire society's social resilience against radicalisation and VE, emerge as significant drivers.

Across the region, economic deprivation restricts access to decent living conditions, making it easier for radical groups to recruit unemployed and economically-deprived youth. This phenomenon is observed in the Balkans and is particularly pertinent for North Macedonia, where economic deprivation significantly influences young people to join radical social movements or sub-cultures that provide an alternative to economic hardship.

MICRO-LEVEL DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM: GENDER CONSIDERATIONS

At the micro-level analysis of drivers of radicalisation and VE across the Balkan countries, gender considerations emerge as a consistent and critical aspect. In this regard, understanding how gender dynamics intersect with various drivers is crucial in shaping effective strategies to counter these challenges.

One of the central gender-related patterns that span the Balkan region pertains to concerns about radicalisation within communities. These concerns are not uniform and are influenced by gender, with females consistently demonstrating a higher collective concern about radicalisation within their community compared to their male counterparts. This consistent trend, observed in all four countries, underscores the importance of considering gender dynamics when evaluating the local perceptions of radicalisation and VE. While this gender-driven concern is evident in all countries, there are variations in the extent of these gender differences. In the cases of Bulgaria and North Macedonia, the gender disparities related to concerns about radicalisation are relatively modest, indicating a somewhat balanced perspective among both genders. However, in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the gender differences in perceived concerns about radicalisation are more pronounced, with females expressing notably higher levels of concern.

Moving beyond concerns, the gender dynamics in religious activities emerge as a crucial potential driver of micro-level radicalisation. In these activities, distinct patterns become evident. Kosovo stands out with the highest level of religiosity among both males and females, indicating a strong religious presence. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, both male and female respondents showed considerable participation in religious activities, indicating a shared interest among genders. In contrast, Bulgaria shows a significant gender gap in engagement, with low male participation and female participation in religious activities.

Perceptions of economic status also exhibit variations influenced by gender. Bulgaria, for instance, stands out with the highest percentages among respondents perceiving themselves as economically-disadvantaged, suggesting particular economic challenges within the country. In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo report the lowest percentages among females perceiving themselves as poor or near poor, highlighting differences in economic self-perceptions across gender and among the surveyed countries.

With regard to safety perceptions at the neighbourhood level, both male and female respondents exhibit similar patterns of perceived safety, with a slightly higher level of perceived safety among male respondents. However, when it comes to national-level safety perceptions, a consistent pattern emerges, with male respondents generally reporting a higher percentage of feeling safe compared to female respondents. This indicates that, in terms of feelings of safety within their countries, gender appears to play a substantial role in shaping respondents' perceptions. Within the general context of CONNEKT's research, especially regarding territorial inequalities, it may mean specific, tailor-made approaches are needed at local level regarding prevention, e.g., policies aimed at addressing urban-rural socioeconomic disparities, promoting inclusive development, and ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens.

Lastly, institutional trust, trust in the police, and religious trust are other key areas where gender dynamics influence respondents' perceptions. Trust in state governments, with the exception of North Macedonia, is higher among female respondents, highlighting the significance of state institutions in the eyes of women across the Balkan countries. Conversely, trust in political parties is more prominent among male respondents, a trend consistently observed across countries. Trust in the police, often a vital institution in maintaining security and countering extremism, also shows gender-driven variations. Female respondents generally express higher levels of trust in the police, while trust in the army is slightly higher among male respondents across all countries (with the exception of North Macedonia). In terms of religious trust, female respondents in Kosovo and North Macedonia exhibit slightly higher trust than male ones, whereas male respondents in Bulgaria and Bosnia and Herzegovina show slightly higher trust in religious leaders and figures. In terms of P/CVE, one conclusion is that authorities should invest in a targeted, gender-oriented way in capacity-building and transparency measures to bolster public trust in institutions. Another approach is to facilitate interfaith dialogues and collaborations to enhance understanding and cooperation.



Conclusions

In the complex landscape of the Balkans, where radicalisation and VE are pressing concerns, a nuanced understanding of the drivers at macro, meso and micro levels is crucial. This report highlights the multifaceted nature of these drivers and underscores the need for holistic strategies that consider the interplay of various factors across multiple levels.

MACRO AND MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION

The intersection of economic deprivation at both macro and meso levels plays a pivotal role in understanding the intricate drivers of radicalisation and VE in the Balkans. While the macro-level analysis acknowledges economic deprivation as an indirect factor, often entwined with other key drivers such as education and social marginalisation, the meso-level analysis delves deeper into the connections between economic challenges and the acceptance of radical ideologies, particularly within marginalised communities. This nuanced approach reveals that economic deprivation alone is not a decisive driver of radicalisation. Instead, it is the combination of economic hardships with factors such as ethnicity and social marginalisation that elevates its significance. The cases of Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate how socioeconomic challenges intersect with prejudice, stereotypes, hate speech and violence directed towards marginalised communities, particularly the Roma community, leading certain members to adopt radical ideologies as a response to their challenging living conditions.

Understanding these interconnections between economic deprivation and radicalisation is essential for policy-makers and practitioners. Addressing economic challenges in isolation will likely yield incomplete results. Comprehensive strategies should consider the complexity of these factors and aim to improve the overall living conditions and social resilience of vulnerable communities. Moreover, these findings stress the importance of involving local communities and understanding their specific needs and grievances in the development of effective prevention and intervention programmes.

MICRO-LEVEL DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION

Gender considerations emerge as a consistent and critical aspect in understanding micro-level drivers of radicalisation and VE in the Balkan countries. The evidence underscores significant gender disparities in concerns about radicalisation, with females consistently expressing higher levels of concern about radicalisation compared to their male counterparts. This pattern is observable in all four countries, though with varying degrees of gender disparity. Recognising these gender-specific patterns is vital for tailoring more effective strategies to address radicalisation and VE at the micro level. Such strategies should consider the unique roles and concerns of different genders within these contexts.

Religious activities and economic self-perceptions also exhibit variations influenced by gender. The disparities in these aspects indicate the need for gender-sensitive approaches to address radicalisation effectively. For instance, in Kosovo and North Macedonia, where there is a relatively balanced religious landscape among males and females, interventions should focus on fostering

interfaith dialogue and cooperation to counter extremist narratives effectively. In contrast, in Bulgaria, where there is a significant gender gap in engagement in religious activities, targeted efforts should be made to encourage both males and females to participate in such activities. The differences in economic self-perceptions highlight the need for strategies that address the economic challenges faced by specific gender groups.

In terms of perceptions of safety and trust, gender dynamics play a role in shaping respondents' views. Recognising these dynamics is crucial for understanding local perspectives on safety and trust in institutions. Policy-makers and practitioners should take gender into account when developing measures to improve feelings of safety and trust in state institutions, the police, and religious figures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that stem from this analysis must be interconnected and holistic, reflecting the complexity of drivers at various levels in the Balkans. Policy-makers and practitioners are encouraged to adopt a multifaceted approach.

- **Multilevel strategies:** Develop comprehensive, multilevel strategies that recognise the interconnectedness of factors. Addressing macro-level drivers should be complemented by tailored meso-level and micro-level interventions that target specific communities and their unique needs.
- **Economic empowerment:** Implement initiatives aimed at addressing economic deprivation at its roots. This includes not only addressing poverty but also targeting social marginalisation and unemployment among vulnerable communities. Cross-sectoral policies should aim to provide employment opportunities and improve living conditions.
- **Gender-sensitive approaches:** Design gender-sensitive interventions that account for the varying roles and concerns of different genders. This involves encouraging participation in religious activities, addressing economic challenges, and ensuring safety and trust among males, females and others.
- **Community engagement:** Involve local communities in the design and implementation of prevention and intervention programmes. Communities must be active partners in identifying and addressing drivers of radicalisation and VE, as their unique insights are invaluable.
- **Marginalised communities:** Devise tailor-made measures to address problems of marginalised communities, especially Roma, linked to the risk of further marginalisation or radicalisation.
- **Interfaith dialogue:** Encourage interfaith dialogue and cooperation to counter extremist narratives. Promoting mutual understanding and collaboration among different religious groups can help build resilience against radicalisation.

- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Establish mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of interventions. This will enable policy-makers and practitioners to assess the effectiveness of strategies, make necessary adjustments, and ensure that resources are allocated efficiently.
- **Data collection and research:** Support research and data collection efforts to further refine the understanding of drivers and the impact of interventions. Evidence-based policy-making is essential to develop informed, effective strategies.
- **International collaboration:** Recognise the transnational nature of radicalisation in the Balkans. Collaborate with international partners to address the influence of foreign funding, ideologies, and diaspora communities on domestic P/CVE strategies.

Addressing the multifaceted drivers of radicalisation and VE in the Balkans requires a comprehensive and interconnected approach that encompasses macro, meso and micro levels. Understanding the intricacies of economic deprivation and gender dynamics is central to the development of effective strategies. The Balkans face unique challenges, but with informed policy-making and community involvement, the region can build resilience against radicalisation and VE.



References

Bieber, F. and Pollozhani, L. (Eds). (2021) *CONNEKT Regional Report on Macro Approaches to the Study of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in MENA and the Balkans*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

Bieber, F. and Pollozhani, L. (Eds). (2023) *CONNEKT Regional Report on Meso Approaches to the Study of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Mena and the Balkans*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean

Dzhekova, R., Ralchev, S. and Stoyanova, N. (2021) *CONNEKT Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers: Bulgaria*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

Kambovski, V., Georgieva, L. and Trajanovski, N. (2021) *CONNEKT Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers: North Macedonia*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

Kapidzic, D. et al. (2021) *CONNEKT Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers: Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.

Peci, L. and Demjaha, A. (2021) *CONNEKT Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers: Kosovo*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.



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.



The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, under Grant Agreement no. 870772