CONNEKT
POLICYBRIEF

Policy Brief on Countering and Preventing Meso-Level Drivers in MENA and the Balkans

01
INTRODUCTION

The CONNEKT (Contexts of Extremism in MENA and Balkan societies) project investigates radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Balkan countries at macro (institutional), meso (community), and micro (individual) levels. The first phase of meso-level research explores diverse communities that are potentially vulnerable to radicalisation and provides important insights into relevant drivers of radicalisation (see Annex 1). The second phase of meso-level research goes into the prevention factors and attempts to provide recommendations for resilience-building among the selected communities.

Using case studies, the paper explores diverse contexts like schools and online communities. It progresses to the exploration and discovery of relevant meso-level drivers out of those that CONNEKT explores,[1] emphasising key patterns in the findings (see Annex 2), then moves to community-level interventions in prevention, featuring the lessons learned from the case studies. The final section provides targeted policy recommendations at various levels, underscoring the importance of meso-level analysis in understanding radicalisation.

[1] The seven CONNEKT drivers are: religion, economic deprivation, social digitalisation, territorial inequalities, political grievances, educational, leisure and cultural opportunities, and transnational dynamics.

UNRAVELLING THE DRIVERS IN THE FIRST PHASE – A MOSAIC OF CASE STUDIES

Meso-level drivers

The Balkans

Table 1: Case studies for each Balkan state under study

	BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	BULGARIA	KOSOVO	NORTH MACEDONIA
Case Study 1	Two schools under one roof: The political context includes influence on potential radicalisation and existing segregation.	Online conservative communities: Rallying popular support via propaganda and misinformation.	Political grievances in South Mitrovica: City experiences and ethnonational political tensions.	Commemorations of the 2001 Tetovo conflict: Holds importance as a memory-related topic in public discourse.
Case Study 2	Organised groups of football fans: Public displays of violence throughout history.	Football supporters: Political parties utilise hooligans for political objectives.	Transnational dynamics in Gjilan: Situated near the triangle borders of Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia.	Football fan groups in Tetovo: Ethnic divisions within the local football scene.
Case Study 3	Youth supporters of online Salafi influencers: Lecturers attain a celebrity status within their online communities.	Confidential since the study could further marginalise an already marginalised community. access to educational and employment opportunities.	Religious interpretations in Gjakova: Plurality of religious practices, encompassing Sunni and Bektashi traditions, as well as Catholicism and Orthodoxy.	Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility: Radicalisation risk heightened in prison environments. rvices in areas where women face stronger barriers in their access to educational and employment opportunities.

The case studies, focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, reveal religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, and political grievances as key drivers of radicalisation. Salafi influences through social media play a role in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Kosovo. Socioeconomic challenges in Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia can lead individuals to seek solace in Salafi circles (Kapidžić et al., 2023). Territorial inequalities and transnational dynamics contribute to radicalisation that manifests most clearly in football fandom in Bulgaria and North Macedonia. Foreign propaganda and misinformation on social media fuel radicalisation in conservative communities in Bulgaria (Ralchev and Stoynova, 2022). Political grievances affect education system divisions in Bosnia and

Herzegovina (Trkulja, 2017), far-right ideology in Bulgaria, armed conflict legacy in Kosovo, and ethnic relations in North Macedonia.

MENA

Table 2: Case studies for each MENA state under study

	EGYPT	JORDAN	MOROCCO	TUNISIA
Case Study 1	The Christian community of Al-Warraq: High unemployment and low educational achievements.	Karak area: Limited opportunities, inequality, and strained relationship with the state.	Amal organisation: Association to help transform violence instances into alternative discourses.	Feriana: Proximity to border with Algeria, high youth unemployment.
Case Study 2	Bahtim Informal Community: Rapid transformation from agricultural to urban area.	Refugees in Northern Jordan: Scarcity of opportunities in education, employment, and social integration.	Ultras Siempre Paloma football supporters: Platform for youth expressing discontent with political institutions.	Hammam-Lif: Area with high crime incidence among youngsters.
Case Study 3	Alexandria University: Site of frequent protests.	Ma'an female preachers: A loose structure for informal preachers with high unemployment rate.	Childhood and youth organisation: The ideological socialisation of youngsters within this group.	Sidi Abdelhamid: Socioeconomic polarisation in the governorate.

MENA reports emphasise the intricate nature of radicalisation, highlighting the need to consider social contexts and the interplay between ideology and context. Meso-level analysis identifies that multi-level marginalisation forms the core of economic, social, and political grievances, with high rates of underemployment, insufficient political representation, and limited access to social services. Urban radicalisation patterns reveal various forms of exclusion experienced by different youth categories (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). The findings suggest that radicalisation and violence signal a deeper systemic crisis in the state-citizens' relationship, calling for solutions addressing human development conditions and significant economic, social, and political changes.

THEMATIC SYNTHESIS ACROSS THE LEVELS

The cross-level analysis of drivers in both regions reveals a complex interplay between religion, political grievances, and governance models. The "triangle of anger", involving individual political grievances, economic deprivation, and territorial inequalities, stands out as a focal point contributing to radicalisation. The research underscores the significance of alternative spaces, digitalisation, and leisure/education, emphasising fan cultures and online radicalisation. Additionally, transnational dynamics, external influences, and the roles of diaspora and digitalised relations play crucial roles, with attention to gender and youth issues like toxic masculinity and youth alienation and under-representation.

02

FROM ANALYSIS TO ACTION
IN THE SECOND PHASE – BUILDING RESILIENCE

UNDERSTANDING PREVENTION STRATEGIES

In the second phase of meso-level research, the focus shifted to community-level prevention strategies in the CONNEKT project. Chosen case studies provided insights into why certain communities, despite conducive conditions, remained resilient to VE (Bieber and Pollozhani, 2023). CONNEKT emphasises building social resilience as a preventive measure, combining context-specific prevention and intervention tools. The term "resilience" is central, defined as the community's ability to adjust to changing conditions, providing a framework to analyse structural and agency-driven responses at the community level.

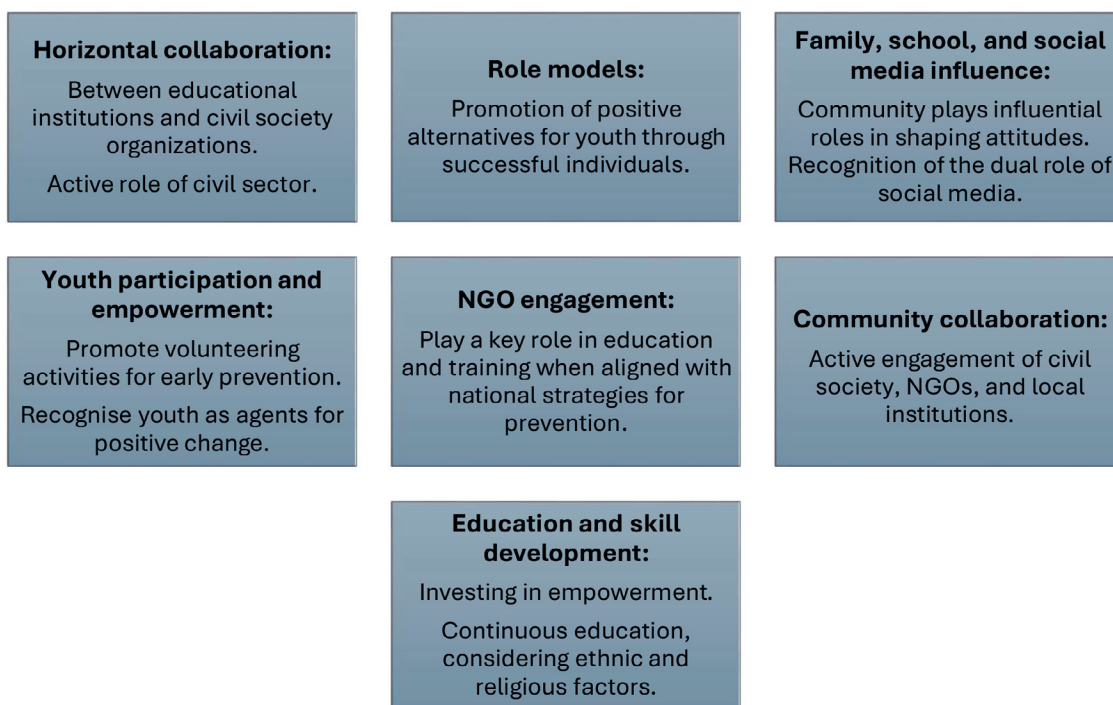### MAIN FINDINGS FROM CASE STUDIES ON PREVENTION AND RESILIENCE

Research identified several key factors of prevention and resilience. They are presented here as regional findings, as well as the cross-cutting synergies. Noting that most case studies here remained the same as in the first phase (see Table 3 and Table 4).

The Balkans

Table 3: Case studies for each Balkan state under study

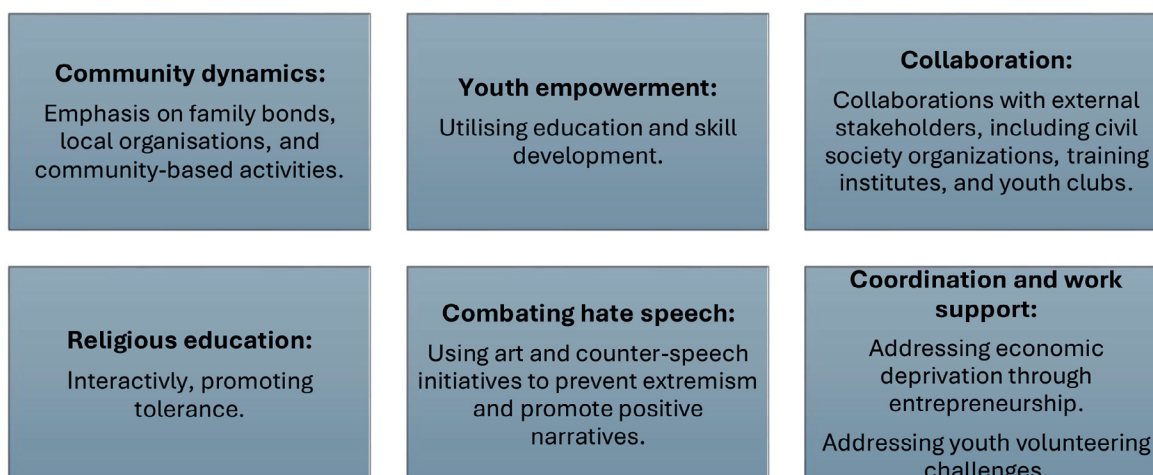|	BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	BULGARIA	KOSOVO	NORTH MACEDONIA
Case Study 1	Two schools under one roof	Violence in schools: Societal factors and specific community influences affecting young people.	Political grievances in Mitrovica	Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility
Case Study 2	Organised groups of football fans	Football hooligans	Religious interpretations in Gjakova	Football fan groups in Tetovo

Key factors

Horizontal collaboration: Between educational institutions and civil society organizations. Active role of civil sector.	**Role models:** Promotion of positive alternatives for youth through successful individuals.	**Family, school, and social media influence:** Community plays influential roles in shaping attitudes. Recognition of the dual role of social media.
Youth participation and empowerment: Promote volunteering activities for early prevention. Recognise youth as agents for positive change.	**NGO engagement:** Play a key role in education and training when aligned with national strategies for prevention.	**Community collaboration:** Active engagement of civil society, NGOs, and local institutions.
	Education and skill development: Investing in empowerment. Continuous education, considering ethnic and religious factors.	

MENA

Table 4: Case studies for each MENA state under study

	EGYPT	JORDAN	MOROCCO	TUNISIA
Case Study 1	The Christian Community of Al-Warraq	Karak area	Amal Organisation	Ben Guerdane: A border city. ISIS attempted to seize it in 2016.
Case Study 2	Bahtim Informal Community	Ma'an female preachers	2 Organisation childhood and youth: The same as in phase one.	Hammam-Lif

Key factors

Community dynamics: Emphasis on family bonds, local organisations, and community-based activities.	**Youth empowerment:** Utilising education and skill development.	**Collaboration:** Collaborations with external stakeholders, including civil society organizations, training institutes, and youth clubs.
Religious education: Interactivly, promoting tolerance.	**Combating hate speech:** Using art and counter-speech initiatives to prevent extremism and promote positive narratives.	**Coordination and work support:** Addressing economic deprivation through entrepreneurship. Addressing youth volunteering challenges.

SYNERGIES AND CROSS-LEARNING

Utilising research insights from the Balkans and the MENA region, a comprehensive framework for cross-regional learning is proposed. The initiative aims to facilitate the exchange of best practices, synergies, and mutual learning, including youth exchange programmes and targeted training addressing specific challenges. Virtual forums are suggested to bring together stakeholders from both regions and to provide spaces for sharing interventions and addressing challenges in preventing radicalisation among youth.

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03
POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BALKAN REGION

On a local level

Support local NGOs: Strengthen local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by offering financial and institutional support, recognising their crucial role in providing alternatives to youth, particularly in small communities.

Community stakeholder collaboration: Promote collaboration among football clubs, sports associations, schools, and public institutions to counteract radicalisation among organised football fans, emphasising the potential for positive engagement through volunteering and humanitarian efforts.

Community programmes: Facilitate community forums, workshops, and events to foster a sense of belonging and empowerment. Support initiatives that enhance the skills and capacities of community members, who are seen as leaders within the community.

Promote inclusive sports culture: Encourage sports events that promote inclusivity, such as running competitions, to counter violence and hate speech. Support sponsors and advertisers that contribute to positive sports culture.

Targeted socioeconomic policies: Implement targeted policies and programmes addressing poverty and unemployment to counter radicalisation. Focus on education leading to employment and specific job searching skills.

Strengthening school-employer connections: Enhance linkages between schools and local employers regionally to create a more seamless transition for youth into the workforce.

Investment in community centres: Invest in community centres as hubs for educational and cultural activities, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Put particular focus on art, and education through art.

Youth awareness programmes: Promote education and awareness-raising initiatives against nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and hate speech. Empower youth to implement thematic projects addressing the dangers of these ideologies.

On a national level

Education reform: Implement systemic changes in the educational system to enhance discipline, engagement, and respect among adolescents. Foster critical thinking and diversity within the curriculum. Also, prioritise critical thinking over memorisation.

Media literacy programmes: Develop and integrate media literacy programmes into educational curricula to equip young people with the skills to recognise and resist misinformation and extremist content. It is important to start enhancing their skills at an early age, if possible, in primary schools.

Interfaith dialogue and religious literacy: Promote national-level initiatives for interfaith dialogue and religious literacy programmes. Engage moderate clerics in leading discussions on non-violence, tolerance, and cooperation.

Internal mutual exchange programmes: Encourage mutual exchange between different territorial parts, fostering interaction between poorer and richer areas and those with different ethnonational compositions.

Establish professional networks: Form national professional networks addressing specific issues, such as the role of social media in radicalisation. Focus on collaboration and information sharing.

On an international level

NGO collaboration: Encourage international collaborations with NGOs, emphasising the importance of sustained capacity-building initiatives to ensure local actors' independence and sustainability beyond project-based support.

Interregional sports initiatives: Foster interregional collaborations in sports initiatives, encouraging football clubs and associated institutions to share successful preventive strategies. Facilitate cross-border partnerships to address common challenges.

International collaboration on fan behaviour: Facilitate international collaboration on managing fan behaviour during matches. Share well-developed scripts and practices for fostering a positive sports atmosphere.

Information sharing on social media: Establish regional networks for transnational cooperation, focusing on the role of social media in radicalisation. Promote information sharing among governments, civil society, and the private sector.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MENA REGION

On a local level

Youth empowerment projects: Implement grassroots projects at the local level, working over a minimum of three to five years to build trust with young people. These initiatives should provide spaces for youth to develop a sense of agency.

Community-centric public services: Improve the quality of local public services, particularly in education and healthcare, ensuring better access for marginalised communities. Develop inclusive urban policies at the local level to address specific needs and involve communities in decision-making processes.

Local employment opportunities: Establish local programmes that link schools with nearby employers, creating opportunities for young people to gain practical skills and employment. Encourage local entrepreneurship through initiatives that address bureaucratic hurdles and offer support to youth-led projects.

Open civic spaces: Invest in accessible civic education tools and collaborate with civil society to strengthen youth capacities for positive participation in the city. Involve local communities in designing public policies to bridge trust gaps.

Youth trust projects: Encourage grassroots projects that build trust between youth and local governments over a longer period of time.

On a national level

Education and employment policies: Formulate national policies that address socioeconomic issues, focusing on education and employment opportunities. Strengthen the linkages between national education systems and industries to enhance youth employability.

Quality public education: Prioritise investment in public education to ensure equal opportunities for all. Enrich school curricula with experiential learning, critical thinking, and spaces for youth-led discussions on social, economic, and political issues.

Youth inclusion in public policies: Develop national policies that encourage youth participation in shaping public policies. Establish channels for expressing frustrations and grievances peacefully.

Civic education programmes: Integrate civic education programmes into national curricula, collaborating with civil society to promote inclusive education. Encourage the establishment of spaces for dialogue in schools and cultural/youth centres at the national level.

Tax incentives and administrative facilitation: Incentivise investments in underdeveloped regions through tax incentives. Facilitate administrative procedures related to projects, making them accessible to citizens in marginalised regions.

Inclusive urban policies: Develop inclusive urban policies that consider the real composition of cities, addressing issues like transport, leisure, cultural facilities, and marketplaces in a participatory and inclusive manner.

Quality public services: Improve the quality of public services, including education, healthcare, and access to cultural spaces, with a focus on better accessibility for marginalised communities.

On an international level

Transnational collaboration: Facilitate transnational cooperation and information sharing among governments, civil society, and the private sector. Establish professional networks at the international level, focusing on issues such as the role of social media in radicalisation.

Global economic support: Secure global backing for economic development, promoting equitable resource management, international investments in underdeveloped regions, and fostering collaboration through twinning processes to break isolation in marginalised areas and build connections with other communities.

International educational partnerships: Collaborate with international organisations to enhance public education and provide equal opportunities globally. Exchange best practices in civic education and youth empowerment programmes on the international stage.

Conclusion

The first phase of the meso-level research in the Balkans and the MENA region unveils intricate drivers of radicalisation, from religious influences and transnational dynamics to economic deprivation and dissatisfaction with political structures. In the Balkans, collaboration among educational institutions, civil society, and local authorities is deemed crucial to prevent youth radicalisation, emphasising quality education, social engagement, and positive role models. In the MENA region, community dynamics, family bonds, and collaboration with external stakeholders shape the prevention landscape, with a focus on religious education and digital entrepreneurship. Both regions propose comprehensive policy recommendations at local, national, and international levels, promoting collaboration, socioeconomic policies, and transregional cooperation to counter radicalisation. The CONNEKT project urges Balkan policymakers to adopt a comprehensive approach while, in the MENA region, decisive action and international collaboration are encouraged to address economic disparities and foster holistic strategies for positive youth engagement.

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ANNEX 1

Questionnaire for the first phase of meso-level research

Religion
- Question 1. Is religion a driving factor of violent extremism with greater relevance than other colliding factors? Has religious education played a role in preventing violent extremism? Do youngsters identify with existing religious leaderships?
- Q. 2. Does the relation between religion and national belonging play a specific role?
- Q. 3. What is the impact of social experience and practice of religion on communities, or it is rather the individual attitude towards religion what drives young people to radical ideas and actions?

Economic deprivation
- Question 4. Do territorial inequalities produce collective grievances that can intersect with other identity or ideological dimensions?

Social digitalisation
- Question 5. Is the digital context an overwhelming channel for violent extremism in MENA and the Balkans? Are social media and internet narratives relevant to explain radicalisation processes in target countries? Do these processes have commonalities with social media and internet recruitment in the EU?

Political issues
- Question 6. What is the impact of the political context in the process of radicalisation? To what extent do democracy, good governance, rule of law and political inclusion have a role in shaping perceptions of drivers of radicalisation?
- Q. 7. How different actors of radicalisation are framed by the state in each targeted country?
- Q. 8. What are the dominant narratives on community grievances based on political claims?

Educational, Leisure and Cultural opportunities
- Question 9. To what extent does the lack of cultural, educational and leisure opportunities have a role in driving radicalisation? Is it possible to link the failure of educational attainment with radicalisation processes? Are those contexts that provide better leisure facilities for young people less susceptible to radicalisation and violent extremism?

Transnational dynamics
- Question 10. How globalisation and transnational movements impacted politics and society?
- Q. 11. Are perceptions on foreign policy a driver of violent extremism?

- Q. 12. What is the role of new family patterns and diffuse social relations in the field of the transnational nature of radical groups?
- Q. 13. How globalised communities link themselves to transnational movements?
- Q. 14. What is the role of family, ethnic, religious, political, criminal networks?

ANNEX II

Findings from the first phase of meso-level research

DRIVERS

SOCIAL CONTEXT	Religion	Economic deprivation	Territorial inequalities	Social digitalisation	Political grievances	Cultural opportunities	Transnational dynamics
Socialisation/ education	Ma'an (JO) Two schools under one roof (BiH) Football fans (BiH) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility (MK) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG)	Ma'an (JO) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Two schools under one roof (BiH) Football fans (BiH) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Football fans (MK) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Football fans (BiH) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG)	Ma'an (JO) Two schools under one roof (BiH) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)
Employment and labour relations	Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Al-Warraq (EG) Amal (MA) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Ma'an (JO) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Amal (MA)	Karak (JO) Bahtim (EG)	Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Karak (JO) Bahtim (EG)	Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)
Urban and peri-urban spaces	Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK)	Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK)	Ma'an (JO) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG)		Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG)	Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	
Artistic and cultural creation	Al-Warraq (EG)	Karak (JO) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK)	Bahtim (EG)	Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Childhood and youth organisation (MA) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Al-Warraq (EG)	Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Childhood and youth organisation (MA) Gjakova (XK)	Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)

DRIVERS

SOCIAL CONTEXT	Religion	Economic deprivation	Territorial inequalities	Social digitalisation	Political grievances	Cultural opportunities	Transnational dynamics
Punitive justice system	Al-Warraq (EG)	Al-Warraq (EG) Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility (MK)	Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG)		Football fans (BiH) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG)		
Ethnic community	Two schools under one roof (BiH) Football fans (BiH) Football fans (MK) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)			Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Two schools under one roof (BiH) Football fans (BiH) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Two schools under one roof (BiH)	Football fans (BiH) Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility (MK) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)
Political and social participation	Football fans (BiH) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Karak (JO) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG)	Al-Warraq (EG) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Karak (JO) Two schools under one roof (BiH) Football fans (BiH) Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG) Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility (MK) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)	Bahtim (EG) Al-Warraq (EG)	Football fans (MK) Gjakova (XK) Mitrovica (XK)

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