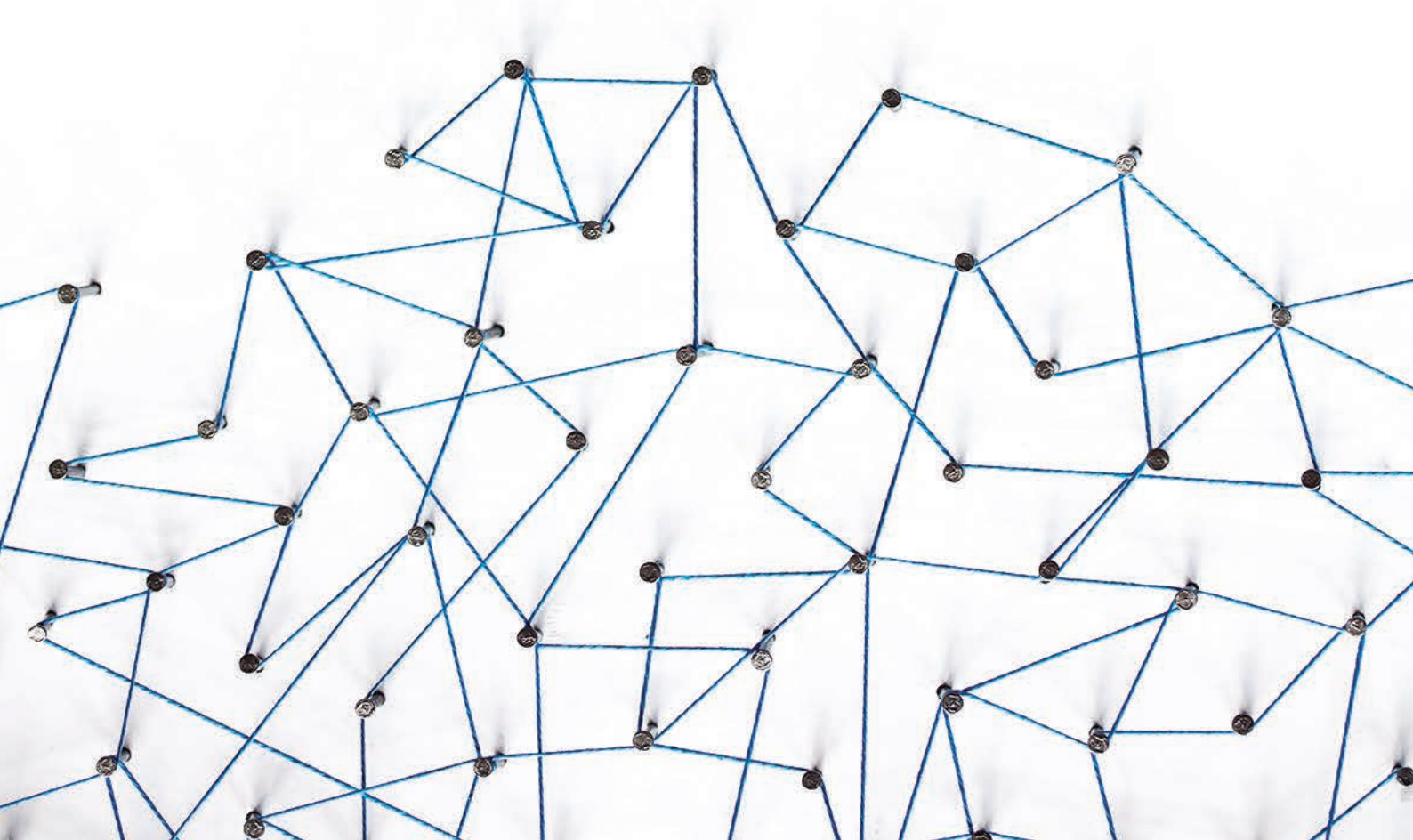




Tackling Radicalisation Risks in the Balkans: Multi-level Complexities and Policy Solutions



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Overview

The European Union (EU)'s approach to addressing radicalisation, violent extremism (VE) and terrorism has been set down in the "Counter-Terrorism Strategy" (2005) and the "European Agenda on Security" (2015).¹ In responding to related risks, the EU has strived to bring member states as well as Western Balkan candidate countries to devise **coordinated national- and local-level policies for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE)** (Musolino, 2021). EU institutions have emphasised the need to develop strategies, tools, programmes and networks. The EU-established Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) has evolved into a principal entity enhancing knowledge and competences and raising awareness about preventing and countering radicalisation across the EU. RAN's "soft approach" moves beyond the security paradigm and focuses on comprehending radicalisation, exchanging information and building capacity of professionals. Such a **holistic approach to P/CVE** is also directly needed in the Western Balkans. Countries in this region are seen as especially vulnerable to radicalisation and extremism, which could pave the way to VE (Yakova and Bogdanova, 2022).

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EU counter-terrorism (CT) and P/CVE efforts in the Western Balkans have been framed under the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) process, which aims to step up cooperation between the EU and countries in the region on security issues. A central part of the IISG is the Western Balkans Counter-Terrorism Initiative (WBCTi) seeking to offer a **coherent and consistent response to terrorism and VE threats coming from the region**. EU priorities in the region have been stipulated in the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans (European Union, 2018). The pursuit of these goals is underpinned by cooperation mechanisms such as the Regional Network of National Coordinators for CT and P/CVE of the Western Balkan Six (RNCC). The RNCC follows the example of RAN and is supported by the EU regional Counter-Terrorism/Security expert. This policy brief concurs with the objectives and strategies outlined in the Joint Action Plan, in particular the need for a **"whole-of-society" approach to P/CVE to tackle the root causes of radicalisation and build resilient societies**.

Tackling radicalisation and extremism risks in the Balkans through P/CVE requires a rigorous understanding of the underlying drivers of radicalisation. Increasingly, policy stakeholders are taking into account the critical impact of such triggers on vulnerability to radicalisation (Anzil et al., 2022). However, considerable **gaps remain in terms of enhancing knowledge about how the drivers play out, and translating this knowledge into policy action**. Building upon the findings of comprehensive cross-country research,² this policy brief examines the main factors of radicalisation in four Balkan countries – Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The key drivers are political grievances, religion, transnational dynamics, digital literacy, and economic deprivation, and may be seen to

¹ The references to strategic documents and initiatives provided in the introduction to this policy brief aim to set the general policy background in relation to the question at hand.

² As part of the EU-financed [CONNEKT project](#) focusing on the Balkans and the MENA region.

operate at three levels: a) macro (national/state); b) meso (community) and c) micro (individual) (Communale, 2023). Respectively, they have been empirically analysed at each of these levels through interviews, focus groups and (non-representative) surveys. Looking into the complex interlinkages of the factors of radicalisation across the three levels provides valuable policy insights.



Religion and political grievances

In the Balkans, religion and political grievances intersect at the macro (national/state) level as potential drivers of radicalisation and VE. Recent developments have **dislodged the established narrative about religion** as the main impetus behind radicalisation (ibid). Settled notions have been particularly challenged by the **growing role of religious organisations in P/CVE**. Cooperation has been on the increase both among officially recognised religious communities, and between such actors and the state. In some countries, such as BiH and North Macedonia, collaboration among established religious communities has been institutionalised, while in others, it remains informal.

The mode of interaction between faith-based organisations and the state in the area of P/CVE also varies. In BiH, the main **religious communities have been acknowledged as important players in prevention**, including in the State Strategy for Preventing and Combating Terrorism (2015-2020).³ Bulgaria's state strategies for P/CVE also recognise the role of religious communities.⁴ In North Macedonia, the government has made practical use of the institutional framework for interfaith dialogue in the state's P/CVE agenda (Kambovski et al., 2021). The scale and impact of faith-based organisations' P/CVE activities differ within and across countries. For example, the Islamic Community of BiH has its own P/CVE Strategy (2016) and has organised multiple related activities and events (Kapidzic et al., 2021). In contrast, the Bishops' Conference has not explicitly addressed radicalisation issues. In Kosovo, the Islamic Community has been extensively and proactively involved in efforts to counter radical interpretations of Islam. In the Bulgarian context, it is difficult to gauge the practical results of religious communities' engagement in P/CVE.

The empirical macro-level research also confirms the shift in the accepted narrative about religion as the dominant driver of radicalisation. For instance, in North Macedonia, institutional representatives are generally sceptical about deeming religion a major catalyst of violence occurrences, such as the case of the 2017 storming of the parliament (Kambovski et al., 2021). In Bulgaria, civil society and academic experts warn against the popular framing of religiosity as a factor supposedly rendering Muslim Roma communities vulnerable to radicalisation. A general cross-country trend is that state-recognised religious communities tend to be viewed as less susceptible to radicalisation. Unofficial religious groups and individual religious interpretations are seen as more receptive of radicalisation narratives. Importantly, even in the case of groups or persons that show signs of adoption of radical religious ideas, **religion cannot straightforwardly be regarded as a principal driver**.

³ Bosnia and Herzegovina Council of Ministers, "Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism (2015 – 2020)". Sarajevo, 2015.

⁴ Republic of Bulgaria Council of Ministers, [Strategy for Countering Radicalization and Terrorism \(2015-2020\)](#).

Closely intertwined with religion, political grievances are another macro-level factor relevant to radicalisation risks in the Balkans. While political grievances are context-dependent, they are broadly similar in all four states. Such concerns mainly relate to deficiencies in political representation in state institutions, good governance, political accountability, and trust in public institutions. In some cases, underlying political discontent has manifested as – or in the very least, contributed to – political tensions over religious issues. For example, in Kosovo, political parties have come into conflict over questions such as the teaching of religion and the wearing of hijab in public schools (Peci and Demjaha, 2021). In BiH, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, partisan activities and rhetoric have often been directed against the ethnic and religious “other”. Such tactics have had a divisive and even polarising impact on society.



Digital literacy and transnational dynamics

Radicalisation and VE risks in the Balkans are also linked to the workings of digital literacy and transnational dynamics as potential drivers. In the examined countries, these factors emerge as particularly relevant at the meso (community) level. They are interconnected, with digital literacy primarily playing an enabling role and transnational dynamics a contextual one.

Digitalisation and access to the Internet have impacted the spread of radical ideas and agendas in two main ways. Firstly, in all four countries, **the Internet and social media have been used to disseminate religious messages and agendas**. In Kosovo, a major means of indoctrination has been YouTube content circulated by radical imams. Similarly, in BiH, an influential Salafi figure has used digital channels to exert influence on their online followers. Disconcertingly, state policy responses to the spread of radical narratives in the online space are still at a rudimentary level. Certain positive developments in institutional practice are observed in BiH and North Macedonia. The Bosnian Communications Regulatory Agency has recently red-flagged the issue of violent and extremist online content (Kapidzic et al., 2021). In North Macedonia, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services has undertaken measures to counter the online propagation of radical religious interpretations (Kambovski et al., 2021). However, state efforts across all the countries remain irregular and incoordinate. Tackling those challenges requires a **unified state approach codified in synchronised legal, regulatory, and policy instruments**.

Secondly, across the region, **online disinformation has escalated – in some cases revolving around radical notions**. For instance, young people in Bulgaria have been exposed to far-right online messages transmitting ideas that are illiberal, antidemocratic and hostile to groups with protected social characteristics (e.g., race, religion, sexual orientation) (Lozanova et al., 2017). Disinformation campaigns have been particularly prominent in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly three quarters of the Macedonian society has been affected by “infodemics” related to the threat of COVID-19 (Kapidzic et al., 2021). Vulnerability to disinformation narratives among communities and individuals has been intensified by a **widespread lack of digital and media critical thinking abilities**. Despite high levels of functional digital literacy, insufficient critical thinking skills in the consumption of media and digital content have been especially pronounced among young people, rendering them more susceptible to disinformation narratives. In the Bulgarian context, this challenge has been repeatedly highlighted by civil society actors (Dzhekova et al., 2021). Additionally, problems linked to online disinformation in the four countries have been aggravated by transnational dynamics. For example, in North Macedonia, experts have cautioned that the online climate created by “infodemics” may provide a fertile environment for malign foreign influence (Kapidzic et al., 2021).

Beyond their intersection with digitalisation, transnational dynamics play out as significant contextual forces moulding both risks and state response to radicalisation and VE in the Balkans. Radicalisation risks have been shaped by the **inflow of extremist ideologies and funding from abroad and the influence**

of diaspora communities. For instance, in BiH, cross-border networks of Chetnik organisations have recruited foreign fighters to go to Ukraine (Karcic, 2020). In the case of Kosovo, foreign radical interpretations of Islam have been linked to the establishment of intra-state religious structures, provision of scholarships, increase of diaspora networking activities, and spread of radical ideas in the online space. In several countries, including Kosovo and Bulgaria, there is evidence of strong influence exerted by diasporas located abroad on domestic groups (Chirchi, 2022). Consequently, cooperation across the region and the EU needs to be stepped up in order to address potential vulnerabilities in diaspora communities located within the EU (outside the individual countries). Finally, domestic P/CVE approaches have been affected by transnational influences, such as the operation of international organisations. These dynamics have been particularly prominent in North Macedonia (Georgieva et al., 2022).



Economic deprivation

In the Balkans, economic hardship may preclude the fulfilment of the human right to an adequate standard of living of members of socially vulnerable groups, including young people. Evidence shows that **economically deprived youth are easier targets of radical groups** (Communale, forthcoming). In three of the four countries analysed in this policy brief, economic deprivation emerges as a relevant driver of radicalisation at both the macro (national/state) and the meso (community) level. The empirical research demonstrates that, at the macro level, this factor is associated with poverty and social marginalisation. At the micro (individual) level, it has been found to manifest as marginalisation, economic exclusion, unemployment, and feelings of hopelessness.

In Bulgaria, BiH and North Macedonia, the importance of economic deprivation is recognised by P/CVE experts (Communale, forthcoming). However, it is **rarely viewed as a self-standing driver**. In the Bulgarian context, institutional representatives tend to under-emphasise the relevance of poverty as a determinant of radicalisation. Nonetheless, academics have underscored the potential significance of economic hardship when it is conjoined with social marginalisation, in particular its extreme manifestations – hate speech and violence (Communale, forthcoming). Similarly, in BiH, experts point out that – coupled with other factors such as education – poverty indirectly influences vulnerabilities to radicalisation (Communale, forthcoming). In North Macedonia, institutional representatives acknowledge the need to tackle poverty in the reintegration of foreign fighters. However, the national P/CVE strategy, which addresses foreign fighter reintegration, does not explicitly look into the economic dimension of those processes.⁵

Conversely, in Kosovo, P/CVE policy approaches do not consider economic challenges to be of relevance to radicalisation. Evidence shows that, in the case of Kosovo, most individuals who have adopted radical ideas are not from poor backgrounds (Communale, forthcoming).

⁵ Government of the Republic of Macedonia, [National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism \(2018-2022\)](#). Skopje, February 2018.



Gender considerations

Gender dynamics consistently emerge as relevant to radicalisation and VE in the Balkans. P/CVE approaches and strategies ought to be informed by an understanding of how gender **intertwines with potential radicalisation drivers**. The results of the empirical research at the micro (individual) level reveal that gender correlates with specific perceptions, beliefs and practices in areas that are of relevance to P/CVE. For example, a major research finding is that in all the countries **women report higher levels of concern regarding local radicalisation and VE**. In Bulgaria (31.0% female, 29.2% male) and North Macedonia (52.6% female, 51.5% male), the gender disparities in these concerns remain relatively modest. However, in Kosovo (72.1% female, 53.7% male) and BiH (80.6% female, 74.1% male), the gender differences in perceptions are more significant, with females expressing notably higher levels of concern (Peci, forthcoming). These variations underscore the influential role of gender dynamics in shaping perceived concerns about radicalisation. When it comes to religiosity, Kosovo is the country where religious adherence appears to be strongest among both males and females. In Bulgaria, by contrast, there is a low level of participation in religious activities and a notable gender disparity in this regard. In Kosovo, the highest level of religiosity is visible among female (62.5%) and male (57.6%) agreeing with the statement “I am a true believer and accept all the teachings of my faith,” while the lowest percentage is among male (8.9%) and female (13.9%) respondents in Bulgaria. The second highest percentage for both genders is in BiH (50.2% female, 50.3% male), and the third highest is in North Macedonia (44.4% female, 41.7% male) (ibid). Another important regional trend is that trust in state institutions and the police is greater among women, while trust in political parties and the army is higher among men.⁶

⁶ For detailed information on gender dynamics please see L. Peci, Balkans Regional Report on the Micro-Level Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism [Manuscript in preparation]. October 2023.



Policy recommendations

Balkan states should adopt **“whole-of-society” approaches to P/CVE** that address the drivers of radicalisation in their complexity and increase social resilience. In turn, this requires “whole-of-government” deployment to structure coordinated multi-institutional responses and resolve existing issues related to piecemeal handling of certain radicalisation challenges (such as online radicalisation). With a view to the transnational character of radicalisation challenges in the Balkans, those approaches need to be supplemented with **strengthened regional and international cooperation** in the area of P/CVE (Communale, forthcoming). This also warrants enhanced commitment and engagement on the part of the EU and international organisations, including the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Additionally, the four countries examined in this policy brief need to recognise and deal with **types of radicalisation risks that are commonly neglected or downplayed** in political and policy debates. Among those are risks related to far-right political and ethno-nationalist radicalisation as well as potential religious radicalisation in religious groups that are less commonly viewed as susceptible to radical ideas (e.g., some conservative Christian communities, as in the case of Bulgaria). In parallel, state institutions should take measures to **counter the prevailing stigmatisation of particular socially vulnerable groups** (e.g., Roma communities in Bulgaria) as ipso facto vulnerable to radicalisation. Civil society experts stress as imperative to bring under control skewed and unjust narratives and institutional practices reflecting the misconception that experiencing social marginalisation and/or poverty “implicates” communities in being at higher risk of radicalisation.

The following policy directions and steps could provide state institutions with orientation in tackling the intricate intersections of the key radicalisation factors:

EXECUTE MULTI-LEVEL POLICY SOLUTIONS

- Develop a **comprehensive multi-level P/CVE strategic framework** that considers and responds to the **interconnectedness of drivers** at the macro, meso and micro levels. Gender-responsive and gender-transformative perspectives should be embedded in P/CVE strategies.
- Supplement policy measures aimed at addressing macro drivers (e.g., political grievances, poverty) with **tailored preventive and intervening measures** at the meso and micro levels. The latter should be devised by local authorities, in collaboration with civil society actors, and aim to cater to the specificities and needs of target communities and groups. The design and implementation of prevention and intervention programmes should actively involve communities. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms need to be set up to assess effectiveness, propose improvement pathways, and ensure efficient resource allocation.

FOSTER INTER-RELIGIOUS COLLABORATION

- Step up cooperation between state institutions and religious communities in the area of P/CVE. If appropriate, cooperative relations could be institutionalised (following the example of BiH and Kosovo).
- Actively **involve religious communities and faith-based organisations in P/CVE** activities at all levels. National P/CVE strategic documents ought to recognise religious communities as significant actors. **Religious organisations should proactively seek ways to be involved** in local and national P/CVE efforts, including by developing internal P/CVE strategies and guidelines (similarly to the Islamic Communities of BiH and Kosovo).
- **Disseminate positive examples** of P/CVE involvement of religious communities to further counteract the established narrative about religion as an alleged primary driver of radicalisation in the Balkans.
- **Bolster collaboration among the various religious communities** and faith-based organisations that form the state's religious makeup, integrating such collaborative efforts within the national strategic P/CVE framework and local governments' P/CVE agendas. Strive to encourage dialogue between established religious communities and religious groups that are not officially recognised by the state.

SYSTEMATICALLY TACKLE ONLINE RADICALISATION RISKS

- Develop integrated legal, regulatory and policy instruments to **prevent and constrain the spread of radical ideas in the online space, including hate speech**. The mandates of state agencies regulating communications and the media should be more clearly defined to effectively assess risks, detect transgressions and alert other relevant institutions, including law enforcement, while at the same time making sure they are not a prerequisite for online censorship.
- Use the mechanisms of the formal education system to **build digital and media critical thinking abilities among youth**, so as to counter uncritical consumption of potentially radical online content. Provide targeted funding to civil society organizations (CSOs) working to close this skill gap.

Long-term P/CVE solutions managing the principal drivers of radicalisation require that governments secure **socio-economic justice**, especially by eliminating social marginalisation and poverty. Responding to existing political grievances in society necessitates the **strengthening of good governance**, in particular through ensuring the rule of law and political accountability, and countering corruption and state capture threats. Additionally, addressing religious grievances and religiously-motivated political grievances calls for enhanced legal and policy approaches to the **governance of religion and religious diversity**. While policies in this area are axiomatically context-specific, research suggests that “multiculturalised secularism” may be a good fit for Balkan countries (Moodod and Sealy, 2019). This paradigm revolves around respect for diversity, positive co-operation and principled distance by the state, responsiveness to religious communities' needs (e.g., related to public religious exercise) and individual human rights protection. Finally, it is highly desirable that Balkan countries, the EU and international organisations provide increased support to research into these and other potential long-term solutions to the underlying factors of radicalisation.



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

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

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

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



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