



KCSS
Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

THE UNEXPLORED NEXUS: ISSUES OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MACEDONIA

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NOTES ON THE AUTHORS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AR	External Intelligence Agency
BDI	Democratic Union for Integration
BIK	Islamic Community of Kosovo
BFI	Islamic Community of Macedonia
CT	Counter-Terrorism
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
FF	Foreign Fighters
ISIS	Islamic State
KCSS	Kosovar Centre for Security Studies
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
NLA	National Liberation Army
PDSH	Albanian Democratic Party
UBK	Directorate for Security and Counterintelligence
VMRO-DPMNE	Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violent extremism and radicalisation in Macedonia are at the crux of the complex puzzle in the broader jigsaw of state-building and societal cohesion. While the individual drivers of violent extremism in Macedonia are consistent to findings elsewhere, this study uncovers structural drivers rooted specifically in the Macedonian context, all of which have contributed to the longer-term consequences that paved the way to radicalisation. As a consequence, the myriad of societal and inter-ethnic problems led to the religionization of a part of the society and the entrenchment of ethnic groups in their own particular identity, with some adopting a more conservative national or religious ideology. The growth of radicalisation and extremism has occurred “under the surface”, within a context of uneven domestic politics and the contested international political standing of the country pertaining name issue. On occasion there have even been cases where the previous ruling party of Macedonia has misrepresented the presence of religious extremism to deepen the ethnic cleavages in the country. With the new government of mid-2017, however, the country is taking a clear and more comprehensive stand on the issue. There have been tangible efforts to properly invest on the prevention of violent extremism specifically and facilitate better inter-ethnic relations generally in the country.

Key findings

Structural and political drivers

- The first and foremost elements of radicalisation and violent extremism in Macedonia were encouraged by a group of individual illegal imams who returned from the Middle East. These individuals brought a highly conservative ideology, different from the nascent version of Islam, using hate speech and occasionally calling for use of force;
- Additional drivers of radicalisation emerged from the mushrooming of Middle Eastern NGOs, which arrived under the banner of humanitarianism, especially during the war in Kosovo and the 2001 conflict in Macedonia. Some of the NGOs successfully disseminated radical and extremist ideology, especially around Skopje and Kumanovo. Until recently they operated without any interference and they are challenged only to a limited extent;

- Although the new political setting in Macedonia is bringing more prospects for its citizens also in terms of inter-ethnic relations, the long-term consequences of the ruling of VRMO-DPMNE are still present. During its rule, Albanians were often marginalized, leading many individuals to seek alternatives, which included participation in radical groups. Extremist imams exploited the grim position of the Albanian community in Macedonia and combined it with a generic religious narrative. This has encouraged the recruitment of young people into radical and violent ideology that calls for the support of IS and other terrorist organizations;
- There is prevailing argument by the interviewees that the previous ruling party (VMRO-DPMNE) tried to maintain a tense inter-ethnic situation to incite fear in order to preserve their political domination in Macedonian politics. The Smilkovci (Monstra case) was frequently cited as a case that feeds the narrative of religious extremism, as was the murder of innocent Pakistani refugees (2002), killed in cold blood in order to impress the international community through the image of fighting “Islamic fundamentalism” in the wake of 9/11 attacks in US;
- The debate on the question of identity in Macedonia has affected a wide number of communities. It has led Albanians to entrench in their identity and “further differentiate” from ethnic Macedonians, a reaction toward what many interviewees defined as the “identity arrogance” of the latter;
- There is general increase of religionization among the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, at least when compared to Kosovo and especially Albania.

Religious and individual drivers

- Although there are no official data, there is an estimate of 156 foreign fighters from Macedonia who have travelled to Syria and Iraq. Some of them were killed, part of them returned and the remainder are still believed to be in Syria;
- The key promoters and recruiters of extremist and terrorist ideology are Rexhep Memishi and Shukri Aliu, both influential imams in Macedonia. They both embraced a violent form of fundamentalist Islamic ideology and spearheaded the creation of youth groups, gathering in jamaats or para-jamaats. Many of the men active in those networks ended up in Syria and Iraq. The rest continue to spread the fundamentalist ideology through online content;
- A crisis of legitimacy in the Macedonian Islamic Community (BFI) especially in Skopje and Kumanovo has spurred, among other unintended consequences, the creation of

para-jamaats, especially those divided in to the so-called conservative practitioners and radical groups;

- The increased religionization of the population and fragmentation of the Islamic community gave rise to the so-called conservative practitioners widely defined as Salafis. While these conservative practitioners of Islam pose a challenge to the country's secular order, the report could not establish a direct link between them and violent extremist groups;
- The radicalised individuals from Macedonia are believed to be people who have more personal motives and assume new roles as protagonists. These motives has to do with personal humanitarian cause, protection of Sunni Muslims in Syria, the desire to assume leadership and personal ego;
- The so-called Abdullahu case is the most pertinent case that has been included in the IS narrative on social media and religious events to raised foreign fighters in Macedonia. The case centres on an imam's self-sacrifice for the *ummah* and the Muslim Brotherhood.
- There is a lack of awareness among citizens in Macedonia about the dangers of radicalisation. There are increasing uncertainties on where the boundary lies between traditional practices of Islam and more conservative practice. There is general sense of fear among the population due to these uncertainties;
- Recently, online radicalisation is increasingly serving as an instrument for recruitment in Macedonia. There is violent content being posted on Facebook, YouTube and Telegram. The main narrative includes a " call to jihad," calls to attack "crusaders" Jews and Shia; support for terrorist attacks in the West as well as calls for support for the arrested imams, combined with reporting from the IS battlefields.

Methodology

We have applied a wide variety of qualitative data collection techniques for the purpose of this report. The team has predominantly relied on the previous experience and research reports of the KCSS on radicalization and violent extremism. This has provided an effective means to triangulate and verify the findings. The majority of the data collected has been referenced throughout the article with the exception of several interviews conducted on condition of anonymity. For the sake of preserving our interviewee identities they have been given a coded reference. Additionally, some of the findings included throughout the text

were provided by informants who have not been cited or referenced. The data collection methods are listed as follows:

- The KCSS team has analysed the existing legal and policy framework pertaining to the prevention and countering of violent extremism in Macedonia. The team has also made reference to reports in the wider academic and policy literature;
- For the purpose of this assessment, the research team has conducted 20 face-to-face interviews with a wide variety of stakeholders. Most of the interviews have been conducted with the Islamic community in Macedonia (BFI). This includes those under the auspices of BFI and those considered as 'conservative.' The interviews with the religious community and civil society took place in both urban and rural areas. Primarily, the team has focused interviews and discussion in few rural locations. Interviews were also conducted with the broader spectrum of political parties in Macedonia, and from the Albanian community;
- We have completed three focus groups with community representatives. One focus group was organised in Kumanovo, with the other one in Skopje. There were 25 participants across the focus groups. Due to the links between Kosovo and Macedonia, we also organised a focus group including 11 individuals in Hani i Elezit, the bordering town between Kosovo and Macedonia affected by violent extremism;
- The KCSS has created a database of online extremist pages on Facebook, Telegram and Youtube in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia. This is the result of a significant research project from 2015-2017. This report also shows that websites and profiles that share the online propaganda of extremist groups are very active in Macedonia;
- The needs assessment has relied on KCSS reports, as well as individual contributions such as: "Report inquiring into causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq" (2015); "The citizens view against radicalism and violent extremism" (2016); "Beyond Gornje Maoče and Ošve: Radicalisation in the Western Balkans" (2016) and "New battlegrounds: Extremist groups' activity on social networks in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia" (2017).

The primary objective of this report is to examine the extent to which radicalisation and violent extremism is related to the practice of Islam. That said, the report does not qualify this type of extremism as the main security challenge in Macedonia due to the presence of other forms of extremism, such as nationalism. As the findings of the report will explain, religious extremism is often juxtaposed with nationalism.

1. CONTEXT OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MACEDONIA

The first signs of violent extremism and radicalisation in Macedonia are traced to the early '90s and is closely related to the sudden influx of non-governmental organisations funded by the Gulf States and the return of young imams from the Middle East. This new generation of Middle East-trained imams graduated from non-Hanafi Islamic schools of thought. These organisations and individuals focused their efforts to awaken a dormant identity and to re-establish the forgotten Balkan Muslim communities through monetary assistance, some of which went hand-in-hand with the proliferation of divergent Islamic traditions previously uncommon to the region.¹ Most of these individuals were influenced by religious practices in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt, namely a more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam through which they tried to change the nature of religious practices in Macedonia that had coexisted with the secular state. The most radical imams include individuals who returned from Egypt after they attended radical Islamic schools.²

The most common instruments observed were the facilitation of printing houses, humanitarian activities and religious education - supported mostly through funding from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These activities supported religionization, particularly the spread of a more conservative Islamic ideology. The peak of the influx of these organisations was registered in 1999 during the Kosovo war when hundreds of thousands of Kosovo refugees sought refuge in Macedonia. In this context, the spread of conservative Islam in Macedonia was camouflaged under the banner of humanitarian assistance. Shortly after, a power struggle ensued between the Macedonian Islamic Religious Community (BFI) and its approach grounded on the traditional Islam³ and the teachings of the Hanafi school of thought in one hand, and Imams who gained ground through the building of mosques through dubious

1 Gëzim Krasniqi. 2011. The 'forbidden fruit': Islam and Politics of identity in Kosovo and Macedonia, p.3; Valery Perry. 2016. Initiative to Prevent/Counter Violent Extremism in South East Europe, p. 41.

2 Shpend Kursani. 2015. Report inquiring into causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

3 There are disagreements in the way how traditional or non-traditional Islam is being interpreted in different circles. The reference to traditional Islam in this report does imply the practices of Islam applied throughout centuries in Macedonia. This is most usually framed into Hanafi School of Thought.

funds and through the provision of assistance for disadvantaged communities⁴ at a time of internal instability, on the other hand.⁵

The so-called “back to root” Islamic element – often framed as Salafis - matured from 1999 to 2004, establishing stronger connections with religious preachers in the region and establishing effective control in some key mosques. While so-called Salafis in Macedonia are not necessarily considered extremists, their rituals aim to change religious practice through the promotion of an anti-secular sentiment and challenging national and traditional values. It is true however that most of the individuals subject to extremist and terrorist groups in Europe have been subject to some forms of Salafism. The most dangerous segments were those who legitimized the use of force as a mean to reach their goals. The activities of these groups led to the fragmentation of the Islamic community in Macedonia, an already marginalized Albanian community seeking political and identity accommodation within the boundaries of a Slavic-dominated Christian Orthodox state.

Much of the genesis of violent extremism in Macedonia and in Albanian-speaking countries in the region centres around two controversial figures: Rexhep Memishi and Shukri Aliu, both widely categorised as carriers in the region of the *takfiri* ideology⁶ – an ideology which implies the use of force as means to reach its goals.⁷ Memishi, Aliu and their group managed to spread the ideology in para-jamaats⁸ by extending their influence beyond Macedonia, especially in Kosovo are as alongside the Macedonian border.⁹ The two men’s background and educational trajectory indicates their ideological indoctrinate in the Middle East with the purpose of spreading this particular strand of Islam in the region. For instance, during 1990s, Aliu pursue his studies in Syria, continued onto Medina in Saudi Arabia, where he was purportedly expelled because of his radical Takfir worldview.¹⁰ He eventually went to Egypt where he spent time in Takfiri circles, strengthening an association to this radical ideology.

4 Gëzim Krasniqi. 2011. The ‘forbidden fruit’: Islam and Politics of identity in Kosovo and Macedonia.

5 Ioannis Kagioglidis. 2009. Religious education and the prevention of Islamic radicalization Albania, Britain, France and FYROM, p. 57.

6 For more on takfiri ideology please see KCSS Report: Shpend Kursani. 2015. Report inquiring into causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

7 Ibid.

8 Para-jamaats are usually gathering of young individuals, practicing conservative Islamic rituals, outside of the mosques and not subject to the authority of the Islamic association.

9 Shpend Kursani. 2015. Report inquiring into causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

10 Ibid.

Upon his return to Macedonia, he served in Gazi Babë¹¹, from where many individuals became foreign fighters. Memishi followed a similar path. He served in the “Jahja Pasha” mosque in Skopje. Memishi pursued his religious studies in Medina in the early 2000s, and similar to Aliu, was expelled from university and left Saudi Arabia due to his radical Takfir ideology. He then went to study in Egypt, join in *gtakfiri* circles between 2004 and 2006, a period during which he clashed with other imams from Macedonian and Albanian speaking territories¹²(including with those referred to as Salafis). He contested their “knowledge of Islam” because they did not embrace the *takfiri* ideology.¹³Much of these nuances are found in the debates between Rexhep Memishi and other conservative imams from Macedonia. For example, in one discussion regarding the participation of Muslims in elections the proponents of Aliu and Memishi¹⁴criticised the secular state by describing those participating in the voting process as *kuffar*. On the other hand, the so-called conservatives believe that the Muslims should adjust with the state and shall not boycott as long as their rights are not abused, despite their desire to live in a pure Islamic state. These views are an indicator of the differentiation within both the traditional Islamic practitioners and the conservative Salafij practitioners in Macedonia.

The men’s influence stretch beyond Macedonia. They used a cooperation vacuum between Kosovo and Macedonia to cast their impact into Kosovo. Both Memishi and Aliu have lectured in Kosovo, primarily in the municipalities of Kaçanik, Hani i Elezit, Viti and Gjilan. It is not a coincidence that many of the Kosovo’s foreign fighters are from these municipalities, including the most prominent members of ISIS from Kosovo: Lavdrim Muhaxheri and Ridvan Haqifi, both inspired by Memishi, Aliu and other violent extremists. As a result of their activities, Memishi and Aliu were placed on a “Stop List” that denied them entry into Kosovo. While Kosovo undertook this measure in 2011 and notified the Ministry of Interior in Macedonia, Macedonian authorities did not follow a similar measure due to the complex relations between Kosovo and Macedonia under the VMRO-DPMNE rule.¹⁵

11 Interview with D, a political activist from Skopje, 5 July 2017. Skopje, Macedonia

12 The reference to Albanian speaking territories should not be seen political but language wise. No political connotation should be withdrawn from this.

13 Interview with A, an Imam from Kosovo, 22 August 2017. Mitrovica, Kosovo

14 Dispozitae votimeve | Rexhep MEMISHI Access on: 01.02.2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsAFH7IXO1A>

15 Interview with G, Senior official of Kosovo Government, 12 July 2017. Prishtina. Kosovo

1.1 Religious life in Macedonia

Macedonia is a country of an estimated 2.103.721 citizens. This number is not accurate due to controversies around the population census.¹⁶Based on the available data, it is a multi-ethnic country composed of: Slav Macedonians 64.2 %, Albanians 25.2%, Turkish, 3.9%, Roma 2.7% and others 4.3%.¹⁷The majority of citizens are Orthodox Christians (64.7%), followed by Muslims (33.3%) and others (2%). There is no clear data on the religious practitioners in the country, but based on overall observation Macedonia is amongst the most religious country in region, especially in comparison to Kosovo and Albania. The best indicator to assess the level religiosity can be found during the holy month of Ramadan. In Macedonia, the majority of Muslims appear to fast while others tend to respect those fasting by refraining from eating and drinking during the day as a matter of solidarity. On the other hand, there is strong religious sentiment among Macedonian majority while during VMRO ruling ties between the state and Orthodox Church have been strengthened. Overall, the religious sentiment is found to be strong towards both Orthodox Macedonians and Muslim Albanians.¹⁸

The majority of Muslim practitioners in Macedonia are Albanians (85%), followed by Turkish and others (15%).¹⁹ The official representative institution of Muslims practitioners in Macedonia is the Religious Islamic Association in Macedonia (BFI). This institution is in charge of religious life in the entire territory of Macedonia. The institution includes: an assembly, district muftiates, Faculty of Islamic Studies, madrasas, a humanitarian organization, and other institutions which are directly under its supervision. BFI is widely considered to lack transparency, with an autocratic election process and no mobility.²⁰ The current head of BFI was elected and has served in that position since 1993. Among some practitioners he has a reputation for controlling decisions across institutional policy, such as financial control, electing the imams and other staff, and rejecting reform²¹. The larger community criticised him for intolerance to different views and his refusal to pave way to reform in BFI. ²²The authoritarian rule of the BFI may have provided an additional unintended consequence: the

16 For more please see <https://www.balkanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Macedonia/Census-fails-in-Macedonia-105372>

17 For more please see https://www.indexmundi.com/macedonia/demographics_profile.html

18 Interview with H, Political Analyst, 10 September 2017. Skopje, Macedonia.

19 Interview with the high representative of BFI in Macedonia, 11 July 2017. Skopje, Macedonia.

20 Interview with R, Historian, 11 September 2017. Skopje, Macedonia.

21 Ibid.

22 Data collection from the Focus Group organized in Kumanova held on November 12th 2017.

grouping of para-jamaats, especially those preaching conservative as well as radical Islamic views as an alternative outlet to the mainstream but non-accommodating BFI.

Some of those interviewed and participants in the focus groups felt that the Islamic Association in Macedonia does not have the credibility to represent non-secular Muslims, thus they do not have to follow the suggestions and the rules put forward by the BFI.²³ Due to the lack of trust expressed towards the BFI, many of which refuse to interact with the institution, there is disagreement and fragmentation between the so-called conservatives and moderates, a factor very much visible inside mosques.²⁴ These disagreement shave led to the operation of illegal mosques, where some of the young Muslim population practice religion outside of the scope of the BFI. According to the representatives of the BFI, the activities of imams in the illegal mosques are spreading radicalization and violent extremist ideologies.²⁵ The illegal mosques are believed to be active in the broader district of Skopje (especially Çair and Saraj) and the region of Kumanovo.²⁶ According to the representatives of BFI in Macedonia, these venues are illegal and should not be allowed to function as mosques or organise the Islamic religious life. Also, there are number of media outlets in Macedonia that regularly transmit the speeches of conservative imams. In addition, other imams who support radical views but do so “below the radar” make effective use of social media to spread their message.²⁷

While there port finds that the illegal mosques and self-proclaimed imams are practicing and lecturing religion in a more radical and conservative way, this does not imply hate speech or incitement to use force. According to the interviewees from the broader societal spectrum, this rather echoes a “plurality” in the practice of Islam, in which the practitioners choose from a broader spectrum their preferred imams, especially in the age of the internet and growing antagonism towards BFI.²⁸ These “illegal mosques” are considered as by-products of the conflicts and disputes between the Islamic Association of Macedonia and the renegade imams, which have studied in Middle East and brought with them a contrasting practice of Islam. Yet, this decentralization of the religious marketplace and the summation of activities of these newly established mosques outside the authority of BFI lead to heightened religionization and pose a challenge to the traditional practice of Islam, which largely coexisted with the

23 Interview with V, Civil Society Activist 17.07.2017 (Kryetar I tifozeve dhe punon ne komunen e Cairit)

24 Interview with J, Imam. 20 July 2017. Tetovo, Macedonia.

25 Interview with the high representative of BFI in Macedonia, 11 July 2017. Skopje. Macedonia.

26 Ibid

27 KCSS observation from the monitoring of social media platform

28 Data collection from the Focus Group organized in Skopje, 2 October 2017.

secular state. Here, the secular perspective sees the practice of conservative Islam as the main difference between the BFI and “illegal mosques”.

In general, the BIF was not only unsuccessful in becoming a single voice for the Muslim practitioners, but the institution was also weak in responding to the increase of violent extremism. According to the interviewees, the BIF reacted very late in the prevention of the participation of Macedonian citizens in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. In the beginning of the conflicts, the BIF expressed a veil of sympathy for the Syrian opposition forces, which fought the Assad regime. Moreover, in 2013 they targeted Muslim followers with appeals for support for the Syrian’s people efforts for freedom and the provision of humanitarian aid towards Syrian citizens and refugees in mosques in Macedonia.²⁹ While void of a direct call to Macedonian citizens to participate in the conflicts, the appeals may have indirectly influenced individuals to actively participate in fighting in Syria and Iraq.³⁰

1.2 A small segment of extremism: Macedonian foreign fighters

Owing to the intricacy, timeliness and lack of means to access data, it is difficult to estimate the true number of Macedonians who have left for Syria and Iraq as Foreign Fighters (FF).³¹ Based on a report from the Analytica think tank in Macedonia, as of mid-2016, there were 110 foreign fighters from Macedonia, including 25 of foreign fighters from Macedonia have been killed fighting with ISIS, 86 have returned, 3 women and three families.³² The number provided by the Macedonian officials is higher, estimating 156 citizens in total who went to Syria and Iraq. Foreign fighters from Macedonia, most of whom joined IS and al-Nusra, had a role in online videos, where they were seen destroying their passports and renouncing their nationalities as a means to radicalise through online propaganda,³³ with went unabated due to the lack of coordinated effort to censor local extremist sites. Moreover, according to the interviewees the

29 Interview with E, Imam from Skopje. 12 September 2017. Skopje. Macedonia

30 Interview with M, Imam from Skopje. 13 September 2017. Skopje. Macedonia

31 The Soufan Group. 2015. Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq. p, 7.

32 Kaltrina Selimi and Filip Stojkovski. 2016. Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism: View from Civil Society. p, 10.

33 Vesë Kelmendi and Shpat Balaj. 2017. New Battlegroups: Extremist Groups Activity on Social Networks in Kosovo, Albania and FYROM.

radicalisation is particularly evident around Skopje, including Çair and Gazi Baba, communities where the Albanians have little integration into Macedonian state system.³⁴

While the Macedonian BFI has long noted that it has proof of imams preaching radicalised messages and encouraging individuals to join the jihad, it is only in 2015 that the Government acted proactively to bring mosques back under BFI control.³⁵ This action led to the issuance of 35 warrants and a dozen arrests of whom were conducted by Macedonian law enforcement agencies.³⁶ Prior to this, while imams encouraged collection of funds for more humanitarian purposes during the Syrian war, there has officially been no reference to jihad or participation in the conflict.

Generally, the number of Macedonian foreign fighters has declined, possibly due to the arrest of key ISIS recruiters, shrinking of ISIS controlled territories in Syria and Iraq, strong border control from Turkish side and, perhaps most worryingly, the calls from IS leaders to operate in the countries where the supporters reside. Macedonian foreign fighters continue to be convicted abroad for terrorist activities, while radicalised ideas and material are still circulating and have possibly moved underground to avoid the new security measures.³⁷ With varying access to international databases on FFs and suspects, Macedonia has principally approached the phenomenon by countering it with law enforcement, while falling short on any serious preventative and anticipatory measures.³⁸ Acknowledging the importance of community and civil society engagement, until lately, Macedonian authorities did not adopt inclusive measures to confront the phenomenon in its multidimensional complexity.

34 Valery Perry. 2016. Initiative to Prevent/Counter Violent Extremism in South East Europe, p. 41.

35 Interview with the high representative of BFI in Macedonia, July 2017. Skopje. Macedonia.

36 Valery Perry. 2016. Initiative to Prevent/Counter Violent Extremism in South East Europe, p. 42.

37 Kaltrina Selimi and Filip Stojkovski. 2016. Assessment of Macedonia's Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism: View from Civil Society. p, 13.

38 Ibid, p. 16.

2. STATE OF MACEDONIA VERSUS RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM

2.1 Institutional readiness and response to extremism and terrorism

Macedonia is a part of the European Union's Western Balkan counter-terrorism (CT) initiative where CVE is a high priority.³⁹ The Sector for International and Regional Political/Security Cooperation within the Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs handles CVE cooperation on a regional scale. From the legal context of CVE in Macedonia, the Macedonian Criminal Code of 1996 included provisions on terrorism, sanctions for endangering the constitutional system and security, criminal association, financing terrorism and international terrorism.⁴⁰ Currently, terrorist actions foresee 4-15 years of imprisonment, depending on the severity of the act. In the Macedonian context, the Public Prosecutor's Office prosecutes acts of terrorism and other criminal acts related to terrorism,⁴¹ while the Ministry of Interior is responsible for law enforcement in CVE, although it is only a smaller aspect within a larger CT strategy. Moreover, new investigative measures were introduced in 2003 and 2004 for challenging cases to collect evidence, monitor communications, computer penetration systems, secret surveillance, general monitoring, and audio-visual recording of persons.⁴² The Directorate for Security and Counterintelligence (UBK) is the country's internal intelligence agency, which maps and monitors radicalised Macedonian citizens, whereas the Agencija za razuznavanje (AR) is Macedonia's external intelligence agency tasked to collect intelligence and information beyond Macedonia's borders. Since Macedonia's independence and particularly during VMRO-DPMNE's governance, the role of intelligence agency was highly controversial. Leaked stories of wiretapping and allegations of the involvement of the intelligence agencies in the safeguarding and even bolstering of the political position of Gruevski and his party

39 Ibid, p. 27.

40 Fehmi Agca and Nikola Dacev. 2016. International Cooperation on Law Against Terrorism: The Harmonization of Anti-Terror Laws in Turkey and Macedonia. p. 85.

41 Ioannis Kagioglidis. 2009. Religious education and the prevention of Islamic radicalization Albania, Britain, France and FYROM, p. 60.

42 Ibid, p. 59.

complicated its role as an impartial stakeholder in countering threats, including violent extremism and terrorism.⁴³

The 2004 Law for Prevention of Money Laundering and Other Gains from Criminal Acts, and the 2005 National Strategy on the Fight against Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism aim to tackle the sources of financing terrorism, although there are no significant efforts to ensure their implementation.⁴⁴ In September 2014 amendments were made to the law making joining foreign military or paramilitary forces, or recruiting, training or transporting fighters punishable with a prison sentence of minimum 5 years. In addition, the individuals suspected of having contacts with foreign extremist groups are banned from travelling abroad. Consequently, the National Strategy in the Fight against Terrorism was adopted March 15, 2016, including reference to CVE, marking therefore a serious attempt to create policy in the Macedonian context. Altogether, the future of the national strategy remains unclear with an undefined context for monitoring, implementation and coordination.⁴⁵ Positive steps have been made with the appointment of coordinators in charge of preventing violent extremism.

The first concrete action in CVE/CT was taken in August 2015 with a police operation called "Cell", which led to imprisonment of 11 individuals (followed by other Cell operations).⁴⁶ In this operation, the principal ISIS recruiter Rexhep Memishi was arrested. Altogether, the Cell operations were a testament to the diversity of profiles of individuals arrested and sentenced under the new legislation, underlining that there is no definite and single profile of foreign fighters from Macedonia. Four of them have been sentenced.⁴⁷

2.2 Politics of identity and radicalisation

Identity remains a central issue in Macedonia, shaping internal political and inter-ethnic dynamics. The crisis of identity in Macedonia created consequence of radicalisation, where both communities, ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, are entrenched into their respective identities. Furthering ethnic distance through ethno-nationalism and religion

43 For more please see <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-crisis/wire-tap-scandal-brings-thousands-out-against-macedonian-leader-idUSKBN0O20A420150517>

44 Fehmi Agca and Nikola Dacev. 2016. International Cooperation on Law Against Terrorism: The Harmonization of Anti-Terror Laws in Turkey and Macedonia. p. 86.

45 Valery Perry. 2016. Initiative to Prevent/Counter Violent Extremism in South East Europe, p. 42.

46 For more please see <https://mk.usembassy.gov/country-reports-terrorism-2016/>

47 For more please see <http://tvklan.al/denohen-rekrutuesit-e-xihadisteve-ne-shkup/>

has caused complex co-habitation which has led to some groups or individuals expressing radical views. From the Albanian community point of view, the “open door policy” towards different Islamic schools of thoughts in some neighbourhoods, especially around Skopje and Kumanovo, aims to justify the “religionization” and religious conservatism as an action towards what some interviewees defined as the “identity arrogance” of the Macedonian majority.⁴⁸ As a result, the overarching narrative does not classify sufficient ethnic distance on the basis of different languages and cultures but rather on a combined ethnic and religious identity.

The main difference between Macedonians and Albanians can be found in the way identity is cast. Over the last decade the Macedonian political elite have invested in the so-called Skopje 2014 project that consists in the construction of national identity through an uninterrupted narrative of the pre-historic Macedonia to the present day as a way to bolster the often-contested Macedonian national identity.⁴⁹ This does not only lead to a deepening of the dispute between Greece and Macedonia – hence the political stagnation of the country – but it has also fuelled tensions with the ethnic Albanian community, who find themselves excluded from the narrative despite their sizeable presence. The Macedonian elite tried to assuage the Albanian unease by arguing that the struggle to strengthen the Macedonian identity is not directed against the Albanians. For example, the former Prime Minister of Macedonia, Gruevski, has invited Albanians for “understanding”, stating that Albanians are safe in their identity because it is more consolidated than the Macedonian one.⁵⁰

Gruevski’s calls, however, have not helped to change the narrative among the Albanian political and religious elite, as well as that of the ordinary people. The politics of identity of the Macedonian political elite, has given rise to a new narrative among the Albanians community. For instance, the representatives of Islamic Community in Macedonia, including a significant number of imams, believe that it was Islam that preserved the Albanian identity in Macedonia.⁵¹ They argue that the context of identity politics in Macedonia would not allow Christian Albanians, Catholic or Orthodox, to survive, because they would be subject to

48 Interview with R, Political Analyst from Skopje, 11 September 2017. Skopje, Macedonia. Also this was repeatedly mentioned by number of interviewees as well as citizens participating in the focus groups.

49 For more, please see <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2015/apr/11/skopje-macedonia-architecture-2014-project-building>

50 For more, please see <http://klankosova.tv/gruevski-shqiptaret-skane-pasur-problem-me-identitetin-neve-namohohet/>

51 Interview with the high representative of BFI in Macedonia, July 2017. Skopje, Macedonia.

assimilation, as was the case with a number of Albanian Orthodox families.⁵²Such discourse constitutes a new narrative in Macedonia that excludes the previous narrative offered by the Albanian political elite in Macedonia and runs contrary to it. Arben Xhaferi, one of the most prominent Albanian intellectuals in Macedonia and former Head of Albanian Political Party (PDSH), believed that secularism was key to preserving Albanian identity. Xhaferi argued that "... the Albanians created their national identity on the basis of ethnic belonging and tradition which leads to no segregation of other communities, with the language constituting the core element of identity, not religion."⁵³

The narrative of "identity based on language and culture" shifting into "identity based on language, culture as well as Islam" has been somewhat observed in some political and intellectual circles recently. The members of the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) – the largest Albanian political party –as well as the Albanian Political Party (PDSH) consist of elites who predominantly have links to the former National Movement of Kosovo (LPK), which was considered the political wing of what became the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and National Liberation Army (NLA). Members of this clique were ideologically attached to a secular and national identity motivated previously by communist leaders, particularly Enver Hoxha, whose ruthless dictatorship made Albania the only atheist country in the world in 1967.⁵⁴

The narrative cultivated by the current political elite is not as strong as the previous one in the light of plurality of opinions provided by the broader Albanian political and societal spectrum. While not entirely documented, the new political movement of Albanians in Macedonia "Besa," validated the Albanian identity to be rooted into Albanian language and culture, but claimed that the Islamic identity of Albanians in Macedonia is an indispensable part of the community's national identity.⁵⁵Although Besa made some political gains due to Albanian community's disenchantment with the ruling party BDI due to allegations of corruption and mismanagement, there is also an argument in the identity shift. While such identity shift does not have a direct impact on radicalisation, it provokes a debate on identity within the Albanian community. Consequently, arguments that the Albanian identity is consolidated⁵⁶no longer resonate with certain groups and young individuals in Macedonia making them prone to disentangle them from the local identity and to imagine themselves as part of a larger identity category that surpasses their national context. Such shift

52 Ibid,

53 Arbën Xhaferi. 2017. *Vepra – Kauza Shqiptare në Maqedoni 02* (Book – Albanian cause in Macedonia 02), p.20.

54 James Pettifer. 2014. *Kosova Liberation Army: Underground War to Balkan Insurgency 1948 – 2001*.

55 Interview with R, Political Analyst from Skopje, 11 September 2017. Skopje, Macedonia

56 Mehmet Kraja. 2017. *Kosova, identitet pa shtet* (Kosovo, identity without state).

while not a single determinant, may be a catalyst for these categories to join foreign conflicts in Middle East or to contribute to home-grown radicalisation. These shifting paradigms of identity with some parts of the Albanian community members in Macedonia have altered the perceptions of how they view their identity in comparison to that of other Albanian-speaking communities in Kosovo and Albania. Identity is a theme vigorously discussed by Albanians in Macedonia, yet its implications on radicalisation can only be found in a few individuals who have stripped themselves from traditional narratives of ethnic identity and moved towards religious extremism. This shift and its implications should serve as a cautionary tale to political elites in the region and other identity “entrepreneurs” as they reframe the political identities and the national narratives.

The identity conundrum among the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia is seen also in the context of the educational system. A number of interlocutors pointed out that traditionally there were much better conditions to study in madrasa than in the secular schools in Albanian language.⁵⁷ While the positions of the Albanian school have improved significantly in the last 15 years, the traces of the limited Albanian schools during socialist Yugoslavia as well as the events which led to the shutdown of Tetovo University in 1995 served to many to seek religious education in the country and particularly overseas, namely in Middle East and Turkey.⁵⁸ In order to demonstrate the difficult situation of Albanian language schools, an imam, who was also a teacher at the school in the vicinity of Skopje, explained the disparity in the conditions in the secular school and madrasa.⁵⁹ This issue is largely linked to financial resources and mismanagement, due to limited government funding for school systems compared to funding for madrasa and Islamic courses, which is funded mainly by donors. The fact that the government allocated limited funds to secular schools and did not stop the flow of money for religious school systems - part of which feed radicalisation and extremism - marks a consequence of state action that may have led, intentionally or unintentionally, to stimulated radicalisation and increased religionization⁶⁰ among the Albanian community in Macedonia.

57 During Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes as well as Socialist Yugoslavia, the position of Albanian language schools in Macedonia was much worse than in Kosovo. In turn, there were better conditions and rather incentives for studying in Medrese and Islam. The only change was that now the studies changed from Turkish/Arabic into Bosnian/Serbian largely because Muftiate from Sarajevo was leading the Islamic school system in Yugoslavia. This was part of the strategy by the authorities in Skopje for de-Albanisation. For more please see Gëzim Krasniqi. 2011. The ‘forbidden fruit’: Islam and Politics of identity in Kosovo and Macedonia.

58 Interview with H, Political Analyst, 10 September 2017. Skopje, Macedonia.

59 Interview with T, Imam in Western Macedonia. 13 September 2017. Macedonia.

60 Interview with political activist in Macedonia. 12 July 2017. Skopje. Macedonia.

2.3 Radicalisation and contra-radicalisation: the cases of Smilkovci and Kumanovo

Conspiracy theories in Macedonia abound. They are part of every conversation with officials and ordinary citizens alike, largely a consequence of the 10-year rule of VMRO DPMNE and the legacy of paranoia and interception associated with the socialist Yugoslavia. According to some actors from the Islamic community, Islamic radicalisation and extremism was “encouraged”, or in its softer version ignored by the Macedonian state authorities following the domestic calculation of especially VMRO DPMNE, so to position better their conservative political stance among their electorate.⁶¹ Some went further by stating that a few of the more radical imams are supported by the Macedonian law enforcement agencies⁶², statements which could not be verified independently but were overly present in the narrative of key participants.⁶³ These statements may have been partially supported by Albanian political parties, which cite as evidence of those claims the inaction of Macedonian law enforcement authorities in preventing violent extremism and radicalisation.⁶⁴

The case of Smilkovci is considered one of the most controversial cases raised by the majority of the interlocutors. To recall, 5 ethnic Macedonians – all young in age – were found dead in the Lake of Smilkovci in 2012. The alleged murder sparked inter-ethnic tensions after the authorities implied the deaths were some ethnically motivated attack and Macedonian police raided the Albanian community neighbourhoods arresting of 6 ethnic Albanians. All of them were charged with life sentences, as confirmed by the appeal.⁶⁵ Amnesty USA⁶⁶ has reported on the ill-treatment of detainees from the Smilkovci lake murder, while the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights⁶⁷ has questioned the prosecution and the media’s role in fuelling inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions through their use of emotive language. In particular, the latter is indicative of the state-led denigration making direct links with radical Islam, at

61 Interview with E, Imam in Skopje. 12 September 2017. Skopje, Macedonia. Also this was stressed at both focus groups organized in Skopje and Kumanovo.

62 Interview with political activist in Macedonia. 12 July 2017. Skopje, Macedonia; This also derived from both focus groups.

63 Data collection from the Focus Group organized in Kumanovo held on November 12th 2017.

64 From the interviews with representatives of Albanian political parties in Macedonia.

65 For more please see <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-court-confirms-terrorist-murders-sentence-12-14-2015>

66 For more please see <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/annual-report-macedonia-2013/>

67 For more please see http://www.mhc.org.mk/system/uploads/redactor_assets/documents/1110/Godishen_Izvestaj_English_.pdf

the expense of Albanian community in general and especially those subject to this case. In total, there were 46 closed-session court hearings where lawyers called for more thorough investigations and more evidence.⁶⁸

This case –known also as “Monstra case”–has finally been sent to re-trial. It remains the most politicised trial in the modern history of the country. The Albanian political parties and the broader spectrum of civil society and religious leaders believe the case was orchestrated by the Macedonian authorities in order to deepen political and inter-ethnic tensions and boost the political position of VMRO-DPMNE.⁶⁹ The interlocutors believe citizens are learning from the past, particularly the case of the murder of innocent Pakistani immigrants in 2002 who were executed by security structures to “impress” the international community and in an attempt to shift the context of the conflict with the National Liberation Army (NLA) to give it a religious dimension.⁷⁰ The research did not dig into this particular case but it was overwhelmingly pointed out as an example to explain the instrumentalization of extremism for the purpose of domestic politics in Macedonia as well as to express the ultimate distrust on Macedonian security structures.

The case of Kumanovo (May 2015) was also brought to attention. In this particular incident, during a fighting between a group of Albanian extremists and former NLA fighters with the Macedonian security forces, 18 people were killed and several injured.⁷¹ There is no concrete explanation as to why the group ended up in Kumanovo and what the real motivations for violence were, but the Macedonian authorities were quick to conclude that some members of Kumanovo group had also been foreign fighters in Syria. The report finds that none of them have travelled to Syria, let alone have any attachment to Islamic groups. Instead, some of the men fought during the conflicts in Kosovo and Macedonia and had since developed ties with organised crime following these conflicts.⁷² The case marked one of the largest incidents in Macedonia following the end of conflict in 2001. The purpose of the group remains unclear. They have ranged from national causes to conspiracy to internal political score settling. Nonetheless, no evidence links the group members with what was attempted to be branded as Islamic extremism.

68 For more please see <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2015/03/macedonia-facade-150318135440964.html>

69 From the interviews with representatives of Albanian political parties in Macedonia.

70 For more please see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3674533.stm>

71 For more please see <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-s-kumanovo-shootout-still-raising-suspicions-05-10-2016>

72 For more please see <http://zeri.info/aktuale/32465/dosja-e-aki-se-ndrecaj-dhe-rizaj-te-dyshuar-ne-kosove-per-krim-te-organizuar-dhe-harac/>

3. DRIVERS OF RADICALIZATION AND EXTREMISM IN MACEDONIA

Radicalization and violent extremism in Macedonia are not caused by one single factor. While a number of factors mirror that of other contexts, there are number of country-specific drivers. General drivers and country specific challenges have been provided in the first and second part of this report. The following section focuses on societal and individual drivers. These drivers include: segregation and distrust towards state system; global jihad; external religious Ideology; sympathy towards “Muslim brothers”; local networks of influence as well as online radicalisation.⁷³

3.1 Segregation and distrust towards state system

For decades, the ethnic Albanian community in Macedonia was segregated and stigmatized in the political, economic, justice and educational realm.⁷⁴ According to the interviewees, the systematic discrimination of Albanians caused the loss of credibility of the Macedonian state in the eyes of Albanian community.⁷⁵ Despite some improvements and the partial implementation of the Ohrid Agreement⁷⁶ - an agreement which led to the end of conflict between Macedonian state institutions and NLA - the government led by Nikola Gruevski and Ali Ahmeti did not improve the integration of Albanians in Macedonia.⁷⁷ According to the interviewees, the Albanians are not represented proportionally and sufficiently in the broader public sector, and the official use of Albanian language, which was elevated by the Ohrid Agreement to an official language in Macedonia in 2001, is still disputed by the nationalistic sentiments in the Macedonian camp, including as an official policy.⁷⁸ The shift in government in mid-2017 has brought some improvements with the current Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev appearing in favour of enhancing inter-ethnic relations. Despite this, challenges

73 Interview with U, Civil Society Activist. 18 July 2017. Skopje, Macedonia.

74 Data collection from the Focus Group organized in Kumanovo held on November 12th 2017.

75 Ibid.

76 For more on the Ohrid Agreement, please see <http://www.ucd.ie/ibis/filestore/Ohrid%20Framework%20Agreement.pdf>

77 Ibid.

78 Macedonia's President vetoed Albanian language legislation citing a “very expensive redundancy” for the Macedonian administration. For more <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-president-vetoes-albanian-language-legislation/28981428.html>

remain especially in public investments and budget allocation at the local level in Albanian towns. This state of play, according to number of interviewees, has led to an increased dissatisfaction of the Albanian community with the state institutions.⁷⁹

Those interviewed for the purposes of this report point out to ethnic biased especially in the context of the justice system. For instance, of the 2797 incarcerated individuals in Macedonian prisons, Albanians account for the majority (1692 prisoners) or 60 % of the total prison population. There are 1105 Macedonian prisoners, or 39.05% of the total number of prisoners in Macedonia. When compared proportionally to the size of ethnic communities in Macedonia, there is a discrepancy between the relative percentage of the ethnic group in Macedonia and the number of prisoners,⁸⁰ a potential indicator of the ethnic bias that has hurt the societal cohesion and trust in the state institutions.

As one interviewer said:

“In order to see the extent to which Albanian municipalities are marginalised in the context of investments, employment and education, there is no need for in-depth study: one just need to walk in the Albanian majority inhabited areas and see the difference with those of Macedonian inhabited areas...This is also a failure of Albanian political parties (who traditionally govern jointly with the main Macedonian political parties) ...”⁸¹

Commentators argue that the staggering disparity in the quality of life and public investments along ethnic lines was exploited by radical and extremist groups in Macedonia, especially in Skopje and Kumanovo, where such groups continue their activities unabated by the authorities. The alleged discriminatory approach of the state authorities has affected motivations among the Albanian youth in Macedonia and made them look for other alternatives, including a search for a broader identity category in an attempt to reframe the power relations between the Macedonian majority and the disempowered Albanian community. The exploitation of the discrimination and the disparity in representation is very much present in the local narrative of radical imams and key recruiters of extremist groups. This narrative is not limited to a religious narrative but largely refers to the political position of Albanians in Macedonia and their socio-economic standing. That said, various analysts are more optimistic about the recent change in power in Macedonia and the conduct of the new government in redressing some of these perceptions.⁸²

79 From the interviews with representatives of Albanian political parties in Macedonia 13 September 2017

80 For more please see <http://strugaekspres.com/maqedoni-shqiptaret-i-prijne-listes-se-te-denuarve-me-burg-te-perjetshem/>

81 Interview with X, Analyst. 20 July 2017. Skopje, Macedonia.

82 Ibid.

3.2 Global jihad

Macedonia was not immune to the phenomenon of the “global jihad.”⁸³ In the context of IS’ call to “defend the ummah,” dozens of youngsters from Macedonia have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight with the pretext of supporting the Sunni Muslim populations.

The majority of the foreign fighters from Macedonia travelled to Syria and Iraq from 2012 up until the first part of 2014, a period when the so-called ‘Islamic State’ was not yet active and did not have an important role in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. When IS invaded Mosul and other important regions in Syria and Iraq and established the “Caliphate,” through an unprecedented propaganda effort they promoted it as a utopic country ruled by Sharia law and as a place where Muslims may freely live and practice their religion, away from the complex European secular democracies. They invited all Muslims to travel to the “caliphate” with their families to contribute to the historical birth of the “Islamic State.” This propaganda like in much of Europe, appealed to dozens of Macedonian citizens who fled to Syria with their families.. Some were further incited to join groups fighting the Assad regime, especially after the publication of images following the aftermath of the use of chemical weapons.⁸⁴

The report found that in addition to the appeal of the “Islamic State” and solidarity with Syrian opposition resistance to Assad’s regime that resonated with a portion of the population, foreign fighters from Macedonia were further incited by the prospects of becoming protagonists in the creation of a pan-Islamic state ruled by Sharia law. At a time of high disenchantment with their own state and bleak prospects of becoming equal stakeholders in Macedonia, IS offered to them, along with thousands of their Muslim fellows, an alternative, however problematic and false in practice. Through a carefully crafted narrative that exploited local grievances and provided full of fake motivations, IS encouraged them to contribute to the establishment and protection of the so-called caliphate. The Macedonian citizens who joined ISIS and other terrorist groups follow this trail. They have felt that their decision is moral and important for the protection and support of the “Muslim brothers” in Middle East. At times, these feelings were so strong among IS supporters that a citizen sold his entire property in order to finance his travel and contribute to the establishment of the “caliphate.”⁸⁵

According to those interviewed with knowledge of the dynamics of IS recruitment in Macedonia, a significant number of foreign fighters in Macedonia were motivated to join IS due to disenchantment with the political system in Macedonia, including low levels of trust

83 Ibid.

84 Interview with R, Political Analyst from Skopje, 11 September 2017. Skopje, Macedonia.

85 Interview with the K, representative of civil society, 11 July 2017. Skopje. Macedonia

for Albanian political parties, and in protest to the way in which religious life is organized in Macedonia.⁸⁶ They considered themselves protagonist of change, however, it is not clear if they were willing to use violence in Macedonia to bring about this change. Lacking the means to spur change in both the political and religious front in Macedonia, the wars in Syria and Iraq provided the outlet for these individuals. It is not a coincidence that one of the Macedonian foreign fighters rose to become a prominent figure in the so-called Islamic State.⁸⁷

Among important drivers that played a role in changing the shape of Islam in Macedonia and introduced new trends previously foreign to the practitioners of Islam in the region are the Islamic charities present in Macedonia, which have humanitarian and religious goals. Our fieldwork found that these charities are active in organizing different educational activities in Macedonia. They have established schools for different age groups, media stations, and publishing houses. These religious organizations and charities are self-financed or financed by the Middle Eastern countries such as: Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The activities of some of these printing houses is, however, subject to debate and contestation, with many considering that they feed religionization and radicalisation.⁸⁸

3.3 Traditional practitioners ensuring resilience: the contrast between Skopje and Tetovo

Historically, Albanians who live in Macedonia were considered more religious than their ethnic kin in Kosovo or Albania.⁸⁹ This is traced back to the Ottoman Empire, in which Skopje, present day capital of Macedonia, served for some time as the centre of Kosovo Vilayet. While other factors further this point, they will not be treated as part of this report. By way of background it suffices to say that the Muslim community in Macedonia are largely devoted practitioners when compared to citizens of Kosovo, and especially Albania. In this report, we do not argue that being a Muslim practitioner may be a precondition for radicalization and violent extremism. Rather, we find that the more traditional the practice, be it national or religious, the more resilience there is to violent extremism. For example, in the case of neighbouring Kosovo the majority of foreign fighters and supporters of violent ideologies hail from families with no

86 Ibid.

87 O.H is widely considered as one of the prominent ISIS figure from Macedonia.

88 From the interviews with representatives of Albanian political parties in Macedonia.

89 Interview with R, Political Analyst from Skopje, 11 September 2017. Skopje, Macedonia.

tradition of practicing religion, or even from secular families.⁹⁰ Only a few of the foreign fighters from Kosovo originate from families with a long and a strong tradition of religious practice.⁹¹ The same applies to Macedonia. The majority of the foreign fighters from Macedonia do not hail from families that have a strong and long tradition of practicing religion.⁹²

In fact, the individuals who have joined terrorist organizations in Syria/Iraq as well as those supporting in-country religious groups come from different geographic areas of Macedonia, with the majority clustered around Skopje and Kumanovo. Our data collection and the mapping of foreign fighters also captured some internal nuances and variation across Albanian-inhabited areas of Macedonia. The northern part of Macedonia appears more affected by violent extremism than the more resilient western town of Tetovo and the surrounding villages. The largest cluster of foreign fighters is found in Skopje and Kumanovo, and less from the region of Tetovo. There are different explanatory factors that account for this trend. The factors are related to the number of factors such as: ethnical mixed locations; the organization of religious life; the role of the diaspora in local populations of Tetovo (considered more positive) compared to Skopje region, socio-economic dimensions meaning that Tetovo is more developed than Skopje (Albanian inhabited municipalities); the role of border municipalities; social exclusion and alienation and other important vulnerable and resilience factors on C/PVE in Macedonia.

According to those interviewed, one of the factors that makes the Skopje region, for example, more vulnerable towards radicalization and violent extremism is the effort of Macedonian authorities to reduce the role of the Albanian community in Skopje and to make the capital “more Macedonian”.⁹³ Skopje is the third largest city in Balkans where Albanians live, after Tirana and Prishtina and currently it is the city with the largest concentration of Albanians in Macedonia. VMRO-DPMNE’s approach to establish boundaries by pushing Albanians to live in isolated areas of the city and divided from the rest of its population, has led to many ethnically motivated incidents between Albanians and Macedonians. These incidents have been observed in many instances, for example, starting in schools or buses where physical clashes are becoming a norm among the youth in Skopje.⁹⁴

90 Shpend Kursani. 2015. Report inquiring into causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

91 Ibid.

92 Interview with C, representative of Islamic community. 15 September 2017. Tetovo. Macedonia.

93 Data collection from the Focus Group organized in Skopje, 2 October 2017.

94 Ibid.



Figure 1: Factors leading to more radicalization and extremism in Skopje (including its neighborhoods)

According to analysts interviewed, another illustration of the imposition of the dominant Macedonian authority in complete disregard of other communities that live in Macedonia is the “Skopje 2014” project. The Albanian community that lives in Skopje feels increasingly discriminated against and excluded from the political life in Macedonia. Indirectly, this has made the Albanian community in Skopje more vulnerable to different ideologies, including religious extremism.

By contrast, the number of Albanians from Tetovo who have traveled to Syria/Iraq to join extremist groups is very low. The inter-ethnic tensions found in Skopje are largely absent in Tetovo. Furthermore, Tetovo is the best illustration of a context where religious life is organized and is an inseparable part of the community’s activities.⁹⁵ The imams working in the region of Tetovo are well educated, in part because of the holistic training they received, which included sociology, psychology and philosophy. The imams from the Tetovo region keep the tabs on community and understand their concerns.⁹⁶ This good relationship between the community and Islamic Association in Macedonia in the region of Tetovo has made the BFI one of the most trusted institutions in Tetovo and the surrounding areas. The imams and other BFI senior officials in Tetovo are former university professors and activists.⁹⁷ They have managed to build a strong relationship between the community, local authorities, community leaders and religious institutions. This approach has prevented the spreading of the radicalization and violent extremism in entire region of Pollog. In addition, the religious community in Tetovo functions as a unified body, with no internal religious cleavages between Muslim practitioners. This approach has made the region of Tetovo more resilient towards all kind of violent extremist ideologies compared with the other regions in Macedonia.⁹⁸

95 Interview with “L”- professor of sociology from Tetovo. 15 September 2017

96 Interview with “G” high representatives of BFI in Macedonia. 12 September 2017

97 Interview with “G” high representative of BFI in Macedonia. 12 September 2017

98 Ibid:



Figure 2: Factors to more resilience in Tetovo region

In contrast to Tetovo, the BFI in Skopje is not well accepted by part of the active practitioners, which was further hurt by various divisions between Muslim religious leaders in the Skopje region. These internal clashes have affected the community of followers, forcing a division of the jaamat, with many taking the preaching in locations outside of BFI official mosques. These rifts have opened up the gate to the proliferation of illegal mosques in Skopje over the years, with some becoming a hotbed of violent ideologies. On the other hand, there are no illegal mosques present in the region of Tetovo.

3.4 Sympathy towards “Muslim brothers”

Similar to a growing trend elsewhere, for a young and active Muslim practitioner, Islam does not only imply devotion towards *Allah* and religion, but it also implies an obedient lifestyle. New ways of understanding religion through social media and digital media has had blurred the traditional lines and has had a direct impacted on the solidarity and sympathy among Muslims at the global level. Today, religion serves as a means of identification beyond the constraints of state boundaries, a tool to increase trust, brotherhood, connection and solidarity among people of different ethnic backgrounds, regardless of their country of origin. In this context, many Muslims have come to perceive themselves as part of a closely knit community, with a strong feeling of brotherhood⁹⁹

The solidarity with Muslims wherever they reside has generally influenced individuals and groups who have embraced radicalisation and who have taken an interest in fighting in foreign conflicts. In an environment where there was no antagonism towards Shia, Jews and other communities, narratives have created “new enemies” to encourage the recruitment into an extreme ideology and to incite dehumanization of the other religious categories. The most discussed case in Macedonia is that of Sami Abdullahu, an imam from Skopje, who was killed in Syria and became the reason why dozens of foreign fighters from Macedonia joined IS. Abdullahu went to Syria under the banner of humanitarianism and the protection of the Sunni Muslims in Syria against the Alewite regime of Assad. His murder triggered much emotion from the Albanians in Macedonia who praised his “heroism” and readiness to go and fight for the benefit of “brothers” in Syria.¹⁰⁰ The imams of the Islamic Association in Syria have declared the same sympathy for the “heroism” of Abdullahu.¹⁰¹ Therefore, the sympathy

99 For more please see: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/apr/13/who-are-the-new-jihadis>

100 For more please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGAEs-D-9Bs>

101 Ibid

for Muslims in Syria and Iraq and the violence used against them from the Shia regime has had a huge influence on the decision of Macedonian citizens to go and fight as a part of the terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. Abdullahu was praised by an imam in Macedonia who provided the following statement, implicitly referring to Abdullahu's case:

*"...Muslims should be brave and sincere, and if a Muslim brother is attacked by an enemy, the Muslim should give his life to protect the Muslim brother."*¹⁰²

The Abdullahu case has elicited sympathy among part of jamaat and the para-jamaat which encouraged people to believe in the *ummah* and the brotherhood as "indispensable ideology of every Muslims in the globe." His story was utilised for the recruitment of foreign fighters in Macedonia, with some of his statements broadcast and published repeatedly in discussion with groups and individuals.

3.5 Influence of friends, relatives and links to Kosovo

Friends and relatives provide a very important factor in the process of radicalization and also de-radicalisation. To recall, in the Kosovo case the role of friends, family members and relatives was a decisive factor for many of Kosovo's foreign fighters decisions to travel to Syria and Iraq and promote the IS ideologies and pledge loyalty to them.¹⁰³

In the case of Macedonian foreign fighters, we found that they are young. Some of them participated in anti-discrimination protests against the Macedonian authorities.¹⁰⁴ Many were active in sports and football fan groups.¹⁰⁵ Across the board, they expressed frustration about the state of political affairs, ever disenchanted by the Macedonian authorities and Albanian political parties that they felt did not represent them. For example, Aron¹⁰⁶, in his early 20s from Skopje, has travelled to Syria in 2011. Before his participation in the conflict in Syria he was one of the organizers of the protests against authorities related to the "Monstra case". He was a participant in nearly every protest organized in Skopje against the discrimination of Albanians from state authorities.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, two other young males from Skopje who

102 For more please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtcRpw2tYME>

103 Data from the Focus Group in Hani i Elezit. 14 March 2017. Kosovo

104 Interview with the K, representative of civil society, 11 July 2017. Skopje. Macedonia

105 Interview with L, relative of a member of FF from Macedonia. 12 July 2017. Skopje. Macedonia.

106 Aron is a coded name of the Macedonian foreign fighters which was killed in Syria in 2012.

107 Interview with the K, representative of civil society, 11 July 2017. Skopje. Macedonia

have travelled to Syria were also part of the fan club “Shfercerat” from Skopje, a well-known Albanian football fan group. This group is known to be in conflict with its Macedonian rival in Skopje, the fans of Vardar football club. According to the respondents, these young males have used protests as a means to “fight” injustice and fostered strong bonds in the process.¹⁰⁸ The conflict in Syria was another opportunity for them to “contribute” to countering injustice, this time against the Assad regime.

3.6 Online radicalisation

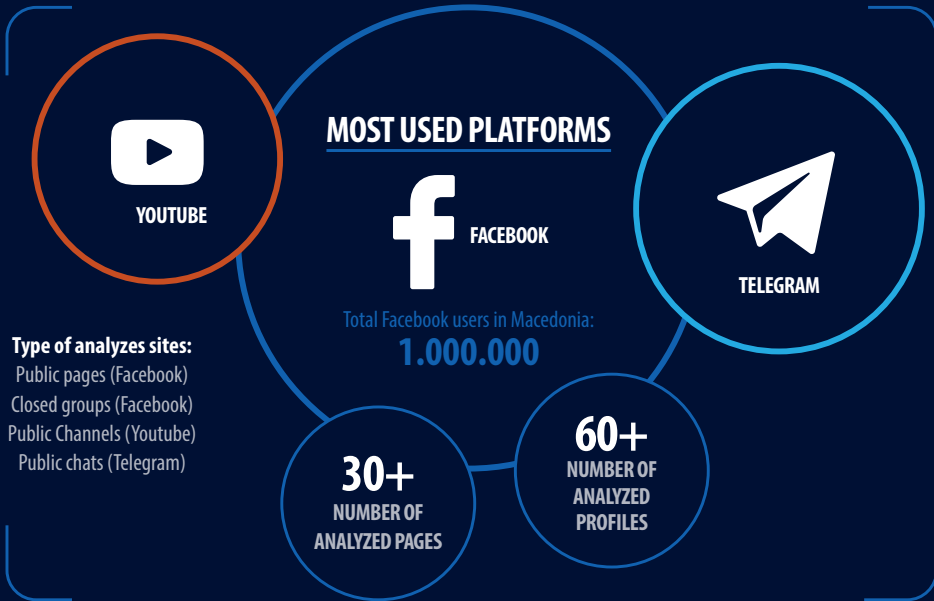
Online platforms have been used extensively as propaganda aimed at engaging and convincing different individuals, especially youngsters, to support different groups fighting in Syria and Iraq. A certain number of individuals who have not joined IS in the battlefield have instead taken their fight to social networks, using their online profiles to provide support to IS or Al-Nusra. The distribution of this propaganda in the Albanian language by IS and other organizations has increased their support base. Research on the social network activities of these various groups unpacks the discourse of online sites that promote IS, the content of these pages, their attitudes towards democratic processes such as elections and employment in secular state institutions, other religious communities, and state security institutions, as well as sermons on jihad and support for prominent members of various violent extremist groups.¹⁰⁹

108 Data collection from the Focus Group organized in Skopje, November 12th 2017.

109 Vesë Kelmendi and Shpat Balaj. 2017. New Battlegroups: Extremist Groups Activity on Social Networks in Kosovo, Albania and FYROM.

MACEDONIA SOCIAL MEDIA INFOGRAPHICS

MOST USED WORDS



TYPE OF DISTRIBUTED CONTENT

- Calls and direct support for Jihad
- Support for jihadists in Syria and Iraq
- Posts against different ideologies and countries
- Supporting imams who are in prisons
- Against Islamic Community
- Hate Speech
- Support for terrorist attacks

Figure 3: Macedonia Social Media Infographics

Some of the profiles affiliated with IS report directly from the battlefields. A thorough analysis of social media pages and profiles, revealed the wide distribution of pictures promoting threatening content for Skopje. Moreover, compared to other countries in the region, in Macedonia the supporters of convicted ethnic Albanians share pictures through which they support the so-called “Islamic State”. Such content has been especially frequent during the holy month of Ramadan. They promote the idea that they are “devoted Muslims” as they seek to undermine further the impact of Islamic Community in Macedonia.¹¹⁰

In Macedonia, there are three categories of online content: (i) extremist groups that advocate violence; (ii) propaganda material, such as calls for jihad or for support for imprisoned imams; and (iii) trends and attitudes towards the state, institutions and society in general. One of the most prominent figures in the profiles of extremist groups is Rexhep Memishi. The release of Shukri Aliu has also been welcomed as a victory for extremist groups on social media. The figure below presents two imams who have been imprisoned on terrorist e charges in Macedonia and whose sermons are primarily distributed in the profiles analysed in this report. They are very active on online extremist pages in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. This graph displays the number of likes and followers of these pages on Facebook.

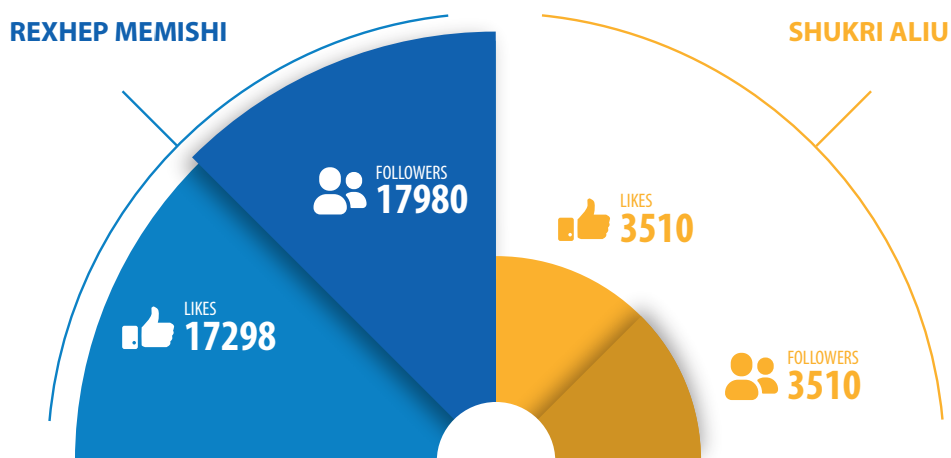


Figure 4: Number of likes and support for Memishi and Aliu on Facebook

110 KCSS database on social media

The latest trend of the supporters of extremist groups on social media was their call to not vote in local elections in Macedonia. Moreover, their discourse was aimed against political parties which are considered to have a religious base, because as they claim, participation in democratic processes contradicts their principles. In Macedonia, the supporters of extremist groups in social media are more active compared to Kosovo and Albania. While we could not quantify the content of these pages, from our research and monitoring of social media we can conclude that ethnic Albanians in Macedonia promote the material of extremist groups more often by sharing or tweeting this content frequently in their groups and profiles. The Islamic community in Macedonia does not have a well-established online platform that would contribute to the religious education of young people and to help counter violent extremism through communication. The Muslim community in Macedonia should build proper online platforms and channels (YouTube, Facebook and Twitter) in order to strategically counter the arguments used by extremist groups for the purpose of recruitment.

4. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION: WHICH ARE THE RESILIENCE FACTORS AGAINST RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM IN MACEDONIA?

Macedonia presents a particularly complex case due to the tensions between the state and a part of the society.¹¹¹ This will continue as long as the Albanian community is not fully included in the Macedonian state institutions. The research identifies three overarching resilient factors: a.) traditional practice of Islam b.) inter-ethnic tolerance and c.) individual and community prosperity.

Firstly, Albanians in Macedonia are traditionally more religious due to the role of the region during the rule of the Ottoman Empire.¹¹² The more there is knowledge on Islam, the lesser will be the potential for externally driven ideologies. In particular, the research finds that in the most traditional Albanian regions such as the Pollog region (Tetovo and Gostivar), the potential for radicalisation and spread of conservative Islamic school of thoughts is lower. This is not only concluded by the number of foreign fighters but also from the perspective of authority that traditional imams exercise in this region¹¹³. In our assessment, traditional imams are those who continue to practice religion with a consistent narrative and do not challenge the secular values. They also remain consistent in the exercise of religious rituals in par with the traditions of previous generations. Our report finds that the more traditional the religious community, the less potential there will be for penetration of radical ideology.

Second, where there is more inter-ethnic tolerance there is less potential for radicalisation. The research finds that there is more potential for radicalisation in mixed neighbourhoods or in places with a higher record of inter-ethnic incidents. This has made areas including Skopje and Kumanovo (with its surroundings) more prone to radicalisation and extremist ideology. The reaction from the communities to police raids, inter-ethnic incidents and disparities in living standards from one neighbourhood to another has at least 'facilitated' the narrative of

111 Anna Juncos. 2017. Principled Pragmatism and Resilience. p. 75.

112 Gëzim Krasniqi. 2011. The 'forbidden fruit': Islam and Politics of identity in Kosovo and Macedonia.

113 Interview with F, representative of local municipality in Tetovo. 15 September 2017. Tetovo, Macedonia.

extremist imams in their promotion of extremist views. In the places where there is a higher proportion of Albanians there are less inter-ethnic incidents reported, hence the potential for radicalisation and extremism is comparatively lower.

Third, lack of ownership and political representation for all communities in Macedonia created a ripe environment for radicalisation, both Islamic and ethno-nationalist. It is not a coincidence that the largest number of foreign fighters and supporters of violent extremism comes from less developed neighbourhoods with very slim prospects for any change in the near future. The report identified disparity in the life between certain municipalities in Skopje. The economic marginalization of these municipalities has been the centrepiece of narrative propagated by radical imams in Macedonia's mosques.

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