

# Applicability of Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework and Programme for Kosovo

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International Centre for Counter-Terrorism

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ICCT Report

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International Centre for  
Counter-Terrorism

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# Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

The policy brief makes the case that policymakers and practitioners need to consider who the state defines as ‘extremists.’ In the West, terrorism and violent extremism are seen as the most radical expressions of anti-government resistance. Things, however, look different in the Global South where some governments effectively foster extremists of their own while targeting legitimate and often nonviolent opposition. Echoes of such an approach are also present in Europe where certain (semi-) authoritarian governments securitise their responses to political dissent while seemingly drawing inspiration from more autocratic regimes outside this continent. Thus, in their case, an attempt to counter real or imagined extremism could consequently and likewise lead them to foster extremists of their own.

This policy brief will focus on the case of Malaysia, where cyber troopers, or cytros, i.e., groups of coordinated trolling individuals (either paid or voluntary), are deployed for political messaging or conduct online malign influence operations to manipulate and manage the public opinion on domestic political issues. The red-ragging tactic brands individuals or groups as communists or terrorists to justify coercive actions against them or creates some green scares that could focus on individuals who allegedly belong to the Islamist extremist milieu. Ironically, these strategies, which seem to target extremists, nurture a peculiar brand of pro-government extremism themselves. Using Malaysia as a case study, this policy brief hopes to demonstrate how the ethnonationalist political actors and their agents use polarising hate speech, the weaponisation of conspiracy theories, and religious supremacy as a criterion for belonging to manage democratic constituents by exploiting existing sociopolitical divisions.

**Keywords:** extremism, vigilantism, digilantism, sedition, incitement, surveillant assemblage, networked authoritarianism

## Introduction

This paper examines the applicability of the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework and the Channel procedures in the context of Kosovo. It does this by examining the way in which the current Channel procedures are constructed with regard to risk assessment, the process of referrals, and the methods of rehabilitation or deradicalisation. The paper will also look at some of the problems of criticisms of the Channel approach, and the problematic implications that such an approach may have, as well as considering whether and how there might be an opportunity to remedy or resolve these. Ultimately, the paper finds that there are both risks and possibilities with deploying a Channel framework in a Kosovan context, although significant care must be taken, as the British context presents significant differences to the Kosovan, whilst it is also important to avoid replicating the mistakes that have been made by the UK Government during Prevent and Channel implementation.

Once the paper has examined the context of Kosovo and its potential requirements around vulnerability and risk in relation to violent extremism and radicalisation, it will explore the processes of Channel processes. Primarily, it will detail the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework, examining its development and implementation, as well as how risk and vulnerability to extremism are understood within this framework. This will be followed by an exploration of the Channel processes of referral, detailing how individuals are referred to Prevent through Channel, as well as considering the rate of referrals in the UK context. This will then be followed by an examination of how Channel seeks to rehabilitate individuals who are undergoing the process, following an assessment and referral. Finally, the paper will look at some of the problems and criticisms of a vulnerability-led approach to violent extremism, before looking at the lessons this has for the Kosovan context – particularly regarding the rehabilitation of prisoners who have returned from Syria and Iraq, in Kosovo.

## Context

This paper examines the possibilities for replicability and implementation of Channel processes in the Kosovan context. This first section will introduce the development of the Channel approach in the UK, as well as details on the political context as to why this approach of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) has been adopted and prioritised over others. This will then be followed by an overview of the state of violent extremism and CVE in Kosovo – particularly on returnees from Syria and Iraq – to note the limitations within the current correction and probational context.

## The Development of Channel within the Prevent Programme

The Channel approach is a multiagency intervention programme that operated within the wider Prevent programme and offered potential ‘at-risk’ individuals a tailored support system (Mastroe, 2016, p. 53). Channel itself, as well as much of wider CVE, falls within a risk-led, pre-emptive approach towards violence and terrorism. Risk assessment approaches have become an increasingly central part of security practice in recent years as part of a growing prevalence of pre-emptive governance of violent extremism, drawing upon criminological hypotheses entering into expanding prevention-orientated policies (Heath-Kelly, 2020; Shanaah & Heath-Kelly, 2022). CVE approaches have generally involved the expansion of security into the ‘pre-crime’ space, in which criminal intent or ideology is sought and identified (Schneider, 2020). In this arena, prevention is less concerned with acts and more concerned ‘with the speech arena, as indicators of radicalisation are looked for in ideas, expressions or attitudes’ (Weert, 2021, p. 8). As such, frameworks such as the British-developed Channel (or other frameworks such as the VERA-2R model, developed in Canada and used in the Netherlands, for instance), have sought to provide

a practical framework for identifying and operationalising indicators of extremism as part of a preventative approach to tackling terrorism.

Channel has developed within, and as part of, the broader Prevent programme in the UK, which has become the main focus of British counterterrorism practice (Kaleem, 2021; McNeil-Willson, 2019). It has been implemented across UK society, with legal obligations to locate extremism enshrined within the UK public sector (Busher, Choudhury, Thomas, & Harris, 2017). Britain was an early adopter of a distinct CVE policy approach, and its comparatively centralised government and increasing centralisation of Prevent within the UK Home Office, have led to it being cited internationally as having a particular national coherence (Thomas, 2020, p. 13). The Prevent programme, within which Channel operates, was established in 2003, became public in 2006, and was designed to ‘stop radicalisation, reduce support for terrorism and violence extremism, and discourage people from becoming terrorists’ (HM Government, 2006). Prevent has since undergone various revisions and reiterations, with the 2011 review recommending a focus beyond ‘Islamist’ extremism to include the far right to tackle ‘the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat we face from those who promote it’ (HM Government, 2011, p. 7).

Channel was first piloted in 2007 and rolled out across England and Wales in April 2012 before being placed on a statutory footing in 2015. Using a multi-agency approach, Channel aims to identify people at risk, assess the nature and extent of that risk, and develop the most appropriate support plan for the person concerned. It was modelled on other multi-agency risk management processes used in child protection, responses to domestic violence and the management of high-risk offenders – as well as drawing from processes designed to safeguard people at risk from crime, drugs or gangs. The primary iteration of Channel also initially claimed to set the bar for reporting quite high, to include ‘expressed support for violence and terrorism; possession of violent extremist literature; attempts to access or contribute to violent extremist websites; possession of material regarding weapons and/or explosives; and possession of literature regarding military training, skills and techniques’ (HM Government, 2011, p. 57). However, since its centralisation within the Prevent programme, risk indicators have been loosened to include factors such as ‘feelings of grievance and injustice’, a ‘need for identity, meaning and belonging’, and a ‘desire for political or moral change’ (HM Government, 2012, p. 2).

In 2015, the ‘Prevent Duty’ came into effect as part of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act (CTSA) 2015, which created legal obligations for all public sector workers to report on instances of extremism. Section 36 of the CTSA 2015 also provided a legal requirement for local authorities to ensure that there was a panel of persons in place in all areas, to assess individuals identified as being vulnerable to extremism, as well as develop a multi-agency support plan. This placed Channel, for the first time, on the statutory footing in Britain that it remains on today, part of Prevent’s activities as central to the reporting and assessing processes. However, it is worth noting that the recent William Shawcross recommendations suggested Channel needs to move away from safeguarding practices (HM Government, 2023a). Today, Channel represents a significant part of the Prevent programme, operating in educational, healthcare, correctional and judicial settings as a means of identifying and responding to concerns of extremism.

## The Kosovan Context

Whilst Kosovo does not have a significant history of religious militancy, it was heavily impacted by the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. At least 433 individuals from Kosovo have travelled to Syria and Iraq since the start of the civil war in 2011, the majority to support Islamic State – roughly 255 men; the remainder, women and children (Clingendael, 2020, p. 2). A disproportionate number of Kosovars who engaged with Islamic State came from a relatively



specific area of five municipalities located close to Kosovo's Macedonian border – an area cited as facing long-term, targeted radicalisation, recruitment and mobilisation efforts by foreign-funded networks in southern Kosovo and northwestern Macedonia (Shtuni, 2016). Today, Kosovo has the highest concentration of returnees from Syria and Iraq in Europe relative to population size (Ndroqi, 2022, p. 5). The majority of the male returnees have been prosecuted due to their involvement, with those convicted receiving, on average, 3.5 years in prison – although there have been substantially longer sentences (Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2021; Clingendael, 2020, p. 4).

The issue of returnees from the former Islamic State has become the central focus of counter-extremism in Kosovo, particularly within ongoing judicial processes, as well as subsequent reintegration within Kosovan society. There remains a significant security concern around returnees, with at least five returnees subsequently found to be involved in planning a domestic terrorist attack and several returnees nearing the end of their prison sentences at the time of writing. There is also growing recognition that needs to be further rehabilitation efforts, as reflected in Kosovo's latest National Strategy Against Terrorism and Violent Extremism, which makes provisions for the reintegration of returnees. As such, mechanisms for identifying and responding to extremism as part of processes supporting reintegration into society prior to and upon release are key to avoiding recidivism and ensuring security.

This section will examine CVE within Kosovan prison and other judicial and correctional facilities. It finds that there are at least three main limitations within current approaches: 1) a limited capacity and experience in dealing with extremism; 2) a low level of cross-sector and inter-departmental coordination within CVE; and 3) a notable lack of suitable metrics for risk assessment within prisons and related institutions.

## Capacity

Whilst recent years have seen the strengthening of counter-terrorism investigations and identification, questions remain over the capacity of state structures that are, at present, still young and unconsolidated. Kosovo has tended toward international engagement as a means of generating capacity and skills building in Countering Violent Extremism, such as through US-led mentorship and equipment grants and EU cooperation. For instance, Kosovo has taken part in the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) process as part of the Western Balkans region, developing a much more robust legal and strategic counterterror framework as a result.<sup>1</sup> There have also been initiatives launched with the European Union and Council of Union to strengthen the rehabilitation and treatment needs of violent extremist prisoners, such as participation in the European Action 'Enhancing cooperation in the Western Balkans in managing violent extremism in prisons and preventing further radicalisation after release' (Council of Europe, 2022). However, there are equally some areas where international cooperation has not occurred, such as the lack of membership by Kosovo in Interpol, which may hamper coordination on combating terrorism. Kosovo's international engagement in counter-terrorism has also left the country particularly reliant on external, donor-driven programming when dealing with the long-term reintegration of returnees from Syria and the deradicalisation of homegrown extremists – potentially limiting capacity in the long run and leaving programmes vulnerable to changes in international funding. Furthermore, the issue of radicalisation in Kosovo has primarily been driven by European conceptualisations, which may mean that critical areas or patterns of extremism local to Kosovo may be overlooked. Ultimately, whilst capacity has grown in recent years due to greater

<sup>1</sup> This includes: Law No. 05/L-002 on Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory; Law No. 03/L-196 on the Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing; Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020; National Strategy Against Terrorism and Action Plan 2018-2022; and the National Strategy of the Republic of Kosovo for the Prevention of and Fight Against Informal Economy, Money Laundering, Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes 2014-2018.

international involvement, this has revealed and created limitations in the capacity of Kosovan CVE, which need to be addressed.

## Coordination

Another area of concern with regards CVE in Kosovo is the sometimes limited levels of coordination, particularly between governmental sectors and departments. The new Strategy and Action Plan for Counterterrorism (CT) and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) for 2023-2027 has placed emphasis on remedying limitations of capacity by encouraging ‘joined-up’, interdepartmental responses – including the better sharing of information and intelligence, and interdepartmental processes of identifying and responding to the risk of radicalisation from current prison inmates. Within the current context of returnees from Syria and Iraq, greater emphasis has been placed on supporting rehabilitation programmes for convicted extremists. This comes following concerns that over 60 percent of prisoners convicted of terrorism are not involved in any way in professional capacity training and development processes; particularly problematic considering it was the ‘dire economic situation, lack of employment perspectives, inadequate education level and unequal economic opportunities’ which were found to be critical contributing factors towards the engagement of young Kosovars with Islamic State (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2022, p. 7).

Successful rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees, as processes of tertiary prevention, require stable relationships between frontline practitioners and security and non-security institutions, as well as between practitioners and returnees, so as to ensure that requisite levels of trust are in place for social and functional interventions (Ndroqi, 2022, p. 4). The creation of the Division for the Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalised Persons (DPRRP) has encouraged greater cooperation between Kosovan security institutions (Orana & Perteshi, 2022). However, there seems to be evidence of continued fragmentation among the security institutions, particularly between security bodies such as the Kosovo Police (KP) and the Kosovo Intelligence Agency (KIA), and between public sector bodies such as the Kosovo Correctional Service (KCS) and Kosovo Probation Service (KPS). There is a notable need, therefore, to ensure cross-sector engagement as part of efforts better to combat violent extremism and support rehabilitation within prisons.

## Metrics

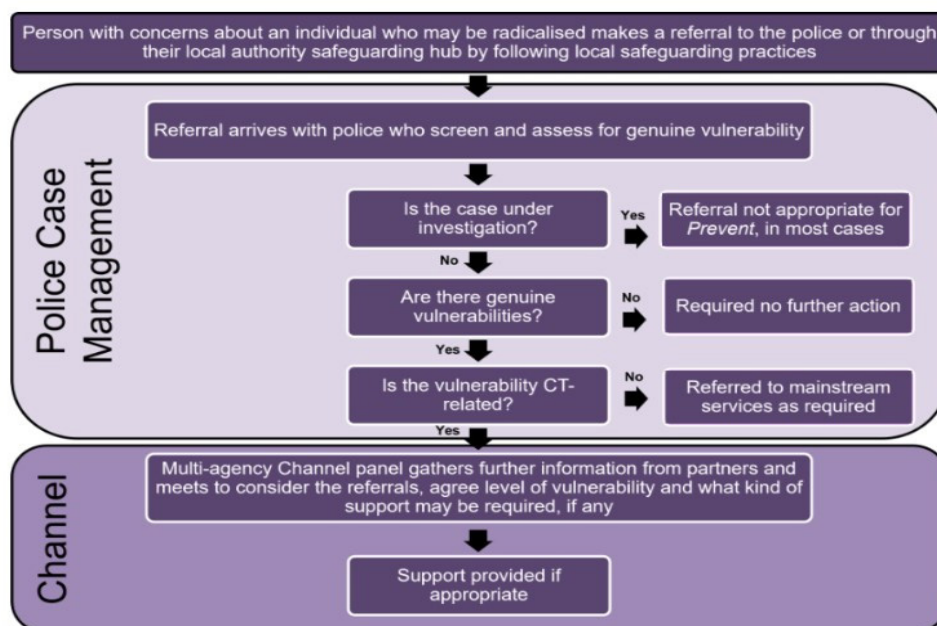
A third area that requires a response is the lack of assessment metrics for violent extremism between the departments. With the shift in the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism (SPVERLT) between 2015 and 2020, away from a focus on intelligence and law enforcement and toward cross-sector prevention, deradicalisation and reintegration approaches, Kosovan authorities have increasingly prioritised early identification, prevention and reintegration as objectives for institutions in tackling violent extremism (Orana & Perteshi, 2022; Visoka & Beha, 2021). However, Kosovo continues to lack a structured risk assessment methodology and, despite the cross-sector and multi-level creation of the DPRRP, has struggled with the lack of a sub-legal framework operable across security institutions. This is demonstrated most notably with the use of more generalised risk assessments from policing and security bodies by the Kosovo Correctional Service (KCS) and Kosovo Probation Service (KPS), rather than the use of metrics suited explicitly for detecting and responding to radicalisation and extremism (Orana & Perteshi, 2022, p. 3). Kosovo has recently been criticised as having ‘no tailored interventions in Kosovo prisons for radicalised inmates – such as cognitive behavioural therapy, mentoring, or structured dialogue tools – and no means to continue monitoring terrorism convicts after their release from prison’ (Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2021). Ultimately, response

to this requires an adequate and agreed-upon framework of assessment within prisons to identify and suitably respond to instances of extremism. To ensure their effectiveness, this should contain a strong and central human rights component when dealing with the prevention of radicalisation in prisons (OSCE, 2021).

A growing focus on reintegrating and rehabilitating prisoners who travelled to Islamic State requires greater levels of capacity, cooperation and assessment around extremism. As such, there is a continued need for the sharing of experience and practice, a requirement to ensure a multi-agency approach, and the implementation of a measured assessment matrix that draws on international experience and human rights. A combination of a rights-based approach, European expertise and, where appropriate, vocational training programmes as part of integration should help lower recidivism amongst current and former inmates (Development and Democracy, 2014, pp. 119-120), consolidating and enhancing CVE programmes. Based on these findings, the following section will consider the merits of the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework and Channel mechanisms as a means of responding to such needs.

## The Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework

Channel forms a central component of referrals as part of the UK Prevent programme within public bodies, such as educational healthcare and judicial institutions. When a referral is considered, the following stages take place: firstly, an initial 'gateway assessment' using the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework identifies and assesses those who may be at risk of extremism; secondly, once the case has undergone a secondary police management check to ensure that it does not need to be escalated to another branch of counterterrorism and that the individual does not pose an immediate threat, the Channel programme leads to the creation of a bespoke panel within the local authority, tailored to the needs of the individual; thirdly, a disengagement process occurs, whereby the individual is supported in moving away from extremism and towards rehabilitation and reintegration within society. This three-step process is shown below:



**Chart 1:** The Channel referral process (HM Government, 2015a)

This first section of the Channel programme examines the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework – which is used throughout the referral and rehabilitation process but is particularly important at the point at which the referral is made and initially assessed. Within Prevent and Channel, the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework plays an important role in identifying those that may be at risk of extremism. The framework supports the identification of individuals at risk of being drawn into terrorism, assesses the nature and extent of that risk, and enables the development of appropriate support plans for the individual or individuals concerned (HM Government, 2012, p. 2). It is described as a ‘consistently applied vulnerability assessment framework’ built around three specific dimensions of assessment: first is the engagement with a group, cause or ideology; second is the intent to cause harm; and third is capability to cause harm (Elliott, Randhawa-Horne, & Hambly, 2023; HM Government, 2015a, p. 11). Within these three dimensions are 22 factors, which provide the mapping for the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework, developed from the Extremism Risk Guidelines (cf. Elliott et al., 2023).

## The Assessment of Engagement, Intent and Capability

Upon submitting a referral, the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework is used to assess the level of engagement, intent and capability present in the individual under question. The first and primary dimension of Engagement focuses on what the Channel programme calls ‘psychological hooks’ by which individuals feel attracted towards engagement with extremism – including factors such as needs, susceptibilities, motivations and contextual influences. Individual hooks cited within the framework include: feelings of grievance and injustice; feeling under threat; a need for identity, meaning and belonging; a desire for status; a desire for excitement and adventure; a need to dominate and control others; susceptibility to indoctrination; a desire for political or moral change; opportunistic involvement; family or friends involvement in extremism; being at a transitional time of life; being influenced or controlled by a group; or relevant mental health issues (HM Government, 2012, p. 2). The majority (13) of the 22 factors cited within the Channel Programme fall within the Engagement dimension and, thus, Channel has a significant focus on identity over and above other aspects of extremism. Extremism is therefore conceptualised within Channel as the result of certain identity markers and beliefs, laying the foundation for terrorist action. This contrasts with other models, such as those used by the VERA-2R model operative in the Netherlands or French approaches, which draw a stronger link between extremism and criminality, for instance (D’Amato, 2019; McNeil-Willson, 2021).

Examples of engagement are cited within the guidance, and include: spending increasing time in the company of other suspected extremists; changing their style of dress or personal appearance to accord with the group; day-to-day behaviour becoming increasingly centred around an extremist ideology, group or cause; or loss of interest in other friends and activities not associated with the extremist ideology, group or cause – amongst others (HM Government, 2015a, p. 12). The shaping of identity, particularly a sharp change in identity, the expression of identity and the identification with an in- or out-group, are conceptualised as particularly important markers of extremism. Such emphasis ties in strongly within the UK Government’s definition of extremism which focuses on identity and values, as the ‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs’ (HM Government, 2015b).

The second dimension of Intent to cause harm, examines the extent to which those who are already engaged by a group, cause or specific extremist belief develop an intention to cause harm. This represents a specific action of the ideology. Such a mindset is associated with a readiness to use violence in the realisation of ends, and includes: over-identification with a group or ideology; ‘them’ and ‘us’ thinking and a focus on hostile in-group out-group relations; dehumanisation of



an ‘enemy’; attitudes that justify offending; harmful means to an end; and harmful objectives (HM Government, 2012, p. 3). It is the second largest grouping of the 22 factors, and specific examples of articulation of this dimension include: clearly identifying another group as threatening what they stand for and blaming that group for all social or political ills; using insulting or derogatory names or labels for another group; speaking about the imminence of harm from the other group and the importance of action now; and expressing attitudes that justify offending on behalf of the group, cause or ideology (HM Government, 2015a, p. 12).

The third section of the framework is the Capability of an individual to cause harm. As is stated in the guidance, ‘[n]ot all those who have a wish to cause harm on behalf of a group, cause or ideology are capable of doing so, and plots to cause widespread damage take a high level of personal capability, resources and networking to be successful’ (HM Government, 2012, p. 3). As such, what an individual is capable of is factored into the process as the final part of the assessment, to consider the risk of harm to the public. Such factors include: individual knowledge, skills and competencies; access to networks, funding or equipment; and criminal capability. The capability section represents the smallest dimension with the fewest individual factors and, as such, has a smaller emphasis within Channel assessment. Specific indicators in guidance notes include: having a history of violence; being criminally versatile and using criminal networks to support extremist goals; having occupational skills that can enable acts of terrorism (such as civil engineering, pharmacology or construction); as well as having technical expertise that can be deployed (such as IT skills, knowledge of chemicals, military training or survival skills) (HM Government, 2015a, p. 12).

Whilst these three dimensions are cited as key to the framework, Channel guidance is clear to underline that each dimension is to be considered separately, as ‘experience has shown that it is possible to be engaged without intending to cause harm and that it is possible to intend to cause harm without being particularly engaged’ (HM Government, 2015a, p. 11). As such, it is not a requirement that one or more factors be evident from each of the three dimensions. Indeed, evidence of just one factor is considered enough to raise concerns. It is also noted that the examples provided by the framework are ‘not exhaustive and vulnerability may manifest itself in other ways’, due to their being ‘no single route to terrorism nor... a single profile of those who become involved’ (HM Government, 2015a, p. 12). As the guidance states, ‘[m]ore important than any one specific sign is the sense that something is not quite right with the person you’re worried about’ (Action Counters Terrorism). Furthermore, the guidance also suggests that the presence of one sign, or a combination of signs, ‘can be indicators of other underlying issues of challenges that are not connected to radicalisation’ and that individuals who have concerns about an individual should ‘trust your instincts’ in terms of making a referral (Action Counters Terrorism).

Following the identification of potentially vulnerable people, the Channel guidance proposes that referrals be made to a Channel coordinator, typically a police officer or a local authority employee (HM Government, 2011, p. 58). These are then assessed by a coordinator to establish if the person is vulnerable to terrorism or should be referred elsewhere, as part of a ‘gateway assessment’. If an intervention is deemed to be required, then a multi-agency panel is assembled, based on the profile of the individual, to consider what might be required to steer them away from extremism, with actions including: counselling, faith guidance, civic engagement, working with support networks, and accessing mainstream services.

## Channel Processes of Referrals

Once a public servant has made an initial referral through the Prevent Referral Portal, the process will fall under Police Case Management, as seen in Chart 1 of this document (p.6). During this section of the process, the police or the local authority will coordinate activity by requesting relevant information from local partners about a referred person. The police will use this information to make an initial assessment of the nature and extent of the concerns using the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework. This screening process – a Gateway Assessment – takes place after each referral in the first instance and is conducted by specialist police officers and staff. A Gateway Assessment also draws upon police databases and other resources to determine the level of susceptibility and risk around the referred person, and whether they are appropriate for Prevent. If there is not deemed to be a susceptibility to radicalisation or extremism, they are removed from the Channel process and referred to more appropriate support services. On the other extreme, those who are suspected of posing a serious or imminent risk of terrorism offending are unlikely to be recommended for support through Channel and may instead be escalated to the Pursue branch of Government counter-terrorism, which deals with immediate terrorist risk. Those deemed appropriate for Channel are then subject to another, more detailed Prevent assessment led by the Channel case officer.

This process sometimes differs. For instance, if there is a child involved or other safeguarding concerns, a parallel Gateway Assessment will also be carried out by a dedicated Local Authority safeguarding team, as well as the one by a Prevent policing team – resulting in a joint assessment. There is both an adult and a children’s referral form, with referrals of those over the age of 18 using the adult referral form. Sometimes, both referral forms are completed, if the referral involves a family or group situation, or if there is concern that older siblings/family members need to be referred at the same time as a young person (Stop Adult Abuse). The Gateway Assessment will thus draw not only upon the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework, but also information provided from possible previous Prevent referrals and other safeguarding information.

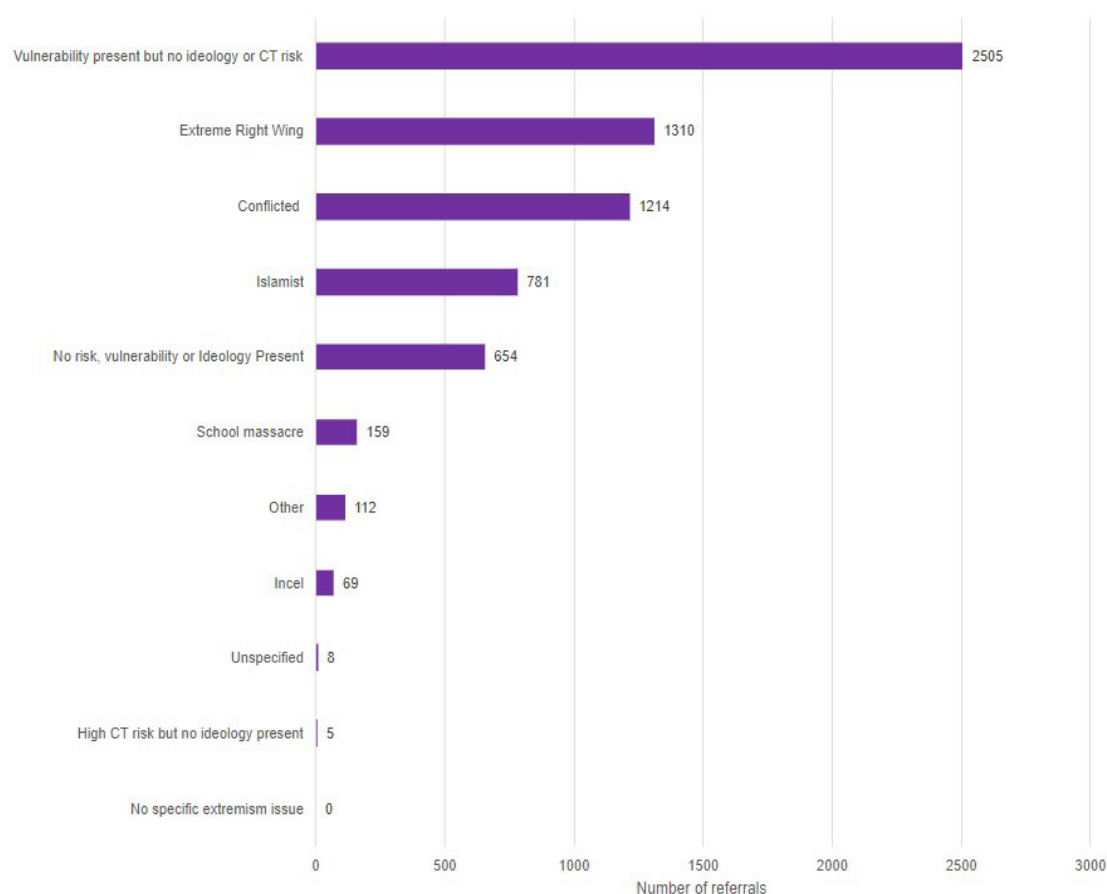
During the assessments by the Local Authority Safeguarding Team or the Prevent Policing Team, Home Office advises focus on certain questions which include: how or why the concern was raised; what would have happened if there was a specific event; the indicators that something is wrong; any sympathetic interest shown in hate crimes, extremism or terrorism – including any extremist ideology, group or cause, support for ‘school shooters’ or public massacres, or murders of public figures; any worrying use of mobile phones, internet or social media, including how this information was found out; any contact with groups or individuals that cause concern, including who and how often, and why those groups are a cause for concern; any expression of wanting to cause physical harm, or threats of violence, including who to, when and what was said or expressed; any need or additional factors, such as disability or special educational need, including what they are and if they are known or just suspected; any broader safeguarding concerns, such as concerns around the family structure, peer group or environment; if they are a minor, what interaction there has been had with parents, guardians or educators; and whether there is a presence or possible presence of any terrorism or terrorism-linked ideology (HM Government, 2022).

There are also ethical points that need to be dealt with in preparation for intervention, particularly around consent. Policy and practitioners are keen to stress that Prevent is a voluntary programme that requires active consent from all participants. Therefore, all attempts should be made to gain consent – a practice that differs depending on the individual(s) referred. If an individual is a minor, then guidance suggests the need to ensure consent from parents or guardians, where possible – although this should be avoided if it is thought harm might result from doing so. Participants

should also be made aware that they can withdraw from the programme at any time, and data on individual referrals and engagement with the Prevent programme will be carefully stored, managed and disposed of and will not affect the individual at a later stage. Questions have been raised over instances whereby data on individual referrals have been accidentally or deliberately mismanaged by police, leading to ‘concerns that the continued use of this data outside of the purposes of prevent could amount to reuse of data and unlawful processing’ (Open Rights Group, 2023). At present, there is relatively little open information on how data from Channel referrals is treated, stored or disposed of.

In terms of the numbers of referrals through Channel, we can observe some trends. In the most recent year of data, from April 2022 to March 2023, there were 6,817 referrals to Prevent through the Channel process – an increase of 6.4 percent compared to the previous year, and the third highest number of referrals since the start of reporting in 2015 and 2016. According to the UK Government, this is ‘predominantly driven by an increase in referrals from the Education, Community and Police sectors, which saw increases of 16%, 16% and 7% respectively’ (Home Office, 2023). These figures suggest a year-on-year increase in individuals referred with a ‘vulnerability present but no ideology or CT risk’ since 2019 and 2020, when it was first categorised, growing from 25 percent of referrals then to 37 percent of referrals in 2022 and 2023. There has been a slight decrease in concern over extreme right-wing individuals, based on the percentage of referrals, and a similar relevant decline in terms of the percentage of individuals referred for Islamist concerns down from 22 percent in 2020 and 2021, to 16 percent in 2021 and 2022, to 11 percent in 2022 and 2023.

Below is a breakdown of Prevent referrals by type of concern from 2016-2017 to the latest available figures (2022-2023):



**Chart 2:** Prevent referrals by type of concern, 2016-2023 (Home Office, 2023)

In 2022 and 2023, most referrals through Channel came from the education sector (2,684 referrals (39 percent)) in 2022 and 2023 and 2,305 referrals (36 percent) in 2021-22). This was followed by the second highest number of referrals coming from the Police (1,943 or 29 percent). As with ongoing trends as in previous years, where gender was specified in the 2022 and 2023 data (6,801 cases), most referrals were for males (6,125 cases, or 90 percent). As with previous years, there was a disproportionate focus on young people and minors: those aged between 11 and 15 accounted for 2,628 (or 39 percent) of referrals where age was specified; whilst nearly half (46 percent) of referrals that became adopted cases for Channels were individuals aged between 11 and 15. This is an increase on the previous year, whereby under-15s accounted for 32 percent (or 480 out of 1,486) of cases discussed at a Channel panel, as well as those adopted as a case (37 percent or 299 of 804) (HM Government, 2023b). Year-by-year data suggests that reporting concerns over extremism have been increasingly focussed on young people, and that those cases found to be at risk of radicalisation have also been becoming younger.

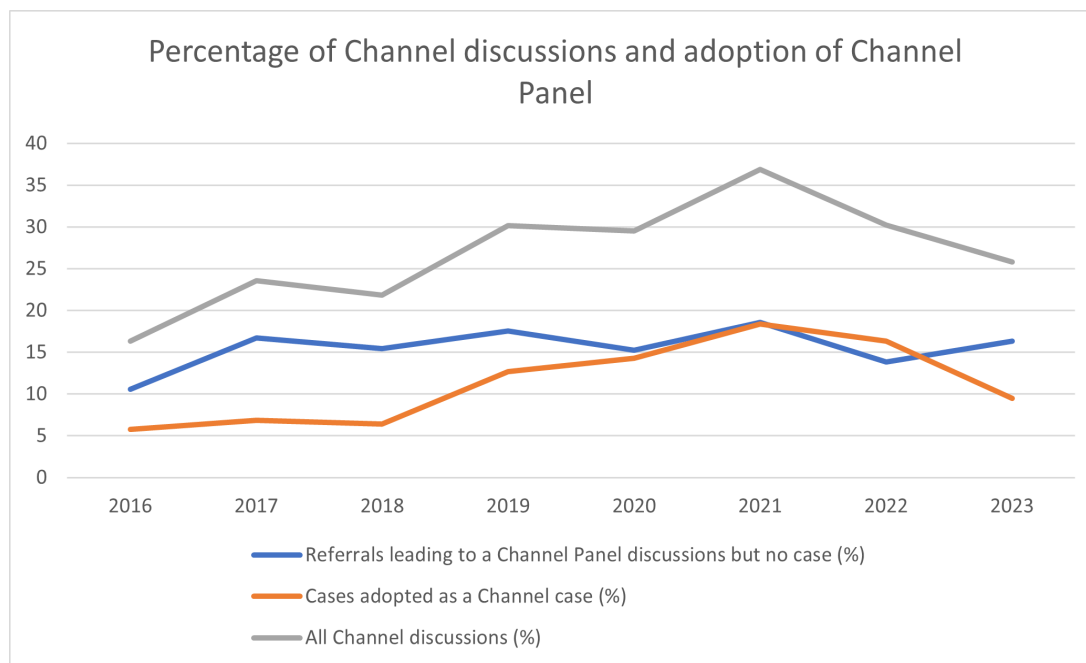
As well as more focus on young people within Channel referrals, there has also been a broadening of the ideological focus of those referred, leading to recent changes in terms of the categorisation of cases. This has included the introduction of the creation of the Mixed, unstable and unclear (MUU) categorisation, as well as its disaggregation into sub-categories. In the 2022 and 2023 data, of the 6,809 referrals to Prevent where the type of concern was specified, 37 percent (2,505) were for individuals with 'vulnerabilities present but no ideology or CT risk'. Referrals due to Extreme Right-Wing concerns accounted for the second highest proportion (1,310, or 19 percent), followed by referrals for conflict ideology (1,214, or 18 percent). Eleven percent (or 781) of referrals were due to concerns regarding Islamist ideology (Home Office, 2023).

Once assessments have been made, the local authority will ascertain what services are already involved with the individual, including through immediate family, and liaise with relevant teams to ensure safeguarding processes are aligned with the Channel process, where appropriate. At this stage, the Channel case and a cross-sector panel are brought together to develop a coordinated response.



## Channel Panels and Rehabilitation

Once assessments have been made, a limited number of cases will be transferred for support from a Channel Panel. The proportion of Prevent cases adopted as a Channel case has remained consistently low since the adoption of the 2015 Prevent Duty.<sup>2</sup> In the latest 2022 and 2023 figures, for instance, there were 6,817 referrals, of which 1,113 were discussed at a Channel panel only, and 645 were adopted as a Channel case. As is demonstrated in the graph below, between 5 percent and 15 percent of all referrals per year are usually adopted as a Channel case.



**Chart 3:** Percentage of Channel referrals, discussions and adoptions of Channel panel (as percent)

Once a case is deemed in need of adoption by Channel, a Channel panel is brought together for each individual case. The Channel panel is multi-agency, made up of various local public services, where deemed appropriate, as well as local authorities. Each local authority is required to have a Channel panel in their area, with the local authority also providing the panel chair and deputy chair to oversee and support the development of Channel cases. The panel acts to develop a support plan for individuals adopted as Channel cases, as well as to consider alternative forms of support – such as healthcare and social care services – where Channel is deemed to be not appropriate. The panel also acts to ensure that accurate records are kept detailing all support plans, agreed actions and decision-making, as well as the outcomes.

### Constitution of a Channel Panel

There are various roles that must be filled within a panel. A single chair and deputy chair, drawn from local authorities, are required to head the Channel panel. Both are required to be senior local authority officers.<sup>3</sup> The lead panel authority for the case will always be the authority where the person (referent) is living. This is to ensure this person can draw on services local to their place of residence,

<sup>2</sup> In 2016, there were 6,560 referrals, of which 693 were discussed at a Channel panel only, and 378 were adopted as a Channel case. In 2017, there were 4,980 referrals, of which 825 were discussed at a Channel panel only, and 338 were adopted as a Channel case. In 2018, there were 6,008 referrals, of which 927 were discussed at a Channel panel only, and 383 were adopted as a Channel case. In 2019, there were 4,407 referrals, of which 772 were discussed at a Channel panel only, and 558 were adopted as a Channel case. In 2020, there were 4,855 referrals, of which 740 were discussed at a Channel panel only, and 692 were adopted as a Channel case. In 2021, there were 3,590 referrals, of which 666 were discussed at a Channel panel only, and 659 were adopted as a Channel case. In 2022, there were 4,920 referrals, of which 682 were discussed at a Channel panel only, and 804 were adopted a Channel case.

<sup>3</sup> These are drawn from a county council or district council in England or Wales, or a London Borough Council, whilst different regulations apply to the application of Channel and Prevent in Scotland.

as well as ensure that counter-terror police are able to manage risk in their respective policing area. The Chair must be able to oversee local channel cases, establish effective relationships between partners of the panel, help to establish the appropriate support plan, assess the risk of the individual to radicalisation, ensure the person and families are updated where possible, liaise with local authority teams if proper, to ensure that Channel support is aligned and coordinated with other safeguarding processes (HM Government, 2015a). Each local authority determines the most appropriate governance arrangements for its Channel panels.

The complete constitution of the panel is dependent on the nature of the referral and the focus of the concern. Individuals who may be requested to sit on the panel include those from the National Health Service, social workers, educational workers (including representatives from schools, further education such as colleges and higher education such as universities), those involved in youth offending services, children's and adult's services, local safeguarding services, Border Force and Immigration Enforcement, Housing and prisons and probationary services. Panel members are multi-agency, contributing to the support plan and attending panel meetings, and they operate not as experts in counter-terrorism, but as experts in their respective professions and the local service and support provision. As well as including relevant representatives on the panel, all Channel case officers and local authorities should develop effective ongoing links between services, such as the education sector, social services, health, children's and youth services, offender management services and credible community organisations, so services are well placed to identify and refer people at risk of being radicalised, into committing terrorist acts or supporting terrorism. Types of support can address vulnerabilities such as educational, vocational, mental health and other needs, and therefore require a wide range of inter-agency support and cooperation (HM Government, 2023b).

On the panel is also a police counter-terrorism case officer (CTCO) or a employed by the local authority. They act to manage referrals and cases through the Channel programme, ensure that referrals are dealt with swiftly, keep case information up to date, review and amend the Prevent assessment frameworks (PAF) as a case progresses; reflect all relevant Prevent concerns and terrorism risk; assess in escalating risk associated with the person's potential involvement in terror-related activity; as well as potentially transfer cases to police-led leadership or into Pursue (Channel), where appropriate. Both the CTCO and the chair must attend every Channel panel to ensure continuity and proper oversight.

## Alternatives and Next Steps

When Channel is not considered suitable, other options may be explored. These may include access to alternative support, such as mental health services or children's social care services. Channel is a voluntary programme where the person consents to receive support to address their terrorism susceptibilities and reduce the risk to them. Where consent has not been obtained, a person could be considered for a police-led partnership, which is often used for individuals who demonstrate Prevent-related issues but are not suitable for Channel. Where consent is not secured within three months, the case will need to be closed to Channel. Police will need then consider whether sufficient concerns remain for escalation. Whilst Channel is a confidential and voluntary process, information shared for the purposes of Channel may be disclosed to a third party when it is legal, necessary and proportionate to do so – although concerns about the sharing of data persist from human rights groups (Open Rights Group, 2023). Information relating to a person's Channel support package may be subject to disclosure if there is a legal reason to courts, police or CPS.

Channel cases remain open until one of three conditions has been satisfied. First, the panel deems that the terrorism susceptibility has sufficiently reduced and the individual is no longer at risk of radicalisation or extremism; second, the terrorism risk has increased, and the case is therefore escalated to the police and to the Pursue branch of counter-terrorism; or third, the consent to

access support is not secured or is withdrawn by the individual. Every case adopted into Channel is kept under review and routinely re-assessed for any changes to identified susceptibilities and risks in relation to terrorism-connected offending. All cases which have been adopted by a Channel panel must, as a minimum, be reviewed by the panel at least six months and 12 months from the point of case closure. Panels will have discretion to undertake more frequent reviews within the 12-month period and to include a further review beyond the 12-month period if there are still concerns that the person may be at risk of radicalising influences or is facing a life change which may place them at risk. This may include factors such as bereavement, loss of employment, loss of housing or a relationship breakdown.

Throughout this process, the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework, outlined in section 2, is referred to throughout this process to provide an overview of an individual's susceptibility to radicalisation. The framework provides a tiered approach to support and decision-making based on the identification of any relevant counter-terrorism factors or susceptibilities and requires a corresponding support plan to be in place to address each identified factor. It serves as what is often termed a 'live document' that keeps each factor closely under review to monitor progress effectively, allowing for a change in approach to case management as necessary. Ultimately, the aim of the process is to ensure that each factor is adequately responded to and addressed, until the risk assessment is deemed to have diminished.

Whilst Channel is largely deployed in the UK in cases whereby individuals have not engaged in criminal acts, it is used to support people at risk of committing or supporting terrorism who are serving custodial sentences for non-terrorism offences and who are referred as part of internal risk management processes. This includes individuals due to be released from prison. Furthermore, while access to Channel support would ordinarily stop or be closed to people who are subject to a Terrorism Act investigation, there may be instances where continued support would be beneficial, as long as it does not negatively impact on the ongoing investigation or affect the integrity of a person's informed consent.

These sections have outlined the processes by which Channel referrals are made and acted upon, as well as exploring the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework that underpins the referrals and response. The following section will look at some of the questions which remain around vulnerability-led approaches such as the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework, before then considering how they might be applied within settings such as Kosovan correctional and probation services.

## Examining Vulnerability-led Approaches

When considering the adoption of a framework for responding to concerns around radicalisation and extremism, particularly in the application of a risk-led framework outside of its initial context, it is worth noting other vulnerability frameworks. For instance, the VERA-2R model in the Netherlands has a different conceptualisation of extremism and the causes of extremism and therefore prioritises different factors of rehabilitation. VERA's main understanding of terrorism is rooted in ideology, whilst the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework tends to prioritise identity; meanwhile, the Channel framework also includes a measure for psychopathology, whilst the VERA framework includes protective factors not found in other assessments (Herzog-Evans, 2018, p. 3). There are also questions that have been raised about the general use of vulnerability-led approaches. In all such models, extremism is seen as both towards terrorism and as a process distinct from terrorism, a separate category linked to safeguarding. Such models struggle to conceptualise how and why extremism leads to terrorism, with guidance noting that holding extremist views or ideology, in most cases, does not lead to acts of violence.

Some problems of the current measures have been noted through reviews of the Extreme Risk Guidance 22+ that underpins the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework. Elliott et al. (2023), for instance, have examined the structural validity (whether factors of extremism group into the expected dimensions) and construct validity (whether items measure the intended theoretical concepts in the manner expected) or the 22 vulnerability factors within the framework and find that, of the three domains of Engagement, Intent and Capability, ‘only the Intent domain exceeded acceptable thresholds for reliability’ (Elliott et al., 2023, p. 2). Of the 22 individual factors, only nine were found to be statistically acceptable in terms of identifying extremism, whilst eight were statistically ambiguous and five were statistically substandard – those with particular issues being: ‘opportunistic involvement’, ‘family and/or friends support extremism’, ‘transitional periods’, ‘mental health issues’ and ‘criminal history’; noting that ‘mental health issues’ and ‘criminal history’ performed poorly on all metrics (Elliott et al., 2023, p. 3). As such, any adoption of the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework should be aware of the limitations of some factors.

The application of concepts of risk and vulnerability has also come under the critical spotlight. One problem of Channel, along with other risk-led approaches, is that they tend to operate in the ‘pre-criminal space’, which causes legal and ethical challenges around identifying extremism. James, for instance, identified serious biases in reporting minorities to Channel (James, 2022). Other criticisms have challenged the conceptualisation of risk and safeguarding as inappropriate within the setting of countering (violent) extremism, which could make safeguarding more dangerous (Heath-Kelly, 2020). Within a judicial and probationary setting, there are questions about how the implementation of Channel safeguarding processes may operate effectively. For instance, the voluntary aspect of the scheme may be difficult to implement in a setting where there is likely limited trust in authorities, risking either poor levels of engagement by prisoners or the development of inappropriate mechanisms of coercion to encourage participation and the undermining of the framework’s validity. The following section will examine how the implementation of the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework may work in settings such as Kosovan correctional and probation services.

## Recommendations for Application

This final section sets out the recommendation for Channel’s application in a Kosovan context, focusing on whether the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework may adequately respond to current limitations. Particularly, this section will explore whether such an approach will enable the development of capacity, coordination and assessment matrices, as required to respond to constraints within the current system. Overall, this assessment finds that the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework will be useful in all three areas of capacity-building, coordination-enhancing and the development of adequate matrices. However, the report also suggests that the limitations of such an approach must be understood from its implementation, and that such an approach would be more effective if it developed to act in concert with local authorities and authorities, and that robust human rights safeguards are provided as part of the implementation process.

### Capacity

Firstly, questions have been raised over the limited capacity of the relatively young institutions in Kosovo to deal with extremism in prison, particularly in response to the need to rehabilitate and reintegrate returnees from Syria and Iraq (Orana & Perteshi, 2022). The Channel framework is likely to be useful in enhancing these institutions in their response. The application of the Channel framework and processes would likely strengthen capacity by providing an established



process for dealing with instances of extremism. By ensuring that cases of the risk of continued engagement in extremism could be identified in prisoners, the Channel framework would give public sector work in correctional and probation greater capacity to respond. The Channel framework is used in the UK's HM Prison and Probation Service, and so has operated in relevant environments beyond the more 'pre-crime' areas, such as education and healthcare.

It may, however, require some careful adaptation to ensure successful implementation in Kosovo. Whilst Channel referrals are active in a prison setting in the UK, the HM Prison and Probation Service referrals currently make up only 4 percent of referrals, according to the latest 2022 and 2023 period – or 267 of a total 6,817 of all referrals (Home Office, 2023). As well as representing only a limited number of referrals, the application of Channel referral processes in UK prisons has been complimented by a variety of other interventions and programmes, which include the Healthy Identities Intervention (HII) and Motivational and Engagement Intervention (MEI), the Desistance and Disengagement Programme (DDP) and the Developing Dialogues toolkit (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021). As such, whilst Channel procedures do operate as a means of responding to extremism in prisons, it does not represent the main focus of reporting, as well as being only one of many measures used to respond to extremism within prisons. Thus, whilst applying such an approach in Kosovo only to a probational and correctional setting may likely be helpful, it is important to consider that the mechanisms have been developed to have a much broader use, and it is worth considering potential adaptation to ensure a more focussed response within the Kosovan setting.

The framework has also generally been used to identify inmates who do not already have a link to extremism. Its use in identifying extremism amongst those who have previously been prosecuted under counter-terror crimes may mean a higher reporting rate and require the framework to be better adapted to avoid potential false positive reporting of concerns, due to the background of the individual. Another potential concern in the operationalisation of Channel reporting is to ensure that the safety of all involved is prioritised. As the UK's Inspectorate of Probation has noted, '[i]t is important that those receiving interventions in a prison and/or probation setting feel safe and secure, as taking part in deradicalisation programmes can lead to threats from those still committed to the cause' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021). The requirement to avoid, for instance, the coercion of prisoners into participating by incentivising inmates in their involvement, is critical. Furthermore, the safety of individuals who report and are subject to reports is also important, particularly in a closed environment where open accusations of further engagement in extremism may lead to reprisals or repression.

Ultimately however, with regard to capacity, there is some reason to be optimistic that the Channel framework will work well within the context of Kosovan prisoner rehabilitation. It provides a tried and tested framework for developing less securitised responses to concerns of extremism that fit within the rehabilitation and reintegration-focused approaches that are being increasingly being centred in responses to Kosovar returnees. It will need careful implementation and potential adaption in a different setting however, and will also both encourage and require greater levels of coordination.

## Coordination

One of the central requirements within the Channel approach is high levels of cross-agency coordination, as well as strong levels of trust between institutions and communities. It has been noted that there is still some significant fragmentation between department, such as the Kosovo Correctional Service (KCS), the Kosovo Probation Service (KPS), as well as intelligence and police departments, which may represent a challenge due to requirements to share intelligence upon referrals. However, there are also several existing partnerships in place that suggest an attempt to move away from fragmented responses to violent extremism. This is evident in partnerships such as those with the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund, and the Strong Cities

Network. It is likely that engagement with religious and community institutions, as well as networks established through counter-extremism partnerships, international NGOs and research bodies, may support the transition towards less fragmented systems, and thus provide space for preventative approaches.

Whilst Kosovo has weaknesses in this respect, it also has strengths that lend itself to a Channel-based approach. There is a strong tradition of religious pluralism and trust between religious institutions, authorities and the wider society in Kosovo,<sup>4</sup> which would be useful in the development of panels and in long-term rehabilitation processes. A focus on engagement with religious institutions would be advisable in the Kosovan case – and is one that is not widely utilised in the UK. The use of positive dialogue and engagement with mosques, as well as interfaith engagement with Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, may support disengagement. It is also worth considering greater engagement with sporting institutions and clubs, which intersect with politics in Kosovo far more significantly than in England and Wales.

The adoption of Channel furthermore offers encouragement for the establishment of a more ‘joined-up’ approach to security in Kosovo and amongst prison and reintegration programmes. A strong requirement of the Channel referral frameworks and processes is multi-agency cooperation, particularly within a prison context. Cooperation among stakeholders is considered critical before, during and after imprisonment, and there is a need that intelligence is shared and that agencies are clear about the shared objectives and their roles and responsibilities at all stages (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021). Ultimately, the requirement to share information and develop inter-agency panels may lead to greater cooperation between institutions, as well as support continued trust between institutions and religious/ethnic communities, and possibly the creation of greater resources for civil society and early-response organisations to countering extremism, which is currently limited. This may also have positive long-term implications in developing a society more resilient to extremism (Grossman, Hadfield, Jefferies, Gerrand, & Ungar, 2020; McNeil-Willson & Triandafyllidou, 2023).

## Matrix

Finally, it is likely that the Channel Vulnerability Assessment Framework will provide a suitable matrix for assessing risk in the Kosovan correctional and probation services that is better tailored to concerns of extremism. The use of more generalised risk assessments from policing and security bodies such as those used by the Kosovo Police (KP) and the Kosovo Intelligence Agency (KIA) – which currently form the main assessment approaches in the Kosovo Correctional Service (KCS) and Kosovo Probation Service (KPS) – have not been designed to respond to processes of extremism and radicalisation, particularly those at an early stage. However, as noted in the report, there are concerns that should be tackled as part of their implementation in Kosovo. For instance, some of the 22 individual factors have been shown to be problematically broad in their conceptualisation, with tiny link to evidence of extremism; whilst others are perhaps less relevant within a correctional or probational setting. There may also be a need to rebalance the three areas of engagement, intent and capability, to better account for the different contexts, in terms of supporting rehabilitation of those already prosecuted for terrorism rather than identifying entirely new instances of extremism.

It is also important to be aware of the concerns that have been raised around the UK prevent and Channel approaches in the UK, particularly with regards to the storing of personal data and

<sup>4</sup> Article 38 of the Constitution, states that ‘freedom of belief, conscience and religion is guaranteed’, Article 39 of the Constitution, that ‘The Religious denominations are free to independently regulate their internal organization, religious activities and religious ceremonies’, as well as Law 02/L-31 (2006) on Religious Freedom in Kosovo, Article 1, which states that ‘everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion’.

the long-term impact of referrals on individuals, as well as long-standing concerns that referrals are impacting on the freedom of speech and civil rights (Faure Walker, 2021; Goldberg, Jadhav, & Younis, 2017; O'Toole, Meer, Nilsson, Jones, & Modood, 2016). As concerns still linger in the UK, attention is required to ensure that, in its application elsewhere, the rights and security of those subject to referrals are safeguarded in a setting where these may be easily challenged, and vulnerable subjects may be harmed. Ultimately, as with its potential for supporting capacity and coordination, the implementation of Channel in Kosovan correctional and probation services may be useful in providing a more relevant and focused matrix for identifying extremism. However, it is important to highlight the controversy that still hangs over elements of the Prevent programme and Channel mechanisms in the UK and consider how lessons can be learnt in its implementation elsewhere.

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## About the Author

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### Dr Richard McNeil-Willson

Dr Richard McNeil-Willson is a Research Fellow in Global Muslim Studies at the University of Edinburgh. His research specialises in critical extremism and counter-extremism studies.

His previous positions include Research Fellow at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University, the Netherlands, and Max Weber Research Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Florence, Italy. He holds a PhD from the University of Exeter, and additional degrees from the universities of Edinburgh, Durham and Exeter. He has also held several visiting positions, including a Visiting Fellowship at the University of Cambridge, and a Visiting Professorship at Charles University, Prague.

Dr McNeil-Willson has worked on several European Commission-funded projects, as well as advising the European Commission directly. He is the editor (with Anna Triandafyllidou) of the Routledge Handbook of Violent Extremism and Resilience (2023), and of the forthcoming Routledge International Handbook of Radicalisation and Social Exclusion (with Tahir Abbas and Lianne Vostermans), as well as Managing Editor of the journal *Mediterranean Politics*.



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