

WESTERN BALKANS

EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM

MACEDONIA REPORT

Filip Stojkovski
Natasia Kalajdziovski

April 2018

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	4
METHODOLOGY.....	6
SOURCING.....	6
LIMITATIONS IN RESEARCH.....	8
POLITICAL CONTEXT AND THE RATIONALE FOR STUDY.....	9
EXPLORATION OF FINDINGS.....	10
3.1. LEVELS, FORMS, AND THREATS OF EXTREMISM.....	10
1.1. CONCEPTS – VIOLENT AND NON-VIOLENT EXTREMISM.....	10
1.2. WAVES OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN MACEDONIA.....	11
1.3. VIOLENT EXTREMISM – FOREIGN FIGHTERS.....	11
1.3.1. RETURNEES.....	13
1.4. NATIONALIST EXTREMISM.....	13
2. DRIVERS AND FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EXTREMISM.....	14
2.1. RELIGIOUS DRIVERS – MORAL ACTION AND COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAM.....	15
2.2. SOCIOECONOMIC DRIVERS – EDUCATION AND ECONOMICS.....	16
2.3. SOCIETAL DRIVERS – SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND EXTREMIST SOCIALISATION.....	18
2.4. ONLINE DRIVERS – SOCIAL MEDIA AND EASE OF ACCESS.....	19
3. AT-RISK COMMUNITIES.....	20
3.1. ETHNICITY AND RELIGION.....	20
3.2. AGE DEMOGRAPHICS.....	21
3.3. PRISON POPULATIONS.....	22
3.4. FAMILIES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS.....	23
4. LINKS BETWEEN ORGANISED CRIME AND EXTREMISM.....	24
5. TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION.....	25
5.1. REGIONAL COOPERATION.....	25
5.2. THE SAUDI CONNECTION.....	25
6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION.....	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	29
ANNEXES.....	33
ANNEX 1 – MAP OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA; INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS.....	34
ANNEX 2 – “CELL” EXTREMISTS.....	36
ANNEX 3 – RELIGIOUS DISTRIBUTION.....	38

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through an analysis of fieldwork interviews and both primary and secondary source evaluation, this report presents a baseline overview of the extremist threatscape as it pertains to the Republic of Macedonia. The researchers analyse both focus groups and individual interviews with critical stakeholders in civil society, members of the security establishment, and individuals who had been touched by the phenomenon of extremism. The limitation of this report is rooted in access – due to the oft-difficult research landscape presented in the Macedonia context, the researchers were unable to engage directly with violent extremists. As such, secondary source materials are used to support, give context, enrich and, where necessary, triangulate the findings of the conducted field research.

The report thematically presents the levels, forms, and threats of extremism in Macedonia by outlining the definitional variances between violent and non-violent extremism, the waves of Islamist extremism, the phenomenon of foreign fighters, and burgeoning nationalist extremism and its political undertones. While Islamist extremism currently presents the greatest threat to the Republic, findings on disparate forms of extremism are included. The report also outlines religious, societal, socioeconomic, and online drivers and factors contributing to extremism.

Overall, however, the report's findings indicate that ethnic Albanians were most at-risk perpetrating acts of violent extremism. Moreover, research indicates that – compared to other Muslim minority countries in the Western Balkans – Macedonian Muslims have a higher-than-average propensity to become violently radicalised. The report also finds that foreign fighter flows out of Macedonia are at a near-cessation, which will pose difficult policy questions – e.g. how to first rehabilitate and then reintegrate returnees – in light of returnees coming back to Macedonia.

The report concludes with three recommendations: 1) develop pointed and concerted research which seeks to understand the role that ethnicity plays in fostering a vulnerability toward extremism; 2) focus on and access to quality education needs to be prioritised, and; 3) a comprehensive reintegration and rehabilitation strategy must be developed as part of any CVE effort. Overall, a “whole-of-society” rather than “whole-of-government” effort must be espoused which would see CVE efforts being holistically integrated into areas such as education, social welfare, employment, and healthcare.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The Extremism Research Forum is a UK government funded research project¹, examining drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

The research commenced in 2017, exploring a range of themes and topics with key stakeholders within communities, civil society and government, in order to build a coherent picture of the specific situation in each country. This research seeks to inform and assist in the development of CVE policies and programming, offering key findings that could be relevant to practitioners and policymakers working in the field of countering violent extremism.

Each country study: 1) maps out the forms of extremism; 2) examines drivers and contributing factors of radicalisation (global, regional, national and local drivers, political and socio-economic); 3) develops a profile of at risk communities.

Taking into account the multifaceted nature of extremism, the research also; 4) identifies any potential links with organised crime, money laundering, links to terrorism; and; 5) analyses trans-national co-operation of violent extremist groups.

This study forms one of the six contextual research pieces, presenting findings from in-depth primary research conducted with communities and wider stakeholders with knowledge of the violent extremist threats specific to the country. The findings are based on primary, and where credible, secondary data sources in order to create an informed and nuanced picture of the violent extremist activity or potential threat within the country. Importantly, it is intended that this research usefully informs policy development, providing practical recommendations, while also feeding into an overarching regional report, where broader linkages and key transnational issues that have been identified from the research will be examined.

It is expected that this project will result in an increased understanding of the size of extremist threats emanating from the WB region, and ultimately increased ability of the UK and Western Balkan partners to address radicalisation based on increased understanding of the issues and the problem.

COUNTRY BACKGROUND REVIEW

According to the last census conducted in 2002, the population of Macedonia is 2,022,547. The largest ethnic group in the country are ethnic Macedonians, who comprise 64.18 per cent of the population, followed by ethnic Albanians at 25.17 per cent, Turks at 3.85 per cent, and others. Eastern Orthodoxy is the majority faith in Macedonia, where adherents of Islam constitute 33.3 per cent of the population (State Statistical Office, 2002).

Despite the reality that various ethnicities and religions have coexisted with one another for centuries within the geographical area that the current Republic of Macedonia now occupies, a

¹ Implemented by the British Council, in partnership with the International Conflict and Research Institute (INCORE), Ulster University.

certain level of tension and animosity has also underlaid this relationship. While relatively stable under the broader umbrella of Yugoslavia, this balance came to a head in the post-Yugoslav period with the 2001 Armed Conflict between the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA)² and the security forces of the Republic of Macedonia. In term of combatants, the Armed Conflict saw the deaths of 75 Macedonian soldiers and police officers, and upwards of 100 NLA insurgents (Bender 2013, 341).

Fortunately, the conflict did not have the same disastrous casualties and ramifications that the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s had elsewhere in the Western Balkans; while the combined counts of the Yugoslav wars number upwards of 140,000 casualties (International Centre for Transitional Justice 2009: p. 1), the Armed Conflict saw the deaths of around 250 civilians (Bender 2013, 341). The Conflict ended with the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which set the groundwork for increasing rights of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia and formal political power-sharing arrangements between Macedonia and Albanian ethnicities. Legally, the country became a multi-ethnic one reflected through a power-sharing agreement at the governmental level; however, “national” discourses by all sides continue to be emphasised to this day (Popovska and Ristoska, 2015: p. 63).

Since the signing of the OFA, the country has had occasional ethnic clashes in the 2010s – such as beatings, attacks on police officers, ethnically-motivated killings, and violent protests – usually in a pre-election period, as some political parties have exploited nationalist sentiment as a rallying cry in support of their political agendas. Ethnic relations have improved since the 2001 period, but are nonetheless still fragile. This fragility between the two main ethnic groups creates fertile ground for radicalisation and for extremist groups to gain followings, on both the ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian sides.

In more recent years, a political fragility has also set in, which continues to have significant ramifications in terms of legislative action. Until May 2017, Macedonia had been without a functioning government since 2015, when a wiretapping scandal sank the country into political turmoil that brought down the then-ruling nationalist VRMO-DPMNE party and bloc. The election of an ethnic Albanian to the position of speaker of the Macedonian parliament by the new government in April 2017 saw protestors storming parliament, resulting in the injury of 77 people (Day and Sherlock, 2017). In this period, scheduled elections were pushed back and reset numerous times, leaving much of the democratic progress made since Macedonia’s secession from Yugoslavia fall to the wayside.

Although a new government has now been formed, the situation remains precarious following two years of upheaval and lack of governance. It is yet to be seen how, in the context of countering violent extremism, any policy pushes or legislative changes may alter the current scenario within the Macedonian context.

² The NLA was closely associated with the Kosovo Liberation Army.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to provide a baseline insight into and understanding of specifics related to radicalisation and violent extremism within the Macedonian milieu. In particular, this report seeks to examine the phenomenon of Islamist extremism and the threats posed by such extremism in the context of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Although there are some indicators of an emerging branch of nationalist extremism within Macedonia – which will be discussed within the report findings – the bulk of this report occupies itself with Islamist extremism as it currently poses the largest threat to peace and stability within Macedonia.

Open source research on radicalisation and violent extremism within the Macedonian context is scarce, and what research does exist has the propensity to suffer from feedback loops and repetitious sourcing. While there have been a few assessments that have been published – such as a USAID-funded report authored by Analytica think tank, and another by The Atlantic Initiative – the research landscape remains unfulfilled. The newly-elected government of Zoran Zaev has also identified this issue in their national countering violent extremism strategy, and has initiated the beginning of official studies on violent extremism in the Macedonian context (NCCVECT 2018: p. 21).

In order to offer a baseline insight, the report sought information on a number of areas of inquiry using a large variety of sourcing materials, in an attempt to address the current informational deficiencies in the field of research:

- The levels, forms, and threats of extremism posed in Macedonia;
- The drivers and factors contributing to it;
- Links between organised crime and extremism;
- Indicators of transnational cooperation;
- Any country-specific difficulties which had the potential to emerge throughout the exploration of research.

SOURCING

Field research was conducted in an effort to best answer the report's areas of research inquiry. As such, a number of interviews and focus groups were conducted in the cities of Tetovo, Kumanovo, and Skopje (see Annex 1). These cities were selected as geographic locations of inquiry as previous research indicated that these cities have been affected by violent extremism and the phenomenon of foreign fighters; as well, Islamist extremism in the Balkan context has become a more urban phenomenon, moving away from its concentration in smaller villages, as indicated by the trends of the 1990s and early 2000s (The Atlantic Initiative, 2017: p. 14). Moreover, these cities provide ample, under-researched ground from which to investigate the report's research avenues.

In total, the fieldwork included two focus groups and 28 individual interviews (see Table 1). In Tetovo, a focus group with eight participants was held (equal parts women and men), aged 18-28, as preliminary research indicated that this demographic was the most at-risk for radicalisation. The participants were selected through a personal contact of one of the researchers; although further personal details cannot be written about said individual due to reasons of anonymity, they were chosen by the researchers to act as a gatekeeper due to their extensive access networks

into at-risk communities that would not necessarily be open to the researchers themselves. Questions were posed to the focus group regarding the phenomenon of violent extremism in Macedonia, its drivers and pulls, and the extent to which their social circles were affected. In Kumanovo, a similar focus group was also held as in Tetovo, consisting of the same gender and age demographics.

As with all individual interviews conducted in Tetovo, Kumanovo, and Skopje, interviewees were targeted by the needs of the research questions. The researchers determined categories of interviewees to explore who either have personal experience with individuals that have violently radicalised, or work within a milieu in which they have contact with at-risk groups, as determined by preliminary research.

In total, eight interviews were conducted in Tetovo. Two were conducted with grassroots NGOs operating in the city; said NGOs were selected due to their work on both religious and civic issues, respectively. The researchers also spoke to two imams, a representative of the Islamic Religious Community, one representative of the municipality responsible for educational affairs, and three high school teachers from different neighbourhoods in the city. These interviews were semi-structured interviews, and questions related to the extent to which their communities were affected by violent extremism were asked, while also exploring possible reasons behind this phenomenon.

In total, nine interviews were conducted in Kumanovo. Using semi-structured interviews, the researchers also conducted interviews with three NGOs, whose work focuses on civic and ethnic issues; one high school teacher; three imams, and; one municipal ombudsman, covering the same topics and questions as those explored in the Tetovo interviews.

In total, ten interviews were conducted in Skopje. From academia, five interviews were conducted with high school teachers. The researchers also spoke to three family members of individuals arrested on charges of violent extremism in Macedonia in an effort to understand some of the collateral damage caused to those directly touched by the phenomenon of extremism.

Additionally, the researchers conducted two interviews with representatives of the Directorate for Security and Counter-Intelligence where the specifics of violent extremism in Macedonia were discussed, such as the communities most affected by it, transnational cooperation of extremists, and extremist ties to organized crime.

Table 1: Individual interviews conducted through the course of fieldwork

LOCATION	AFFILIATION	NO. OF INTERVIEWS
Tetovo	Civil Society	Two NGO officials
	State Institutions	One municipality representative
	Religious Community	Two imams and one representative from the IRC
	Academia	Three high school teachers
Kumanovo	Civil Society	Three NGO officials

	State Institutions	One municipal ombudsman
	Religious Community	Three imams
	Academia	Two high school teachers
Skopje	Security Institutions	Two state intelligence practitioners
	Academia	Five high school teachers
	Other	Three family members of individuals arrested on charges of violent extremism

Finally, the research also partly relied on information gleaned through open sources such as media publications, academic articles, reports from multilateral organisations, and previous independent Balkan-based reporting regarding violent extremism. This secondary research was used to support, give context, enrich and, where necessary, triangulate the findings of the field research. The researchers also made use of the Freedom of Information Act to access public information available via the Ministry of the Interior.

Interview data was mainly collected using a tape recorder, while the interviews with the intelligence agency contacts were collected through note taking due to legal constraints. The data collected through tape recordings was later transcribed and translated from Albanian into English by the same researcher in order to ensure consistency of transcription.

LIMITATIONS IN RESEARCH

The data collected is qualitative in nature rather than quantitative, which is a limiting factor in determining exact information. The report needed to rely on the perceptions and experiences of those affected by violent extremism, rather than on exact numerical data. Also, due to legal constraints,³ the researchers did not have the opportunity to directly contact any former foreign fighters who had returned to Macedonia, which was a limiting factor comparatively to other Western Balkans contexts. Thus, there are limitations to what one can infer from the available data, as individuals consulted during fieldwork could only surmise drivers and pull factors based on their own observations, given that they had not been radicalised themselves.

Furthermore, within the Macedonian context, violent extremism continues to be a taboo topic of discussion. Macedonia is a country of mixed ethnicities, based in a region which saw significant conflict on nationalistic and ethnic lines throughout the 1990s – a reality which, although to a lesser extent, Macedonia shared. Moreover, violent extremism in the Macedonian context is also an ethno-religious issue, which compounds the willingness to engage in dialogue; the discussion of ethno-religious issues can often be a catalyst toward real conflict in Macedonia, particularly since the political power-sharing of the post-Ohrid Agreement theatre continues to be ever-fragile. As such, it is difficult to find interviewees who are willing to participate in such a project, which is why gatekeepers needed to be a critical link for the researchers; moreover, if one does find a willing participant, there is a possibility that the individual will withhold information because

³ The legal restraints mentioned here refer to Article 322-A of the Macedonian criminal code, which was introduced to deal with violent extremism and the concept of foreign fighters. This article also broadly states that if an individual has any information relating to violent extremism, that individual must report it to the police or face up to five years in prison. This hampered the researchers' access to information insofar as potential interviewees with either a suspected direct or secondary connection with violent extremism had no desire to be interviewed, and those who did were sometimes not entirely forthcoming. Additionally, this made the researchers' ability to conduct interviews with incarcerated violent extremists in prison impossible, thus further compounding the researchers' ability to engage with either returnees or individuals incarcerated on terrorism-related offences.

of the sensitive nature of the subject matter and, in some instances, their own personal connection to someone who may already be incarcerated due to violent extremism.

Moreover, the countering of violent extremism is sometimes hijacked by nationalist narratives, which iterate that any governmental initiatives in this arena are unfairly targeting Muslims and/or ethnic Albanians only. This phenomenon was mentioned in both focus groups conducted through the course of fieldwork. The perception of unfair targeting hampers the ability of the country to conduct any effective countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts, and makes researching the phenomenon difficult, insofar as there is a large risk of alienating the communities that one wishes to support.

POLITICAL CONTEXT AND THE RATIONALE FOR STUDY

As mentioned in the report's country background review, Macedonia currently finds itself in a position of political fragility – a fragility which has the potential to be exploited and further polarised by extreme groups seeking to use divisive narratives to help propagate their own political objectives. In the context of violent extremism, Macedonia is thus in a precarious position. As the Atlantic Initiative (2017) highlights in its work on radicalisation in the Balkans, Islamist extremism has the greatest potential to take significant hold:

....in countries in the region marred by fragile internal structure, administrative dysfunctionality, frozen conflict, and unresolved identity and governance issues. These states have produced underachieving, inward-looking societies that are more obsessed with the past than they are focused on the future, which keeps citizens polarised and thus unable to protect and restore common-sense values. This makes these states continually and increasingly vulnerable to a broad embrace by citizens of reductionist thinking and belief. (p. 12)

Similarly, the political context of the Balkans in general means that the avenues toward radicalisation differ slightly from the trends seen in the West. In Macedonia, this phenomenon cannot be cleanly removed from the realities of the recent past – a past “defined by interethnic strife, segregation, and victimisation”, as well as a current reality “marked by popular perceptions of failed leadership efforts” within the context of ethnic conflict, and “unmet expectations against a backdrop of identities in flux” (United States Institute of Peace 2016: p. 12). As such, researching the Macedonian context must take these realities into consideration, and researchers must conduct their analysis without many of the analytical assumptions that researchers in the Western context are more accustomed to.

Ultimately, research on violent extremism is to an extent a study on how to address some of the larger societal fractures in Macedonia between the two largest ethnic groups. In this way, the difficulties pertaining to the phenomenon of radicalisation – whether that radicalisation be nationalist or Islamist – are addressed not in isolation, but within the broader societal context to which they inherently belong. However, without a baseline understanding of those drivers and factors contributing to violent extremism, any attempts to counter it will be rendered ineffective.

EXPLORATION OF FINDINGS

This section seeks to thematically present the baseline trends, themes, and commonalities gleaned through both the fieldwork exercise, as identified in the methodology chapter of this report, as well as open-source findings and publications. The information found herein is based on interviews with high school teachers, imams, NGO representatives, municipality representatives, high-ranking individuals in the Directorate for Security and Counter-Intelligence (UBK), families of foreign fighters, and focus groups comprising of individuals in the at-risk age demographic. Fieldwork was conducted in Skopje, Kumanovo, and Tetovo, as these cities are most often cited alongside reports of foreign fighter instances and concentrations of extremism.

1. LEVELS, FORMS, AND THREATS OF EXTREMISM

1.1. CONCEPTS – VIOLENT AND NON-VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Before offering a baseline overview of the levels, forms, and threats of extremism evidenced in the Macedonian context, it is important to first engage in a definitional conversation about violent and non-violent extremism.

While a literature review about oppositional definitions of these terms could constitute an entire report unto itself, this report has employed definitions used by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the British Government. According to USAID (2011), violent extremism “refers to advocating, engaging in, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic and political objectives”; it “often manifests itself at the individual level and in highly informal, diffuse networks”. (p. 2) In the most literal and broad sense, violent extremism is defined by violence of action undertaken in line with and in support of extremist narratives and objectives.

The threat posed by extremists, however, is not limited to the violence they might unleash onto society; rather, there is danger in the ideological foundations and narratives which push individuals to violence. As articulated by then-Home Secretary Theresa May in the British Government’s Counter-Extremism Strategy (2015), “where non-violent extremism goes unchallenged, the values that bind our society together fragment [...] intolerance and bigotry become normalised, minorities are targeted and communities become separated from the mainstream”. (p. 7) Moreover, non-violent individuals who are peddling their particular flavour of extremist ideology often “portray violence as inevitable in achieving the desired end state required by their ideology” and use violent language to express their narratives (UK Government 2015: p. 11). In this way, it is possible to see that the pathway from non-violent to violent extremism first begins with rhetoric as a precursor to action.

It is important to stress that not all non-violent extremists will become violent; rather, some may only remain ideologically extreme, but never take the next step toward violence. However, it is equally important to understand that non-violent extremism can foster a conducive environment for violent extremism – that is, it is crucial to differentiate between those who are non-violent and not-yet-violent. Those who are non-violent differ from those who are not-yet-violent insofar as the latter’s non-use of violence “is based merely on pragmatic, tactical and/or temporal

considerations [...] not on a principled political philosophy” (Schmid 2014, 14). In other words, the not-yet-violent extremist possesses the volition to commit violence, but does not have the means – whether physical or temporal – to follow through on that volition. The not-yet-violent extremist, in this sense, remains the most problematic to survey as that shift in “means” is difficult to quantify.

1.2. WAVES OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN MACEDONIA

Within the Macedonian context, propaganda promoting Islamism first emerged in 2011; it featured Rexhep Memishi – widely accepted to be the preeminent recruiter for ISIL in Macedonia, now incarcerated for his efforts – and Shukri Aliu, another well-known recruiter in Macedonia suspected to be the leader and mentor of the perpetrators of the Smilkovci Lake killings.⁴ At the time, however, “jihadism was still not very present for the average citizen [...] on a practical or propaganda level”, but the conflict in Syria changed how those propaganda messages resonated with the broader public (The Atlantic Initiative 2017: p. 104).

Vasko Sutarov, an adviser with one of the Macedonian intelligence agencies, has argued that the call to violent extremism in the form of Islamist extremism has taken place over three phases, in line with the changing nature of the conflict in Syria. Many who initially decided to become foreign fighters did so as a way to fight what they perceived to be the crimes of President Bashar al-Assad, to support their fellow Muslims in that struggle, and to fight alongside the Free Syrian Army; in this period, “to be a foreign fighter was not necessarily scorned, nor was it immediately condemned by religious or political structures” (The Atlantic Initiative 2017: p. 104).

However, with the proclamation of the caliphate in Syria/Iraq in 2014, the situation altered, and those who sought to take up the flag of ISIL – both literally and metaphorically – began to leave in larger numbers for the newly-created state. It is in this period that the first policy responses to the foreign fighter phenomenon in Macedonia begin to take shape (The Atlantic Initiative 2017: p. 104). This manifested in attempts to sanction those who left to fight, and saw the religious community in Macedonia work to dispel ISIL propaganda from a grassroots level (The Atlantic Initiative 2017: p. 105). The current timeframe is reflective of the third phase of foreign fighter flows, and is characterised by defined criminalisation and legislation of extremist action which – alongside changing realities for the caliphate – has aided in the reduction of foreign fighter flows emanating from Macedonia.

1.3. VIOLENT EXTREMISM – FOREIGN FIGHTERS

The first recorded instance of a Macedonian citizen being killed in their capacity as a foreign fighter in Syria was in May 2013 – a 28-year-old man, from a village outside of Gostivar, was killed fighting alongside the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, the then-named Jabhat al-Nusra (Utrinski Vesnik, 2013). As of early 2018, the number of male foreign fighters who have travelled to Syria/Iraq emanating from Macedonia was around 140, with 14 women also said to have travelled to the region.⁵ In 2017, evidence suggests that approximately 37 foreign fighters remain in the region, alongside four women. By the end of 2017, 33 foreign fighters had already been killed in action,

⁴ The incident occurred on 12 April 2012, and saw the killing of five ethnic Macedonians at the man-made Smilkovci Lake by ethnic Albanians. The persecution of the killings led to what became colloquially known as the “Monster” trial, the fallout of which was an increase in ethnic tensions in Macedonia (Marusic and Peci, 2014).

⁵ No data available as to how many children from Macedonia have been brought and/or are currently located in the region.

and 80 have returned home to Macedonia – the second-highest returnee number in the Western Balkans (Azinovic, 2018).

The threat resulting from both the return of foreign fighters to Macedonia and the problem of violent extremism more broadly continues to be high (Interview with UBK official, 2017). While foreign fighter flows are not the only way by which to measure extremism within any context, analysing the propensity by which an at-risk community violently radicalises is a useful exercise in demonstrating this phenomenon. Despite the fact that, over time, foreign fighter flows stemming from Macedonia have been in the mid-to-low range comparatively to its Western Balkan neighbours, there is a distinctive trend in the saturation of radicalisation within the Muslim population (The Atlantic Initiative 2017: p. 10-11). At 1 in 4,545 – or 22 people per 100,000 – Macedonia has the highest per capita of foreign fighters emanating from its Muslim population in the entire Western Balkans (Azinovic, 2018).⁶ This poses additional questions as to the general level of non-violent extremism that can be found within said population in Macedonia.

Although the support for Islamist extremism continues to grow, this is no longer necessarily manifesting in foreign fighter flows out of the country (Interview with UBK official, 2017). As outlined by a high-ranking official in the Directorate for Security and Counter-Intelligence (UBK), the phenomenon of foreign fighters being inspired to leave Macedonia for Syria and Iraq has nearly ceased entirely (Interview with UBK official, 2017). However, there always remains the significant possibility that these returnees will engage in terrorism in the future – as evidenced in similar cases in Western Europe – and that “these individuals might perceive targets in the EU as of high importance” (Interview with UBK official, 2017).

If one looks at the arrests made on behalf of the Ministry of Interior during a number of police actions to combat violent extremism in Macedonia, it is possible to see the levels, forms, and threats of extremism in practice as identified by the Macedonian security establishment. Initially named “Cell”, these operations have now seen three iterations, of which the first took place on 6 August 2015. Cell 1, as that initial sweep has been dubbed, sought to arrest a number of individuals who were under suspicion of organising and recruiting foreign fighters: nine were arrested, 27 could not be located, and it is presumed that another 20 on the suspect lists had already left to join the caliphate by that time. The cities at the heart of these raids were Skopje, Gostivar, Tetovo, Kumanovo, and Struga (Sirachevski, 2015). Since that initial raid took place, eight more of the suspects who could not initially be located have now been arrested (Telma, 2015).

Following this initial operation, Cell 2 was launched on 9 July 2016, which led to the arrests of an additional four individuals who had all returned to Macedonia after having received combat experience in Syria (Vecer, 2016). Of the arrests emanating from the Cell operations, eleven individuals have thus far been convicted of terrorism-related offenses.

The profiles of the individuals arrested as part of the Cell operations are an interesting case study into the variance of extremist profiles in Macedonia (see Annex 2 for a brief description of each individual involved). Some are the types of profiles one would expect to see rounded up in such an operation – for example, Rexhep Memishi, an imam from the infamous Tutunsuz and Jahja Pasha mosques in Skopje, was the main recruiter of foreign fighters in Macedonia. The list of eleven, however, is representative of a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds – convicted individuals range from a cab driver to a doctor, a goldsmith to a governmental employee – and suggests that the threat from violent extremism in the Macedonian context does not necessarily fit one singular socioeconomic background. Moreover, although the individuals are

⁶ For more detailed data on the Western Balkans region, please see: Azinovic, 2018.

overwhelmingly ethnically Albanian, there is also one ethnic Macedonian on that list – an alleged convert to Islam who travelled to Syria to provide medical services to the caliphate (Analytica 2016: p. 24). Although this is but one high profile case study, it nonetheless represents the best example of extremist profiles in Macedonia, and demonstrates that the pathways to and profiles of radicalisation are not always clear-cut.

1.3.1. Returnees

Of pressing consideration, however, is the kind of threat returnees pose when they return from Syria and Iraq. While on the surface one would assume that the most immediate and pressing threat from returnees is their desire to carry out an act of terror in their homeland, Hegghammer and Nesser (2015) have found that, on average, only 1 in 360 returnees had done so in their study on ISIL's commitment to attacking the West. Moreover, as Reed et al (2017) highlight in *The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat*, returnees pose a serious threat even if they do not intend to engage in terrorist activities; they can “initiate or engage in logistical, financial, or recruitment cells, or become leaders in extremist societies”. (p. 6) In the Macedonian context, research has indicated a near cessation of foreign fighter flows to Syria and Iraq, but an increase in sympathy for and the spreading of extremist ideologies. This is in line with both Reed et al and Hegghammer and Nesser's findings – while there is a low likelihood of returnees carrying out acts of terror in their homelands, their more long-term threat is the continued propagation of their extremist beliefs.

Critically, one must understand this near-cessation of foreign fighter flows from Macedonia in the larger geo-political context. As ISIL continues to lose territorial supremacy in Syria and Iraq, coupled with increased measures to prevent extremist travel, the numbers of foreign fighters being drawn to the conflict have declined drastically worldwide (The Soufran Centre, p. 5). However, alongside this decrease has been an increase in the number of lone actor ISIL-inspired terror attacks in Western Europe – in the UK alone, 2017 saw the Westminster Bridge, Manchester Arena, and Parsons Green Tube attacks – as ISIL leadership has looked “to supporters overseas, including returnees, to keep the brand alive” (The Soufran Centre, p. 15). These attacks have been low-tech and crude, traditionally employing a vehicle or simplistic improvised explosive device as a means of violence rather than engaging in a larger, more developed plot. When one takes into consideration – as this report's UBK intelligence source outlined – that the ground-level support for extremist ideologies in Macedonia continues to grow, and place this alongside an expansive phenomenon of lone actor ISIL-inspired attacks, the threatscape appears increasingly problematic and diffuse.

1.4. NATIONALIST EXTREMISM

While the main extremist threat in Macedonia comes from Islamist iterations, there is also a growing concern over nationalist extremism which has been moving from the margins of political discourse in the country to the mainstream. Nationalist extremism, in the Macedonian context, is a narrative which describes the nation in two ways: the continued primacy of ethnic Macedonians within the state power structure, and the socio-cultural supremacy of the imagined Macedonian “nation”, in the Andersonian vein, which is deeply linked to the conceptualised idea of the Macedonian homeland. Two NGO officials that were interviewed voiced their concerns about this growing phenomenon (Interview with S.S. and E.H., 2017), and one high-ranking UBK official stated that while there has yet to be an act of violence perpetrated by nationalist extremists,

there is significant evidence of growing Neofascism and Islamophobia against minority groups (Interview with UBK official, 2017).

Secondary research has also uncovered this finding as well. In his investigation on Islamophobia in Macedonia, Mitre Georgiev concluded that “discrimination on the ground of religion, including Islamophobia, was present in Macedonia”, although it is “often not recognised as an issue as it is concealed by other more dominant actors of discrimination” (Georgiev 2015, 358). Moreover, there is also evidence of Islamophobia and Neofascism appearing in media outlets such as newspapers. In a 2015 Serbian-authored article entitled “Ahmed from Libya has reached Serbia: Instead of churches in Europe you will see minarets. It will be our revenge!” run in Macedonian broadsheet *Vecer*, it is possible to see some of this latent Islamophobia in print (Vecer, 2015a). The article suggested that refugees transiting through Macedonia during the height of the 2015 refugee flows were not authentic refugees, and that their transit through Europe had a more sinister intent (Vecer, 2015a). The portrayal of such articles in Macedonian newspapers is rendered further problematic, considering that “state funding of media is unregulated and non-transparent”, where “pro-government media outlets are awarded state subsidised projects denied to critical media” (SEEMO 2015, 7).

Arguably, the political violence which took place in April 2017 upon the election of Talat Xhaferi – Macedonia’s first ethnic Albanian parliamentary speaker since its independence from Yugoslavia – can be interpreted as a kind of nationalist extremism, with political support. The storming of parliament by 200 supporters of the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party resulted in the beating of the now-Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and ethnic Albanian MP Zijadin Sela among many others, with some 100 people (including nine MPs) sustaining injuries (Hopkins, 2017).

This incident was preceded by the introduction of the Tirana Platform, an agreement signed in Tirana by three of the four ethnic Albanian political parties in Macedonia at a meeting with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati (Mejdini, 2016). The Platform – which, among other things, called for the implementation of Albanian as a second official language in Macedonia – essentially served as a precondition for Zoran Zaev to form a government, as his Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) party required a coalition with the ethnic Albanian parties to secure the election victory (Mejdini, 2016).

The reaction to the Tirana Platform by Macedonian nationalists was visceral. Former prime minister and VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski wrote on his Facebook page that “people have to stand up and defend Macedonian national interests, not stay at home in their slippers” (VMRO-DPMNE, 2017), and his party’s supporters took to the streets the next day (Hopkins, 2017). Since the election last year of Zoran Zaev as prime minister, the nationalist narrative propagated by VMRO-DPMNE has become increasingly more vocal, which may have implications at a grassroots level in terms of nationalist extremism.

2. DRIVERS AND FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EXTREMISM

Keeping in mind the above sentiment that it is difficult to create an archetypal profile of an individual most susceptible to the extremist call, through fieldwork and secondary source investigation, the researchers have identified some of the perceived drivers and factors which could lead to violent extremism in the Macedonian milieu. Those most vulnerable individuals may possess one or all of these attributes, or any number in between; what is an integral

consideration here is how these factors and drivers inform one another to create vulnerabilities that are exploitable by recruiters and their extremist ideologies.

2.1. RELIGIOUS DRIVERS – MORAL ACTION AND COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAM

From the individuals interviewed by the researchers, there was a feeling across the spectrum that a poor theological understanding of Islam has left a void into which extremist thought can creep undetected – at-risk groups are seen as filling their theological voids with problematic interpretations that are in the extreme, often based on emotion rather than rationality, and are simplistic. This was reflective of a lack of consistent religious education on the whole, a point which was particularly stressed by the high school teachers and imams that were interviewed. More than one high school teacher suggested that there ought to be mandatory education on all religions in schools, so that students could better understand their respective faiths in the broader context.

Moreover, as one imam highlighted, there was a lack of access to informed religious education in mosques, as there is not large enough a supply of imams to fulfil the demand. For example, in Skopje, there is a deficit in genuine imams, effectively leaving behind a theological power vacuum, of which extremist preachers can take advantage – “extremists use this deficit to seep into mosques and spread their ideology” (Interview with H.R., 2017).

It is important to note that this phenomenon does not seem to be prevalent in Tetovo, which is a Muslim-majority – and in this context, ethnic Albanian-majority – city in the northwest of Macedonia. One imam and one NGO official this report engaged with spoke to why their city has predominantly remained theologically moderate. As the NGO official opined, “Tetovo imams have worked hard to secure true Islam in this city” (Interview with M.A., 2017). In this effort, theologically-based educational programmes were cited as vital factors in the prevention of extremist narratives taking hold (Interview with S.S. and E.H., 2017; Interview with H.R., 2017). These programmes are designed to engage children from an early age, and provide both the theological underpinnings of Islam and an outlet for discussions on the dangers of Islamist extremism; in this way, children are more aware from a younger age of the dangers posed by extremism, as there has been a concerted effort to engage them in this dialogue.

To support these reflections, there is evidence from the Atlantic Initiative (2017) which demonstrates that the creation of “parallel mosques” – also known as *para-jamaats* – have popped up alongside legitimate religious establishments, and purport to represent the real messages of Islam. (p. 14) One NGO representative from Kumanovo who was interviewed described the number of “illegal” prayer spaces in the city, used by extremist imams to propagate their messages and preach about the perceived apostasy of “legal” imams in the city (Interview with Z.M., 2017). Additionally, these parallel religious structures have helped to facilitate the creation of extremist parallel structures in areas such as education, social services, and healthcare, “thus filling the gaps left, in many instances, by fragile or dysfunctional states and by inefficient and ineffective public services” (The Atlantic Initiative 2017: p. 14).

For example, evidence has recently emerged of an unregistered “kindergarten” named Pcela in Cair (Skopje) which was being housed in a private property. The “kindergarten” was being used as an educational facility for children ages 6-11 to undertake Islamic education (Ivanovska, 2017) outside the context of their regular schooling. The existence of this makeshift educational facility in parallel to state structures was condemned by Sulejman Rexhepi, the head of the Islamic

Religious Community (IRC) (Ivanovska, 2017). Moreover, there is increasing concern that similar facilities will be unearthed going forward.

Linked to this difficulty of religious education and parallel structures is the positing of violent extremism as a “moral good” – at-risk individuals are led to believe that their actions, however violent, are done in the name of Allah, and that such actions are a noble price to pay in the protection of the *umma*. One high school teacher interviewed expressed that the relative of one of his colleagues was most persuaded by messaging such as “we’ll go to heaven if we fight the injustice here”, and decided to become a foreign fighter in Syria (Interview with B.R., 2017).

It is also possible to see that the appeal of the moral good was a strong driver in the first phase of foreign fighter flows to Syria. Of the popular instances profiled by the Macedonian media in recent years, two cases involved men travelling to Syria who were formerly part of the National Liberation Army (NLA). As summarised in Analytica’s (2016) report on Macedonian efforts at countering violent extremism (p. 63), in both instances the men “expressed their motives to be purely based on solidarity with the Syrian population against the Assad regime, wanting to help stop the mass murder of civilians”. However, as the conflict in Syria evolved and ISIS became greater players, that moral argument was co-opted and evolved for a younger audience that was less well-versed in Quranic knowledge (Analytica 2016: p. 63).

2.2. SOCIOECONOMIC DRIVERS – EDUCATION AND ECONOMICS

Throughout the fieldwork, nearly every single individual interviewed identified that a vital factor leading to the espousal of extremist ideologies was a lack of general education quality in Macedonia. Assessments from both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2015) and the European Training Foundation (2013) have articulated that the performance of Macedonian students compared to international standards is very poor, and despite attempts at educational reform – such as the introduction of compulsory secondary education – performance indicators did not augment relationally. Moreover, demonstrated by the European Training Foundation (2013), there is also “evidence of continuing discrimination and exclusion of vulnerable groups” such as ethnic Albanians and Roma from equal access to education, and that “physical barriers between ethnic and cultural communities were created by the introduction of the right to education in the mother tongue”. (p. 13) Overall, the system is not focused on student achievements and attainment, but rather financial inputs into a system where the potential for corruption exists (European Training Foundation 2013: p. 7). Finally, “critical thinking is not on the agenda in the educational process and the young people are expected to listen rather than think” (Popovska and Ristoska 2015: p. 63).

To put this educational question into perspective, many high school teachers interviewed for this report spoke about the serious educational deficits across the country: in one school, the majority of students were described as both unable to complete their multiplications tables and as having difficulty reading (Interview with A.H., 2017); at another school, “there are many students that are in high school but still don’t know how to write their names” (Interview with A.B., 2017). Ultimately, some students are left unprepared to deal critically with questionable discourses; as one imam argued, in his experience lower attaining students have more of a propensity to support emotional arguments – which, in his assessment, extremist ideologies often are – rather than rational ones, as there is a lack of critical engagement with discourse (Interview with H.R., 2017).

This lack of education is equally a lack of knowledge on what the threats stemming from violent extremism are. As one high school teacher described it, his students “perceive violent extremism more as, ‘Did you see what happened? Did you see what he said?’, not in terms of the physical weight of the situation [...] they see it on a surface level” (Interview with M.O., 2017). As an Atlantic Institute (2017) report demonstrates, many at-risk youth hear about foreign fighters who have risen in ISIL ranks – individuals like Abdul Jashari (a.k.a. Abu Qatadam or al-Albani) from Skopje, who was named leader of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham’s military operations. (p. 107) These men are often seen as aspirational figures without questioning the context of the bloodshed that elevated them to these positions.

Much of this difficulty also has to do with a lack of knowledgeable resources to which students can turn to in times of empirical need. In the focus group held in Kumanovo, group participants felt that there were no narratives for discussion on problems related to violent extremism, no safe spaces for at-risk groups to talk about their thoughts and concerns; ultimately, their difficulties become insular until they identify a trusted confidante, but that confidante could very easily be an individual with an extremist agenda.

This lack of quality education is further compounded by the findings that some teachers are also engaged in spreading extremist ideologies. For example, UBK officials have warned the Ministry of Education “that several high school and elementary teachers in Macedonia have been linked to local extremist groups and therefore present the potential danger of trying to indoctrinate their students” (Analytica 2017: p. 20). Ultimately, a lack of proper general education – in tandem with no safe spaces in which to learn about or discuss problems relating to extremism and the threat of teacher recruitment – has left school-aged individuals vulnerable to extremist messaging.

Intrinsically linked to the theme of education is the current financial climate of Macedonia. While financial incentives were identified during fieldwork as a potential driver toward violent extremism, most individuals interviewed saw this not as a main drawing force, but as a supplementary driver. Yet, as two NGO officials opined, the lower the economic standing of an at-risk individual, the more likely that financial incentives could draw them in (Interview with S.S. and E.H., 2017). Secondary research, however, does not touch upon this subject within the Macedonian context.

Related to this idea of financial drivers is the current economic climate of Macedonia and, ultimately, the high unemployment rate which stems from it – currently at 31%, with youth employment reaching 55% (European Training Foundation 2013: p. 8). Put simply, this is the old adage of “idle hands, idle minds” seen in vicious cycle – a lack of good general education across the country leaves individuals unprepared for life after school, and the economic climate of the country simultaneously leaves them with few employment opportunities, thus they find themselves with ample idle time. When presented with the narrative of extremism in the context of a dearth of opportunities in one’s homeland, the idea of a financially-based jihad no longer rationally seems like a logical leap.

Additionally, the economic situation can be seen as the cause of a lack of familial cohesion; more than one person interviewed highlighted that parents cannot necessarily give their children the full support they need, as some parents are required to work long hours or multiple jobs in order to sustain the financial functioning of the household. As one high school teacher expressed, he only knows the parents of ten students in his thirty-student classroom, as only a third are committed to showing any interest throughout the year in their child’s education (Interview with

unnamed professor, 2017). As such, when at-risk youth have no one to turn to, they may seek out alternative sources of support.

It is also interesting to note the assessments of the IRC, the official Islamic religious body in Macedonia. In their estimation, one of the drivers for members of their community to turn toward violent extremism is the undesirable economic reality for the youth demographic in Macedonia. This, inherently couples with the high unemployment rate, leaves young Muslim Macedonians more vulnerable toward more extreme narratives, as their realities on the ground do not provide for an idealised future (Analytica 2016: p. 28).

2.3. SOCIETAL DRIVERS – SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND EXTREMIST SOCIALISATION

Of the individuals interviewed through the focus groups in Skopje, Tetovo, and Kumanovo, there was a feeling expressed by all that individuals who felt excluded or on the fringes of society would be more open to the rhetoric of extremism. Fringes, in this sense, referred to those who felt marginalised and alienated from broader society, and exist outside the general power structures of the state. A low level of trust in state institutions was expressed, and a widespread belief that the state favours one religious group over another – that is, Orthodox Christians over Muslims; more presciently, they expressed that ethnic Albanians felt like outsiders. In line with this, one high school teacher interviewed suggested that the state does not do enough to *not* demonise Albanians, and Muslims more generally, a fact which works to enforce this perceived sense of social exclusion felt among minority communities (Interview with B.R., 2017).

In a country which experienced an armed conflict between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians just over fifteen years ago, a feeling of social exclusion and isolation among minority ethnic groups – mixed with the desire to find belonging – can be exploited readily and effectively through extremist messaging that preaches “inclusivity” as part of its narrative. As terrorism expert Peter Neumann highlights, Western Balkan societies most affected by radicalisation are those who “seem to be in a state of political and cultural paralysis” and “frequently appear not to have moved beyond the conflicts of the 1990s” (The Atlantic Initiative 2017: p. 8). As the current political climate in Macedonia continues to move toward ethnic nationalism on all sides, the potential for violent extremism to take hold in the vacuums of power becomes increasingly more likely.

This sense of exclusion, whether legitimate or perceived, is leaving cracks within the fragile veneer of Macedonian society in which recruiters can fill narrative voids. In speaking with the family members of individuals incarcerated due to violent extremist activity, two critical trends emerged. In all instances, the individuals began their radicalisation by distancing themselves from their friend and family network – a kind of self-isolation after the perception of societal isolation – and moved toward those sharing extremist thoughts. In one case, the individual began this process when his father died, and he receded away from his regular life; this “emotional gap” saw him begin taking all his meals with fellow “brothers” at a *para-jamaat*, where extremist sermons were delivered alongside their meals (Interview with A.R., 2017). Another individual began this disassociation from his networks when he started encountering difficulties in high school, and fell into a group of extremists close in age who solidified their bonds through passing time at a PlayStation gaming centre in Skopje (Interview with family of I.F., 2017). In these instances, all felt a sense of isolation and alienation from their networks, and sought like-minded individuals who validated them in a way which felt idealised.

The second critical trend that emerged is that all encountered recruiters face-to-face. The family of one radicalised individual described their relative's burgeoning friendship with Rexhep Memishi; it first began with him mentioning an individual named Redza in passing, and his answer to outings with family or friends soon became "I'm busy right now, I'm out with Redzo"⁷ (Interview with family of I.F., 2017). In the description of the families interviewed, their perception was that face-to-face interaction with recruiters was a vital factor in their relative's pathway to radicalisation. Secondary research supports this finding. In their work profiling the foreign fighter phenomenon in the Western Balkans, the Atlantic Initiative (2017) asserts that "the process of radicalisation and recruitment in the region almost always begins through initiation with a 'human touch', meaning through personal interaction with a figure of authority". (p. 15) Moreover, the inclusion of Memishi's name in the interviewee's recollection is a critical finding given Memishi's standing as Macedonia's most prolific recruiter of foreign fighters.

Underlying both these findings is a broader trend of extremist socialisation. The Atlantic Initiative (2017) goes on to describe extremist socialisation beyond the initial face-to-face meeting as being "followed by peer-to-peer interaction, often with like-minded individuals, whereby a very specific worldview is reinforced through group dynamics". (p. 15) For example, evidence has demonstrated that foreign fighters from the Cair area of Skopje grew up in the same neighbourhoods – and on the same streets in some instances – near the Tutunsuz and Jajha Pasha mosques; they "knew each other and were influenced and recruited in the same manner" (The Atlantic Initiative 2017: p. 106). This was a common thread described by all families of radicalised individuals interviewed for this report. One family outlined an almost ritualistic socialisation, a kind of final push factor from recruiters which they described as a "farewell ritual" – individuals who were desirous to leave for Syria would stand outside their *para-jamaats* to receive accolades from fellow extremists on their decision to join fellow fighters abroad, and in turn encourage other members to take up the same fight (Interview with A.R., 2017).

Ultimately, there is an undeniable interplay between a fragile and divided society, and the feeling or perception of isolation and alienation. This, mixed with the resonance of Islamist messaging and near-ritualistic extremist socialisation, is an integral driver within the Macedonian context.

2.4. ONLINE DRIVERS – SOCIAL MEDIA AND EASE OF ACCESS

Throughout the conduct of fieldwork, one consistent theme that continually arose was the ease with which at-risk groups could access radical materials online via social media and other internet sites. As one high school teacher articulated, "there are enough convincing materials [...] especially it is the case with videos and violent content" (Interview with A.H., 2017); moreover, another felt that individuals seeking out these materials do not understand the serious, real-world implications of what they are watching – "they said that they feel it as a film" (Interview with A.B., 2017). Although ease of access to radical materials would not likely be a singular driver in and of itself toward violent extremism, it does have the ability to put the viewer on a path toward finding and socialising among like-minded individuals outside the virtual milieu where the bulk of recruiting in the Macedonian context occurs.

Additionally, once radical content is created, its shelf life on the internet sometimes even outlives its creators. For example, despite the fact that Rexhep Memishi has now been jailed as a result of the Cell operations, his YouTube channel "Minber Media" was still being uploaded with new

⁷ Redza/Redzo is contextually understood to be a diminutive form of the name Rexhep.

content well after his incarceration, and has over 7 million views.⁸ Similarly, his “Minber Media” Facebook page with 54,000 “likes” continues to be active to this day, with weekly updates of new content.⁹ Moreover, the shelf life of these materials can sometimes even outlive their creators – the sermons of Anwar al-Awlaki, for example, the American-born extremist cleric killed by drone strike in 2011, continue to be widely shared across the web and used as tools of recruitment. As long as these social media pages continue to be active, so does public access to the materials found therein.

This phenomenon begs a serious consideration: does the incarceration of radicalising content creators – or even their death – result in the end of a recruiter’s ability to radicalise? In short, the answer is no. The online radical presence of Memishi continues to be a potential tool of recruitment for Macedonian extremists despite his incarceration, and its continued life will give continuity and expression to his narratives. The “digital legacy” of radical content is a phenomenon that will far outlive the active recruitment life of an extremist once they have been incarcerated, and brings to the fore questions related to online content curation as a form of countering violent extremism.

There is also evidence of targeted recruitment in ISIL propaganda that could speak to Macedonians in the process of radicalisation. For example, in a video released on 12 June 2014, ISIL fighters can be seen tearing up a Macedonian passport, and denouncing their ethnic and national identities in support of the extremist cause (Analytica 2016: p. 22). Given that easy access to radical materials on the internet has been identified as a factor contributing to extremism, this kind of propaganda has the potential to be effective in further radicalising an individual on their path toward violent extremism.

3. AT-RISK COMMUNITIES

3.1. ETHNICITY AND RELIGION

As described in section 3.1.3. of this report, the instances of foreign fighters among the Muslim population in Macedonia is higher than elsewhere in the Western Balkans. The prevalence within said population is 1 in 4,648, and its nearest competitor is Serbia, with 1 in 5,182. This evidence demonstrates that Macedonia has the highest average of violently radicalised Muslims per capita, which suggests that its Muslim population generally is likely to be more extremist in its outlook comparatively to its Muslim-minority neighbours in the Western Balkans.¹⁰

However, while religion is an important correlator, it is not the *only* factor, as demonstrated by the Cell operations; alongside some of the aforementioned factors leading to extremism, there is also an ethnic element as well. Put plainly, being Muslim is not the only risk factor; an individual is at greater risk of potential radicalisation if they are both a Muslim and an ethnic Albanian, more so than any other Muslim ethnic minority in Macedonia. As articulated in their analysis on Macedonian efforts in countering violent extremism, Analytica (2016) indicated that while ethnic Albanians “feel they can practice their religion freely, [...] they felt more discriminated on ethnic grounds, in the way that other Muslim communities in Macedonia like Turks or Bosnians are not described in the media as being Muslim first”. (p. 62)

⁸ Accurate as of November 2017.

⁹ Accurate as of November 2017.

¹⁰ The authors of this report did send access to information requests to the Macedonian Ministry of Interior to acquire data relating specifically to municipalities, but these requests for information were rejected numerous times due to the data being classified.

There is also a geographic consideration when discussing at-risk communities (see Annex 3). Evidence derived from foreign fighter flows suggests that cities in which there is a Muslim minority that is predominantly ethnic Albanian are more at-risk for extremist messaging. For example, the neighbourhoods of Cair, Gazi Baba, and Saraj in Skopje – which are predominantly ethnic Albanian – were perceived by many of the respondents to be more vulnerable to radical messaging than elsewhere in the city. Kumanovo, which similarly has a Muslim-minority population of around 30 per cent (Analytica 2016: p. 61), was assessed by the report's respondents to be less vulnerable than Skopje, but that ultimately it was more vulnerable than Tetovo, which has a Muslim-majority population of around 70 per cent (Analytica 2016: p. 61).

This begs the question – why is there a greater propensity for inhabitants of Muslim majority cities to be *less* vulnerable to violent extremism than Muslim minority cities? As two NGO officials suggested, Muslims in places like Tetovo do not feel the same kind of social exclusion and isolation, and thus the extremist message does not resonate as strongly; it is down to the Muslim community's inclusion into social processes, they argue, which makes Muslim majority cities like Tetovo more resilient (Interview with S.S. and E.H., 2017). This was a sentiment that was expressed across the board in the conducted fieldwork. The at-risk age demographic that was interviewed as part of a Tetovo-based focus group were inclined to believe that their demographic counterparts in Skopje were significantly more vulnerable to radical narratives than they were; similarly, all three Tetovo-based imams interviewed throughout the course of fieldwork spoke to the resilience of their communities, indicating that the cohesiveness, size, and social prevalence of the Tetovo Muslim community – which is almost entirely ethnic Albanian – played a significant role in that outcome (Interview with H.R., 2017; Interview with E.S., 2017; Interview with J.Z., 2017).

Additionally, one of the imams interviewed expressed that there is a community-built resilience amongst the Muslim community at large in Tetovo to prevent the spread of extremist narratives. He gave the example scenario in which a guest imam was invited to lead Friday prayers; however, the individual in question began to preach what was dubbed by the congregation to be ideologically problematic, and due to the pressures of the congregation, the imam was asked to never return (Interview with H.R., 2017)

In sum, the vital consideration to make here is that while being Muslim is a key risk factor toward radicalisation in the Macedonian context, religion alone does not solely equate to causation. As we can see from the Tetovo example, there are other considerations at play; scenarios in which Muslims have access to the structures of social and political power allows them to hold a stake in society and not feel isolated from wider society. In the context of Skopje, where there are majority Muslim pockets within a Muslim minority city, the possibility of becoming radicalised is significantly higher. While the answer to countering violent extremism in the Macedonian context is not the creation of Muslim majority cities, the suggestion is that Muslims – particularly ethnic Albanians – need to be made to feel as though they are integral players in the social, cultural, and economic strata of the country.

3.2. AGE DEMOGRAPHICS

Generally speaking, recruitment to extremist groups in Macedonia – like elsewhere – is done at the grassroots level; it is not a centralised, concerted effort, but rather is more diffuse, personal, and individualised. As one high school teacher articulated, recruiters of high school-aged individuals attempt to play into the sympathies, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities of the age group

by using steady face-to-face contact that is polite, persuasive, full of flattery, and paints pictures of virtuousness in action. The use of these kinds of tactics toward youth, as he describes them, “can soften even the wolf” (Interview with R.A., 2017). To extrapolate on this point, the tactic of targeting a younger age group is employed by recruiters due to the target’s perceived vulnerability; these recruiters will weave narratives which articulate a “sense of identity, belonging and cohesiveness...[they] begin to define their identity with that of the group and its struggle” (Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism, p. 51). Moreover, in this way, we see that age is factored into extremist messaging and recruitment tactics, and is modified based on the demographic of the target.

If one once again considers the Cell operations carried out by Macedonian authorities (see Annex 2), the individuals arrested and tried under these police actions are demonstrable of some of the at-risk age groups for violent extremism. For example, the eleven convicted individuals from the first two Cell operations range in age from 22 to 38, and the five individuals arrested as part of Cell 3 ranged in age from 18-24 (Analytica 2016: p. 23). Given this spread in ages, it is difficult to give a concrete age bracket at which an individual is most vulnerable to radicalisation in Macedonia; rather, age must be taken into consideration alongside other drivers and factors.

3.3. PRISON POPULATIONS

One other at-risk group that is often overlooked when considering the nexus of violent extremism is prison populations. In the past two years, the Macedonian security establishment has attempted to take a more proactive stance in the capture of individuals involved in terror-related offences. As noted previously, the Cell operations have been at the forefront of this effort, and have produced a positive effective, insofar as they have captured and jailed some major players in the Macedonian theatre of violent extremism. However, as more foreign fighters return home to Macedonia and are incarcerated within the general prison population, there is a greater probability of foreign fighters finding an audience for their extremist views among their fellow incarcerates.

There is evidence of this phenomenon on a global scale, and will only increase in prominence as foreign fighters return home. As terrorism expert Peter Neumann (2010) has argued, prisons as “sites” of radicalisation should come as no surprise:

Prisons are highly unsettling environments in which individuals are more likely than elsewhere to explore new beliefs and associations. Confronted with existential questions and deprived of their existing social networks, prisoners with no previous involvement in politically motivated violence are vulnerable to being radicalised and recruited into terrorism. Prisons, therefore, are ‘places of vulnerability’ in which radicalisation can take place. (p. 7)

Within the Macedonian context, the newly-established National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (NCCVECT) has identified that prison radicalisation is a growing challenge. This is of particular concern with men in the 18-24 age demographic, who the NCCVECT’s (2018) preliminary research¹¹ identified as being most vulnerable to extremist messaging, whether nationalist or Islamist (p. 27).

¹¹ The group has been newly-established under the recently-elected Zoran Zaev-led government.

In their report on prison radicalisation in Europe, the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2016) found that conditions in prisons can play a “significant role in heightening or lessening the risks” of radicalisation in the prison environment (p. 6). Within the Macedonian milieu, prison conditions are subpar. According to the Macedonia Human Rights Report published by the United States Department of State (2016), “poor conditions have given rise to [...] inhuman and degrading treatment of prisoners and detainees”. (p. 4) Similarly, in their investigation of prison conditions in Macedonia, the Council of Europe’s Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman and Degrading Treatment (2016) issued a report in 2016 outlining the continuous problems of corruption, ill-treatment, inter-prisoner violence, and mass overcrowding - the Idrizovo Prison in the Gazi Baba municipality of Skopje, for example, currently holds around 1,800 with an operating capacity of only 900 and suffers from “serious problems” related to “ill-treatment by staff and inter-prisoner violence” (p. 5-6). When these realities are taken alongside the risks articulated by Neumann, the Macedonian context presents a ripe environment for prison radicalisation.

While the prison population remains an at-risk group of concern, it is also important to note that the UBK has attempted to develop “a special prison regime for extremist offenders” alongside prison authorities, in an effort to minimise this threat (Analytica 2016: p. 45). Simultaneously, however, there is a dearth of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes in Macedonian prison facilities which negates much of the positive effects of such programmes (Analytica 2016: p. 45). The Macedonian government has voiced the desire to design and implement further measures in this vein (NCCVECT 2018: p. 27), but this has yet to materialise.

Moreover, there is a growing concern among the international community about the potential for radicalisation in Macedonian prisons. For example, in March 2018, two UK leading experts on prison radicalisation were in Skopje to discuss this issue with the British Ambassador to Macedonia; both individuals were extended this invitation as they both have extensive experience with Islamist extremism in British prisons, and have investigated this phenomenon within the UK context at the request of the British government. While the access to data about prison radicalisation is strenuous to acquire due to the difficulty of the research landscape in Macedonia, the presence of such leading experts is thus demonstrative of the growing importance of this subject to the broader European security community.

When assessing the question of jihadist incarceration, it is important for practitioners of counter-extremism to understand that the locking of a cell door does not equate to the closing of an extremist mind. In the same way that the online presence of a recruiter can exist freely in the world beyond their creator’s life, a jihadist’s ability to recruit and radicalise does not end when they enter the prison walls; before them lie opportunities and minds which are vulnerable to the narratives they seek to impart.

3.4. FAMILIES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Finally, one must also consider the families left behind by foreign fighters as potential at-risk groups. Referring to this phenomenon as “kinship recruitment”, Mohammed Hafez (2016) identifies the risk that is present alongside tightening security environments:

Tight-knit kinship and friendship ties offer opportunities for radical socialisation that simultaneously satisfy psychological needs such as avoidance of cognitive dissonance, the need for maintaining meaningful relationships, and validation from

valued peers [...] kinship and friendship ties can transpose radical political commitments, and these commitments, in turn, intensify the bonds of loyalty among kith and kin. (p. 16)

In fieldwork interviews with officials in the UBK (2017), there is evidence of this phenomenon unfolding in the Macedonia context. Although details were not available from this source, the family member of an arrested extremist interviewed discussed this data at play. They described their relative's movement toward the more extremist elements of their family – while completely disassociating from his moderate family – and even sleeping at the Jahja Pasha mosque in Skopje with them during Ramadan as a way to solidify his closeness to them (Interview with family of I.F., 2017). The individual was described as increasingly argumentative at larger family gatherings, often becoming incredibly temperamental and removing himself entirely from scenarios which did not include the more radical members of his family (Interview with family of I.F., 2017).

Moreover, as his own radicalisation increased, the individual attempted to instigate the radicalisation of the more moderate members of his family. The interviewee described the individual's incessant sharing of videos depicting radical imams on YouTube, as well as ISIL propaganda material, despite his family's attempts to dissuade him of his extremist beliefs. Despite their efforts, the individual was arrested on charges of funding terrorist activity after two failed attempts at fleeing to Syria (Interview with family of I.F., 2017).

Kinship recruitment must also be considered within the returnee context as well, as it pertains to the families of foreign fighters vis-à-vis their positioning as a potential at-risk group. On the base level, the returning of foreign fighters to Macedonia poses an immediate ideological threat risk to their families. On a deeper level, as alluded to above, extremist political commitments can be commuted with friendship or kinship ties, thus facilitating the deepening of those familial bonds. When this is analysed alongside the reality that ISIL's message is becoming increasingly diluted alongside its territorial losses, the immediacy of recruiting new individuals into the fold by returnees becomes ever more accurate. Moreover, as Hafez alludes, if they are successful in their familial indoctrination, it provides an increasingly more complex relational expression of extremist narratives for counter-extremism experts to counter.

4. LINKS BETWEEN ORGANISED CRIME AND EXTREMISM

Based on the information gathered by the researchers, there was no immediate or significant evidence of ties between organised crime groups and manifestations of violent extremism. A high-ranking official in the UBK (2017) iterated that to date, while some members of extremist groups engage in criminal activities – such as low-level participation in the drug trade – these are individualised instances which are not representative of any links at large.

Moreover, according to intelligence officials, organised crime groups have “so far shown no sympathy for the extremist cause [...] and have no incentive to do so at the moment; it would bring unnecessary law-enforcement attention to them” (Interview with UBK official, 2017).

5. TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

5.1. REGIONAL COOPERATION

Research shows that there are existing connections between extremists from Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania, and to a lesser extent Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. These relationships are evidenced by the terror plot uncovered in 2016, in which extremists intended to attack an Albania-Israel football match. The attack was prevented by a police raid conducted in three countries – Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia – and the individuals arrested as part of this plot were part of a larger regional cell. The group had planned synchronised attacks in all three countries, with their main focus being the football match due to take place in Skadar (Qirezi, 2016).

In July 2015, a combined police action undertaken by Macedonian and Kosovar authorities uncovered a coordinated plot to attack water supply systems. The main coordinators were Lavdrim Muhaxeri and Bekim Fidani, Kosovar and Macedonian citizens respectively, and they instructed their supporters in both countries with logistics on how to undertake the attack (Vecer, 2015b).

Cooperation between extremists has occurred on different levels, from logistics to guest lectures. For example, the now-imprisoned Rexhep Memishi is greatly respected in extremist circles throughout the region, and would often be invited to travel from his home mosque in Skopje to deliver sermons and lectures in Kosovo. Moreover, he is said to enjoy popularity among the Albanian diaspora in both Germany and Scandinavia (Interview with UBK official, 2017). As mentioned previously, he cultivated a significant online presence which remains active despite his imprisonment (The Atlantic Initiative 2017: p. 108).

Additionally, the researchers' source in the UBK suggested that there have been instances of radicalisation of individuals in the Macedonian diaspora, particularly in Italy, Germany, and Austria. Some of these individuals have engaged in paramilitary activity in Syria and Iraq, although the details of these instances are unknown due to reasons of national security of the involved nationalities (Interview with UBK official, 2017).

5.2. SAUDI CONNECTIONS

As has been oft discussed, fundamentalist Islamist extremism first entered the Western Balkans via the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s; the wars were a driver of both a real and perceived alienation of Muslims in the region, which led to the establishment of links to the Middle East (see: Gibas-Krzak, 2013; Ranstorp and Xhudo, 2007; Shay, 2007). Within the Kosovo context during this timeframe, for example, Saudi funds were spent on distributing Wahhabi and Salafi literature to young, vulnerable people, and they offered charitable assistance that had strings attached – for example, families would be given monthly stipends “on the condition that they attended sermons in the mosque and that women and girls wore the veil” (Gall, 2016).

Moreover, Gulf-backed charities such as Al Waqf al Islami took root in the Western Balkans as far back as 1989. Despite its stated mission, which purports to concern itself with orphan welfare, only about seven per cent of its €10 million budget between 2002-2012 actually went to that purpose, leaving a significant amount of money unaccounted for (Gall, 2016).

In the more modern context, there has been little evidence to indicate that any funding was given directly to individuals who wished to travel to Syria; rather, as Kosovo's director of their counter-terrorism police has described it, they instead "supported thinkers who promote violence and jihad in the name of protecting Islam" (Georgievski, 2017). In this way, the funding and promotion of Salafist and Wahhabist interpretations of Islam has been fermenting for nearly two decades in some parts of the Western Balkans, thus making current Islamist extremism a natural next step for those in the region more radically-inclined.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Through its analysis of fieldwork evidence and secondary sources, this report has endeavoured to provide a baseline insight into the extremist threatscape within the Macedonian milieu. It has discussed some of the levels, forms, and threats of extremism; the drivers contributing toward it; the at-risk communities in Macedonia; as well as the transnational links, funding, and cooperation for extremist objectives.

Through its analysis, the report has uncovered some vital findings. In an attempt to address and speak to some of these findings, the report proposes three recommendations:

1. *More concerted and pointed research needs to be undertaken which seeks to understand the role that ethnicity plays in fostering vulnerability toward extremism in an effort to counter those vulnerabilities*

Within the Macedonian context, the ethnic issues of the early 2000s have ramifications that continue to be felt throughout the country. Muslims have a higher-than-regional-average propensity to violently radicalise, and ethnic Albanians are *the* at-risk Muslim population within Macedonia in this respect. These findings would suggest that the ethnically-Albanian Muslim population in Macedonia is more comparatively extremist than neighbouring countries in the Western Balkans, and one cannot help but wonder what role the continued ethnic fragility in Macedonia will play going forward. When considered alongside the finding that foreign fighter flows out of Macedonia have nearly stopped in their entirety, there emerges an increased potential for more violent expressions of extremism within the domestic, regional, or broader European arenas. Although the not-yet-violent extremist is the most difficult to halt, there must be an effort to address fundamental grassroots issues which help to foster an environment conducive to extremism.

As well, one of the integral drivers identified by this report was a feeling of isolation and alienation leading up to an individual undergoing a process of radicalisation and that, generally speaking, ethnic Albanians felt removed from the structures of power within Macedonia. However, evidence within the report also suggested that cities like Tetovo – in which Muslims are a majority and are thus vital players within the structures of power – had lower levels of foreign fighters than in cities such as Skopje in which Muslims were a minority. Where extremist narratives purport to represent inclusivity and feed on socialisation, there is ample space to investigate how to best counter and dispel those narratives.

2. *A focus on and access to quality education must be prioritised*

Education was a theme that came up numerous times throughout the findings in this report. Both imams and high school teachers interviewed lamented about the general state of education in

Macedonia, which was also evidenced in secondary research. The analysis of these findings suggests that the educational system, as it stands, is not fit for purpose.

- Competing interpretations of Islam and a lack of qualified imams to fulfil mosque needs – which has resulted from a lack of quality religious education in the country – have paved the way for the creation of parallel religious structures in which extremist narratives can take hold.
- From a state educational level, there is a lack of quality education across the board, and a significant reduction in access to educational facilities by vulnerable ethnic groups.
- Moreover, there is evidence of isolation between different groups in the physical sense, as ethnic and cultural communities are divided between schools taught exclusively in the Macedonian or Albanian language.

Critically, there needs to be a significant effort to democratise access to education and ensure that ethnic integration is a vital component in that effort.

Additionally, there is a lack of engaging narrative among at-risk groups in terms of educating on the dangers posed by radicalisation and violent extremism. Evidence derived from focus group interviews with individuals belonging to the at-risk age demographics suggested that individuals do not have a safe space in which to discuss these questions, and no authorities to which to turn to in times of empirical need. As such, at-risk individuals have no way to critically engage with and/or question some of the extremist narratives to which they may be exposed.

3. *A comprehensive reintegration and rehabilitation strategy must be established as part of any effort to counter violent extremism domestically and must speak to the difficulty of returning foreign fighters*

As mentioned previously, the eroding territorial integrity of ISIL has caused two phenomena: it has aided in the near-cessation of foreign fighter flows out of Macedonia, and it has the potential to cause foreign fighters to flee that territory in order to return home. When considered in the context of an above-average propensity for the Macedonian Muslim population to violently radicalise, a lack of strategy to address this newfound reality could lead to a problematic domestic threatscape in the future.

Moreover, as has been suggested in the findings of this report, the incarceration of returnees augments the possibility for prisons to become “sites” of radicalisation. This in turn, has the potential to inject extremist thinkers into a context in which vulnerable individuals would be more open to radical narratives, and could allow recruitment to take place without hindrance. As such, it is critical that any CVE effort undertaken alongside the criminalisation of violent extremism has a comprehensive reintegration and rehabilitation strategy.

Such a strategy could provide multiple advantages. In addition to broadening CVE approaches beyond mere criminalisation, it provides a pragmatic alternative to those individuals – such as the wives or children of foreign fighters – who do not necessarily warrant prosecution under criminal law, but nevertheless require support and reintegration into a society from which they were estranged. The successful rehabilitation of foreign fighters, moreover, has the potential to offer a credible voice to any prevention efforts undertaken under the broader CVE strategy, and these individuals could work as propagators of counter-narratives for individuals in at-risk groups for radicalisation.

Overall, however, it would be impossible to have any successful CVE efforts in the Macedonian milieu through a solely “whole-of-government” approach; rather, such an effort requires a

holistic, “whole-of-society” approach which speaks to the drivers and anchors of extremist narratives in Macedonia. A whole-of-society approach would help to facilitate a broader understanding across all levels of society of the dangers posed by extremism, and would then in turn allow for the creation of broader competencies and capacities to fight it. Such an approach would also provide an opportunity for CVE efforts to be integrated in areas such as education, social welfare, employment, and health care. Moreover, in a society as ethnically fragile as that in Macedonia, it is critical that counter-extremist narratives are owned not by the state, but by integral stakeholders within society. In this way, the dangers posed by extremism would not be addressed in isolation, but within the broader societal context to which they inherently belong.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Azinovic, V (ed) (2017). The Atlantic Initiative. *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalisation and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*. Available at: http://www.atlantskainicijativa.org/bos/images/BETWEEN_SALVATION_AND_TERROR/BetweenSalvationAndTerror.pdf (Accessed: 3 January 2018)

Azinovic, V. (2018).

Barrett, R. (2017). The Soufan Centre. *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*. Available at: <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2017)

Bender, K. (2013). "How the US and EU Stopped a War and Nobody Noticed: The Containment of the Macedonian Conflict and EU Soft Power", in: Berdal, M., Zaum, D. (2013), *Political Economy of Statebuilding: Power After Peace*, London: Routledge

Council of Europe - Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman and Degrading Treatment (2016). *Report to the Government of "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" on the visit to "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture or Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment*. <https://rm.coe.int/pdf/168075d656> (Accessed 9 January 2018)

Day, M. and Sherlock, R (2017). "More than 70 injured as protestors storm Macedonia's parliament and attack politicians and police". *The Telegraph*, 28 April 2017. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk (Accessed: 2 January 2018)

Gall, C (2016). "How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS". *The New York Times*, 21 May 2016. Available at: www.nytimes.com (Accessed 9 January 2018)

Georgievski, B. (2017). "Could Balkan nations become the new hotbeds of Islamist extremism?". *Deutsche Welle*, 30 May 2017. www.dw.com (Accessed 10 January 2018)

Gibas-Krzak, D. (2013). "Contemporary Terrorism in the Balkans: A Real Threat to Security in Europe". *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 26: 203-218.

Hafez, M. (2016). "The Ties that Bind: How Terrorists Exploit Family Bonds". *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 9, no. 2, 15-18. Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/02/CTC-SENTINEL-Vol9Iss210.pdf> (Accessed: 5 November 2017)

Hegghammer, T. and Nesser, P. (2015). "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West". *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4. Available at: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440/html> (Accessed: 5 November 2017)

Hopkins, V. (2017). "What Happened in Macedonia, and Why". *The Atlantic*, 28 April 2017. Available at: www.theatlantic.com (Accessed: 28 December 2017)

International Centre for Transitional Justice (2009). *Transitional Justice in the Former Yugoslavia*. Available at: <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-FormerYugoslavia-Justice-Facts-2009-English.pdf> (Accessed: 14 March 2018)

Ivanovska, M (2017). "CIVIL Media's texts on kindergarten in Cair stir public interest". *CIVIL Today*, 2017. Available at: www.civil.today (Accessed: 16 March 2018)

Marusic, S. and Peci, E (2014). "Retrial demanded in Macedonia mass murder case". *Balkan Transitional Justice (Balkan Insight)*, 9 July 2014. Available at: www.balkaninsight.com (Accessed: 13 March 2018)

Mejdini, F. (2016). "Macedonian Albanian Leaders Plot Joint Strategy in Tirana". *Balkan Insight*, 30 Dec 2016. Available at: www.balkaninsight.com (Accessed: 13 March 2018)

Memishi, R. "Minber Media YouTube Channel". Available at: www.youtube.com/minbermedia (Accessed 7 November 2017)

Memishi, R. "Minber Media Facebook page". Available at: www.facebook.com/minbermedia (Accessed: 7 November 2017)

Mojsovska-Blazevski, N. and Ristovska, M. (2013). *European Training Foundation. Mapping of VET educational policies and practices for social inclusion and social cohesion in the Western Balkans, Turkey, and Israel – Country Report: Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*. Available at: [http://www.etf.europa.eu/webatt.nsf/0/DAB114816ADBC32DC1257C2100330873/\\$file/FYR%20MACEDONIA%20-%20FINAL%20Report.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/webatt.nsf/0/DAB114816ADBC32DC1257C2100330873/$file/FYR%20MACEDONIA%20-%20FINAL%20Report.pdf) (Accessed 10 January 2018)

National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (NCCVECT) – Government of Macedonia (2018). *National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia For Countering Violent Extremism, 2018-2022*. Skopje: Government of Macedonia.

Neumann, P. (2010). The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. *Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*. Available at: <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1277699166PrisonsandTerrorismRadicalisationandDeradicalisationin15Countries.pdf> (Accessed: 7 November 2017)

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Directorate for Education and Skills Innovative Learning Environments (2015). *Teacher Education Programme on Early Numeracy and Literacy in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/UNICEF.MCD.SystemNote.pdf> (Accessed 10 January 2018)

Pancevski, B. (2010). "Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate of the West". *The Sunday Times*, 28 March 2010. Available at: www.thetimes.co.uk (Accessed: 9 January 2018)

Popovska, B. and Ristoska, Z. (2015). "Process of Reconciliation in a Postconflict Macedonia". *Academicus International Scientific Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1. Available at: <http://www.academicus.edu.al/nr11/Academicus-MMXV-11-063-076.pdf> (Accessed 10 November 2017)

Qirezi, A. (2016). "Kosovo Arrests 19 Suspected of Terror Attacks". *Balkan Insight*, 17 November 2016. Available at: www.balkaninsight.com (Accessed 28 December 2017)

Radicalisation Awareness Network (2016). *Approaches to violent extremist offenders and countering radicalization in prisons and probation*. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-p-and-p/docs/ran_pp_approaches_to_violent_extremist_en.pdf (Accessed: 9 January 2018)

Ranstorp, M. and Xhudo, G. (2007). "A threat to Europe? Middle east ties with the Balkans and their impact upon terrorist activity throughout the region". *Terrorism and Political Violence* 6: 196-223

Reed, A., Pohl, J. and Jegerings, M. (2017). International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. *The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon*. Available at: <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ICCT-Reed-Pohl-The-Four-Dimensions-of-the-Foreign-Fighters-Threat-June-2017.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2017)

Republic of Macedonia – State Statistical Office (2002). www.stat.gov.mk (Accessed: 10 November 2017)

Samuel, Thomas Koruth. Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism. “Understanding the Narrative of the Terrorist from the Perspective of Youth”, in: *Youth and Terrorism – A Selection of Articles*. Available at: http://www.searct.gov.my/images/PDF_My/publication/youth_and_terrorism.pdf (Accessed: 13 March 2018)

Schmid, A. (2014). *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*. The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. Available at: <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014.pdf> (Accessed: 16 March 2018)

Selimi, K. and Stojkovski, F. (2016). Analytica Think Tank. *Assessment of Macedonia's Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism, View from Civil Society*. Available at: http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/extremism-en-updated-FINAL-web_ceb98.pdf (Accessed: 7 November 2017)

Sirachevski, G. (2015). “Полициската акција „Ќелија“ на МВР, уапсени 9 терористи, 27 се во бегство”. *24Vesti*, 6 August. Available at: www.24vesti.mk (Accessed: 4 November 2017)

Shay, S. (2007). *Islamic Terror and the Balkans*. New York: Routledge

Shtuni, A. (2016). United States Institute of Peace. *Dynamic of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*, Special Report 397. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf> (Accessed: 28 December 2017)

South East Europe Media Organization (SEEMO) (2015). *Bad Practices, Bad Faith: Soft Censorship in Macedonia*. Frankfurt: World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers

State Department, United States Government (2016). *Macedonia 2016 Human Rights Report – Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016*. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265658.pdf> (Accessed 5 January 2018)

Telma (2015). “Полицијата уапси македонски припадник на ИСИС”. *Telma*, 21 October. Available at: www.telma.com.mk (Accessed: 3 November 2017)

United Kingdom Government (2015). *Counter-Extremism Strategy*. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470088/51859_Cm9148_Accessible.pdf (Accessed 10 January 2018)

United States Agency for International Development, United States Government (2011). *The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency*. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdacs400.pdf (Accessed: 12 January 2018)

Utrinski Vesnik (2013). “Гостиварец загина во Сирија”. *Utrinski vesnik*, 28 May 2013. Available at: www.utrinski.mk (Accessed: 3 November 2017)

Vecer (2015a). “Ахмед од Либија стигна до Србија: Наместо цркви во Европа ќе се гледаат минариња. Тоа ќе биде нашата освета!”, *Vecer*, 29 August. Available at: www.vecer.mk (Accessed: 16 March 2018)

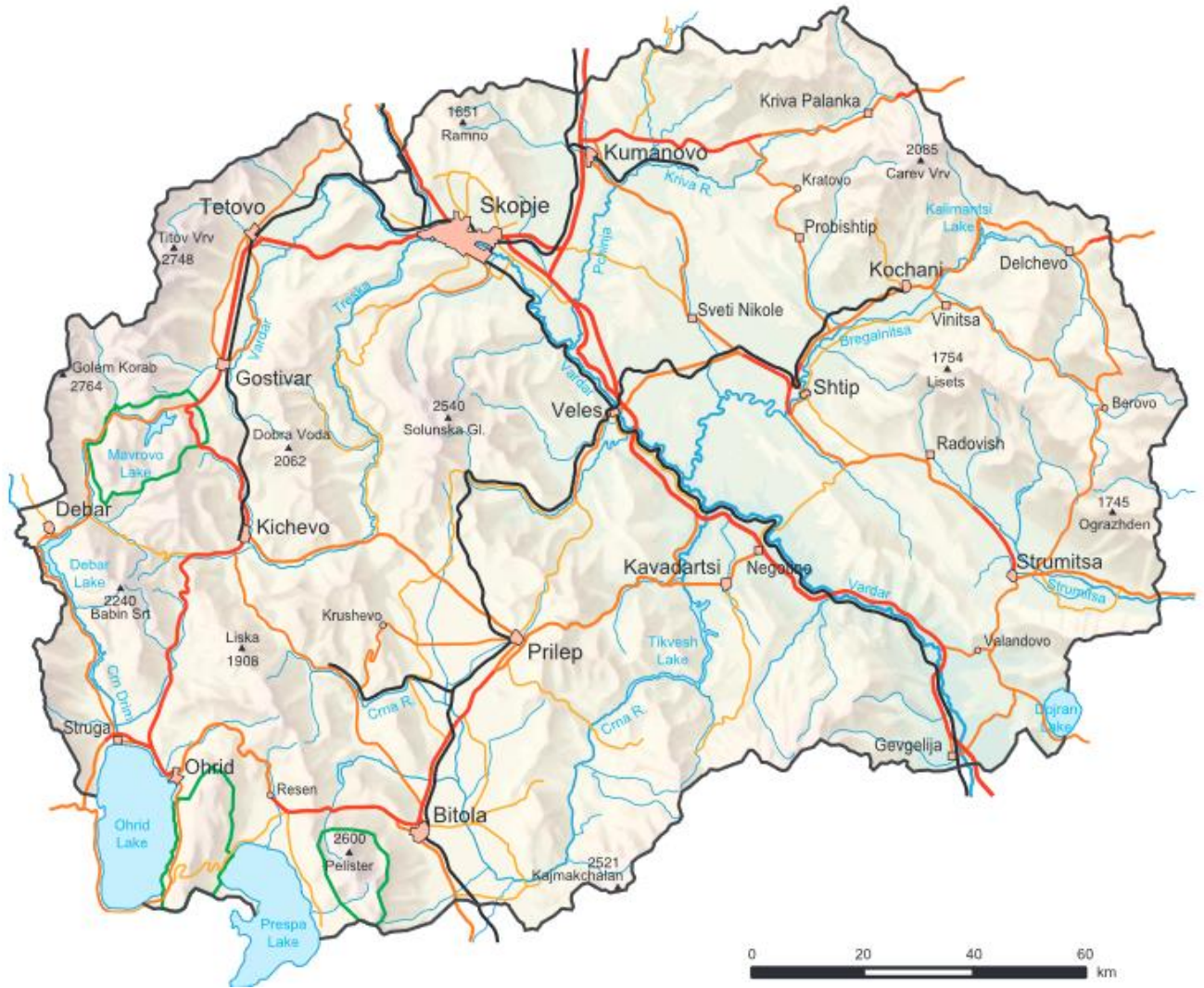
Vecer (2015b). “Уапсените терористи во Косово планирале да фрлат отров и во водите за пиење во Македонија”. Vecer, 13 July 2015. Available at: www.vecer.mk (Accessed: 4 November 2017)

Vecer (2016). “ДЕТАЛИ ЗА „КЕЛИЈА 2“: Еве кои се уапсените - поминале воено-терористичка обука во Сирија”, Vecer, 9 July. Available at: www.vecer.mk (Accessed: 4 November 2017)

VMRO-DPMNE (2017). “Груевски: Нападната е унитарноста на државата, само народот може да ја одбрани”. Available at: www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk (Accessed: 2 January 2018)

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1 – MAP OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA; INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS



Source: State Statistical Office, www.stat.gov.mk

Interviews and Focus Groups:

- A.B. (High School Marija Kiri Sklodovska). Interview by: Filip Stojkovski and Kaltrina Selimi (2016)
- A.H. (High School Cvetan Dimov) Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (2017)
- A.R. Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (December 2017)
- Focus Group – Kumanovo. Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (June 2017)
- Focus Group – Skopje. Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (June 2017)
- Focus Group – Tetovo. Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (June 2017)
- Directorate for Security and Counter-Intelligence (UBK) official. Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (August 2017)
- F.A. Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (December 2017)
- Family of I.F. Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (December 2017)
- F.S. (High School Nace Burxhoni). Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (July 2017)
- Imam E.S. Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (July 2017)
- Imam H.R. Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (July 2017)
- Imam J.Z. Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (December 2017)
- M.A. (Youth Islamic Forum). Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (July 2017)
- M.C. (High School Kiril Pejcinovic). Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (July 2017)
- N.V. (Ombudsman – Municipality of Kumanovo). Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (December 2017)
- R.R. (High School 7 March). Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (July 2017)
- S.S. and E.H. (Democracy Lab). Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (July 2017)
- V.S. (Center for Intercultural Dialogue). Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (July 2017)
- Unnamed Professor (High School for Economics and Law Arseni Jovkov). Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team
- Z.M. (NGO – Kumanovo). Interview by: Macedonia Country Report Team (December 2017)

ANNEX 2 – “CELL” EXTREMISTS

REXHEP MEMISHI (36) – An imam from the infamous Tutunsus mosque in Skopje. Sentenced to 7 years in jail for recruitment for foreign paramilitary organizations subject to Article 322-A of the criminal code. Memishi, has no prior criminal record. He is considered the main recruiter for ISIS in Macedonia.

AHMET DARLISHTA (31) – Government employee sentenced to 5 and a half years in prison for organizing and financing recruitment and transportation for foreign paramilitary organisations subject to Article 322-A of the criminal code.

SEJFULA EVDEMOVSKI (32) – Sentenced to 5 years in prison for logistics and attempted participation in foreign paramilitary organisations, subject to Article 322-A of the criminal code. He attempted to join the fight in Syria, but was stopped at the Istanbul airport and deported back to Macedonia.

RESULJ SAITI (22) – The youngest of those convicted. He was sentenced to 5 years in prison for logistical assistance for Macedonian citizens who joined the war in Syria subject to Article 322-A of the criminal code.

FAZLI SULJA (23) – A goldsmith who was sentenced to 5 years in prison for participating in foreign paramilitary organisations subject to Article 322-A of the criminal code. He travelled to Syria through the Skopje airport on the 21st of February 2015. During his time there he uploaded pictures from the front to his social media profiles.

MUHAMED SHEHU (27) – Unemployed, from Gostivar, sentenced to 5 years in prison for participating in foreign paramilitary organisations subject to Article 322-A of the criminal code. Shehu has no prior criminal record and, like Fazli Sulja, uploaded pictures from the front to his social media profiles.

ISA FUGA (24) – From Skopje with no prior record. Sentenced to 4 and a half years in prison for participation in a foreign paramilitary organisation subject to Article 322-A of the criminal code.

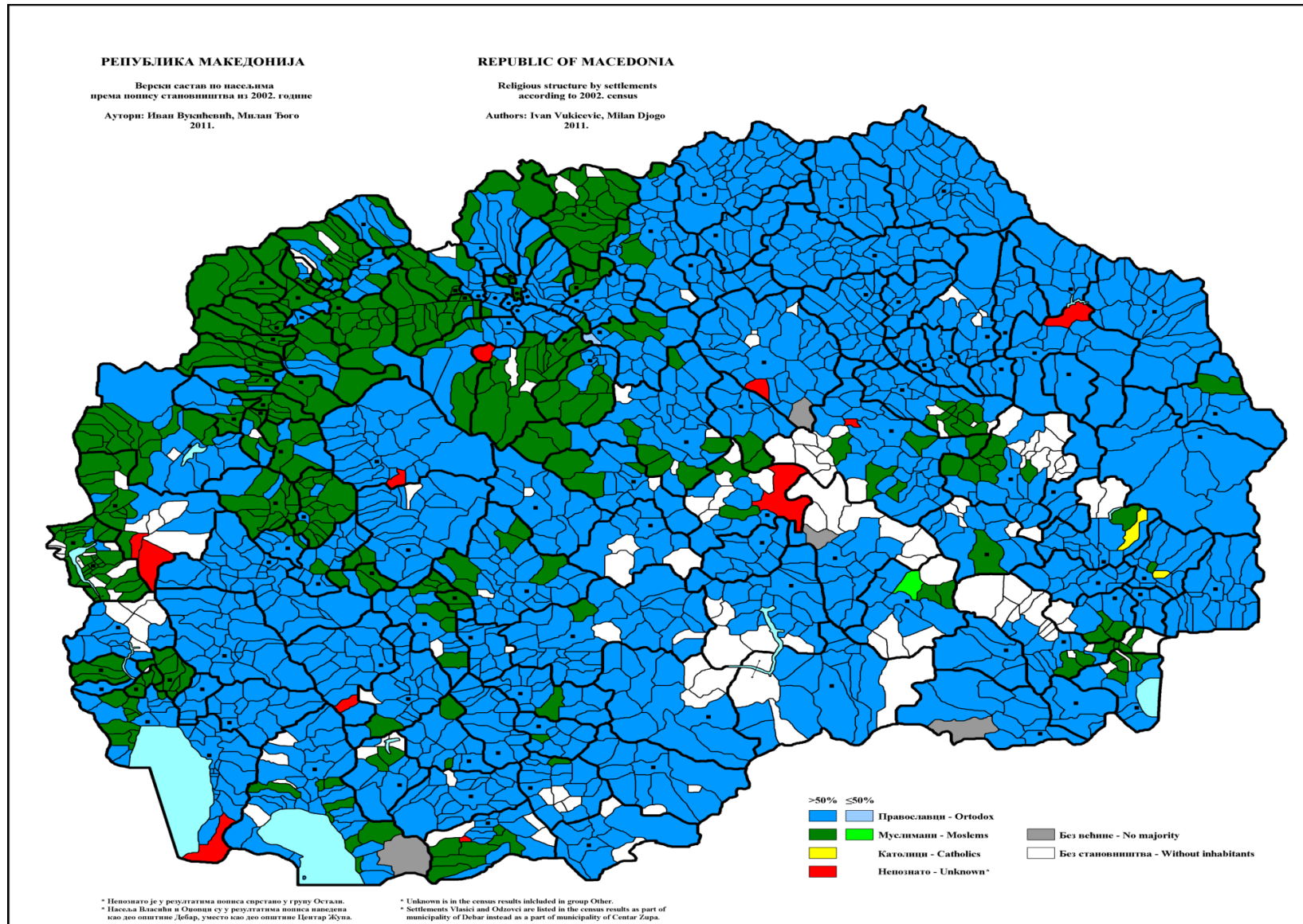
ABDULAH ABDULAH (27) – From Tetovo, He has no prior criminal record. Sentenced to 3 years and 1 month in prison for participation in a foreign paramilitary organisation subject to Article 322-A of the criminal code.

MUHAMED IMERI (38) – Cab driver from Skopje sentenced to 2 years in prison for participation in a foreign paramilitary organisation subject to Article 322-A of the criminal code.

STEFAN STEFANOVSKI (32) – The only ethnic Macedonian convicted in the case “cell”. He is 32 years old and is a doctor. He called upon the Hippocratic oath during the trial, saying that there is nothing wrong in providing medical assistance to people regardless of their faith, race, and nationality. He has been sentenced to two years in prison for participation in a foreign paramilitary organisation subject to Article 322-A of the criminal code. (Analytica 2016: p. 23-24)

ANNEX 3 – RELIGIOUS DISTRIBUTION

Source: State Statistical Office, www.stat.gov.mk



* Непознато је у резултатима пописа сврстано у групу Остали.

* Settlements Vlasici and Odzovi are listed in the census results as part of municipality of Debar instead as a part of municipality of Centar Zupa.



Western Balkans Extremism Research and Policy Analysis Forum
Funded by the UK government

EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM – MACEDONIA REPORT

Publication No: 5 / June 2018
ISBN: 978-0-86355-911-2
Copyrights: Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Publisher, Editing, Design: British Council

Author: Filip Stojkovski
Co-author: Natasia Kalajdziovski
Research supported by: Samet Shabani, Amir Kadri

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or the British Council.

www.britishcouncil.org