

WESTERN BALKANS EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM

Policy brief – Macedonia

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COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MACEDONIA: FROM A “WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT” TO A “WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY”

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Fresh off the end of a long-term political crisis, the Republic of Macedonia currently stands at a precipice where real change has the chance to take effect in the efforts of countering violent extremism (CVE). To date, the CVE approach in Macedonia has been articulated through a lens of securitisation, leaving little room to address some of the drivers and factors contributing to violent extremism (VE), and instead focusing on the act of violence.

In view of these realities, this policy brief proposes four recommendations, based on a broader, more holistic grassroots approach, which would assist the Republic of Macedonia in moving away from a “whole-of-government” strategy to a “whole-of-society” strategy which includes all stakeholders in the CVE. Such an approach would help to facilitate a broader understanding across all levels of society of the dangers posed by extremism, and in turn would create an environment in which citizens become active stakeholders in the fight against extremism. Most importantly, this strategy would be a homegrown effort, not predominantly relying upon international donors, but rather one which is local, self-sustaining, and specific to the needs of the Macedonian context.

Box 1: Foreign Fighters by the Numbers

- **May 2013** – First instance of a Macedonian citizen being killed in a foreign fighter role (Utrinski Vesnik, 2013)
- As of early 2018, around **140** men and **14** women have travelled to Syria/Iraq (Azinovic, 2018)
- The Returnee Threat
 - o **80** individuals have returned to Macedonia
 - o **37** remain in the region (including an additional four women),
 - o **33** have been killed in action (Azinovic, 2018)

Country Context

In 2018, the Republic of Macedonia finds itself at a critical juncture. The territorial diminishment of the so-called Islamic State has reduced the number of avenues and outlets for those wishing to commit acts of violence abroad, thus increasing the potentiality of violent extremism (VE) being turned inward toward the Macedonian state. Moreover, within the larger Western Balkans context, all-too-recent history has demonstrated that instability of one state can bleed into another. As such, destabilisation in one state caused by an increase in unaddressed VE has the potential to destabilise the region as a whole. Without the appropriate policy measures to address VE, such a future may increase in likelihood.

While the Republic of Macedonia has attempted to legislate on VE, this approach has tended to focus on law enforcement and securitisation exclusively. In September 2014, in light of the growing foreign fighter phenomenon, the then-government amended the Macedonian criminal code: provisions were added that criminalised the joining of foreign military or paramilitary groups, and the recruitment, training, or transportation of fighters for the purposes of conducting acts of VE. However, this amendment did little to address the root causes of VE, and as such there remained a need for a broader, more inclusive, and more transparent CVE strategy.

In regard to the Macedonian political context, the country recently emerged from a long-term, intense, and precarious political crisis, where competing political groups exploited ethnic tensions and thus created space for extremist ideologies and narratives to thrive. While there was an attempt – in the form of the 2016 National Strategy for Combatting Terrorism – to build upon the aforementioned criminal code amendments, this was never implemented due to the political crisis. Attempts to improve CVE efforts were thus placed by the wayside while the political crisis unfolded – leaving power vacuums all around the country – and the nature of the VE threat evolved.

In June 2017, however, a new SDSM-led government was formed, which has placed CVE back on the agenda in line with strategic initiatives from fellow regional and Western European actors. While the National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism 2018-2022 was voted in by the Assembly in March 2018, there is a lack of funding allocated to for the implementation of the activities in the action plan.

This policy brief **recommends for the CVE strategy of the Republic of Macedonia to focus on a grassroots, “whole-of-society” rather than a “whole-of-government” approach that is not entirely dependent on foreign donors or programmes.** Such a strategy should include all the varying sectors of society that can potentially impact CVE, enhance their communication with one another, and help

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identify linkages between stakeholders for a more comprehensive, long-term, and societally-ingrained strategy that goes beyond securitisation.

Findings

In order to address some of the deficiencies found within the CVE strategy, the research undertaken in support of this policy brief sought to investigate the levels, forms, and threats of extremism posed in Macedonia, as well as the drivers and factors contributing to it. While the bulk of the research focused on VE – those “advocating, engaging in, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic and political objectives” (USAID 2011: p. 2) – the research also spoke to those who are not-yet-violent; that is, those who possess an inclination toward violence, but do not possess the means. The not-yet-violent extremist remains the most difficult to survey, as that shift in “means” is difficult to quantify.

The main drivers of extremism, as understood in the Macedonian context, can be classified into three categories: religious, socioeconomic, and societal drivers. These drivers are all closely linked to one another, and speak to some of the over-arching themes revealed within the study findings.

- Religious drivers predominantly manifested through a poor understanding of Islam, compounded by a lack of consistent religious education. In this space, *para-jamaats* – parallel mosques – have taken root, thus allowing for the propagation of unregulated extremist interpretations of Islam to be widely disseminated.
- From a socioeconomic standpoint, and closely related to the aforementioned religious drivers, was a lack of general educational quality within Macedonia that was oft-cited as reason why an individual may be susceptible to extremism.
- This, tied, with the poor economic climate and employment prospects for the average citizen, was also linked as a driver toward extremism.
- Finally, the societal drivers pointed to individuals who felt excluded or on the fringes of society; the association of like-minded individuals open to extremist narratives paved the way for group dynamics and rituals to emphasise a new, extreme form of “togetherness” predicated upon shared grievance narratives.

Overall, however, one of the most noteworthy and critical findings in the Macedonian context was the relationship between Macedonian Muslims – in particular, ethnic Albanians – and VE. The findings indicate that Macedonian Muslims, broadly speaking, have a higher-than-regional-average propensity to

violently radicalise, despite the fact that foreign fighter flows emanating from the country are comparatively lower than elsewhere in the Western Balkans. This suggests that there is a distinctive trend in the saturation of extremism within the Muslim population, and poses additional questions as to the general level of not-yet-VE that can be found within said population.

Moreover, the research indicated that ethnic Albanians were the at-risk Muslim population within Macedonia in terms of VE. The suggestion is that ethnic Albanians, particularly in Muslim-minority parts of the country – feel as if they are outside the structures of power and broader society, and they perceive themselves to be discriminated first on ethnic and then religious grounds. In a country which experienced an armed conflict between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians just over 15 years ago, a feeling of social exclusion and isolation can be exploited readily and effectively by extremist recruiters.

Conclusions

While previous CVE attempts within the Macedonian context have taken a criminalisation approach – that is, criminalised the act of committing violence – little has yet been done to address drivers and factors. Ultimately, any policy action that is undertaken must take into account not only the aforementioned drivers leading to VE, but must also consider how Macedonia's minority populations vis-à-vis these drivers are susceptible to VE. As the findings demonstrate, factors and drivers leading to VE are found broadly across society, and work in tandem with one another to foster environments in which extremist ideologies can flourish and take hold, thus leading to acts of violence.

Policy Recommendations

Based upon the findings of the research, this policy brief recommends a “whole-of-society” approach which would provide an opportunity for CVE efforts to be integrated in areas such as education, social welfare, employment, and the political sphere.

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.

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As such, the Macedonian government should consider the following:

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
 - In the Macedonian context, CVE is as much about stopping VE as it is about addressing the longstanding ethnic divisions which exist in the country.
 - This would attempt to address extremism before it becomes violent by seeking to understand and address perceived and real grievance narratives.
 - Moreover, an empirically-based CVE strategy would seek to address some of the inadequacies and shortcomings present in previous.
2. The fostering of strong leadership roles for all stakeholders
 - It is critical to involve stakeholders in the CVE process. This kind of empowerment would allow for individuals to feel as if they had a stake in society as a whole – not just in their own groups or interests – and such empowerment would ideally, in turn, trickle down toward the grassroots level.
 - Fostering these strong leadership roles would also see CVE be interpreted not as a governmental imposition, but rather could lead to a kind of self-regulation by each stakeholder community.
3. A focus on and access to quality education that is not divided among ethnic lines, which seeks to foster critical thinking capabilities, and provides students with the tools to ideologically combat extremism
 - Physical and geographic educational barriers between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians must be addressed in order to provide all citizens with equal access to the same levels and forms of education.
 - Education, in this sense, does not merely refer to traditional education, but religious education as well. A strong state-funded and state-supported educational system, alongside religious education adequately regulated and streamlined by the Islamic Religious Community, would work to ensure that parallel educational structures such as *para-jamaats* would see little to no support within the community at large.

- Limiting the environment in which these parallel structures can flourish would, in turn, limit the space in which extremist ideologies can become mainstreamed, therefore working to quash extremism before it can be weaponised into violence.
4. A comprehensive reintegration and rehabilitation strategy must be developed as part of any CVE effort
- Providing reintegration and rehabilitation programming for individuals who have either violently radicalised or not-yet-violently radicalised is critical in fostering a long-term CVE strategy. Such individuals, once reintegrated into society, can be much-needed public voices in the stamping out of VE.
 - Further, comprehensive reintegration programmes would provide a pragmatic alternative for those individuals, such as the oft-overlooked wives and children of foreign fighters, who were not necessarily directly involved in violence but who nonetheless require support and reintegration into a society from which they were estranged. In this way, rehabilitation and reintegration could offer a gendered focus as well, which further speaks to the ‘whole-of-society’ approach that this policy brief has demonstrated to be critical in the Macedonian CVE effort.

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