SOUTH-EAST EUROPE PROGRAMME

Community resilience against violent extremism in North Macedonia:

the stakeholders' perspective

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PAVE

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Summary

- The PAVE-ELIAMEP Policy Paper 1 puts under the microscope those factors or gaps that hinder or foster community resilience against violent extremism from a stakeholder's perspective.

- Violent extremism and radicalisation are complex and multi-faceted challenges. As such, their prevention requires a multi-agency mechanism and a well-coordinated response from all the actors involved in the process.

- The coordination and cooperation of all the actors involved in the P/CVE mechanism is key to making North Macedonia's national plan for the prevention of violent extremism more responsive to the needs of society.

- Like the other countries in the region, North Macedonia has adopted a multi-stakeholder P/CVE approach involving national and municipal government, law enforcement and the criminal justice system, civil society organisation (CSOs), schools, and religious institutions.

- The local-level stakeholders exhibited higher levels of awareness and resilience and mobilised early on, while the state was slow, inefficient, and mobilised mostly when pressured into doing so by international actors.

- The local communities play a central role in resilience-building efforts through their responsibility to contribute to the system of institutional P/CVE measures. Municipal authorities can effectively coordinate at a local level the work of various stakeholders relating to P/CVE efforts.

- Official religious communities play an important role in fostering community resilience, as they represent an authoritative alternative to radicals and radical narratives; conversely, when these official religious communities are insufficiently proactive, space opens up for radical actors.

- The role CSOs play in strengthening the resilience of local communities against violent extremism was recognized by every interviewee, many of whom made specific references to youth centres established by local NGOs. These centres have emerged as important loci for building resilience, going some way as they do to filling the gap left by the country's segregated education.

- The intervention of internationals and the pressure they apply helps develop resilient institutions at the national and local level. The involvement of internationals has raised the stakes and mobilised official state authorities. But the flip side of that influence is that international solutions and interventions have not always been tailored primarily—or at all—to local needs.

- Community resilience against radicalisations is strongly connected to local politics and the willingness of local politicians to tackle the issue.

1. Introduction

This Policy Paper is a complimentary publication to the Working Paper 5: Online and Offline (De)radicalization in the Balkans jointly produced by the Kosovo Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) and ELIAMEP's South-East Europe Programme in the context of the Horizon 2020 PAVE Project. The PAVE-ELIAMEP Policy Paper 1 puts under the microscope those factors or gaps that hinder or foster community resilience against violent extremism from a stakeholder's perspective.

Violent extremism and radicalisation are complex and multi-faceted challenges. As such, their prevention requires a multi-agency mechanism and a well-coordinated response from all the actors involved in the process. The purpose of this policy paper is to identify the set of governmental and non-governmental actors, including civil society and religious practitioners as well as organisations that have become involved in country-specific initiatives to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE initiatives) in North Macedonia, examining their role in the prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation in their communities. In doing so, it is possible to discuss the different contexts in which the various actors can contribute to P/CVE initiatives. The aim is not to evaluate the effectiveness of every programme involving the different stakeholders, but rather to provide a clearer image of their role and contribution and to identify the context in which each actor should operate. We argue that the prevention of radicalisation at the community level requires the involvement of different actors in a multi-agency mechanism. The coordination and cooperation of all the actors involved in the P/CVE mechanism is key to making North Macedonia's national plan for the prevention of violent extremism more responsive to the needs of society.

The findings of this policy paper draw on four focus group discussions and 29 semi-structured interviews conducted during 2021 in two field sites in North Macedonia.
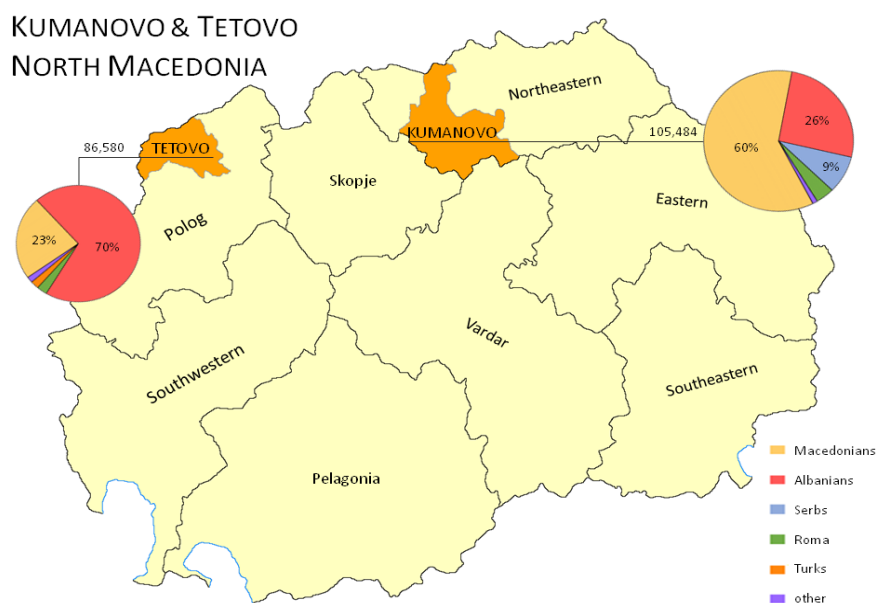
Map credits: Apostolis Karabairis

ELIAMEP's South-East Europe Programme team conducted research in the municipalities of Tetovo and Kumanovo, as well as in Skopje. Specifically, the team organised two focus group discussions in each municipality and conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with civil society activists/members, politicians, religious community leaders, public servants (employed in the police, education, social work and departments of social security), journalists and other media professionals, academics and other experts. For the analysis, the team adopted a comparative research method with a cross-municipal study that included desk research and an interpretative approach to fieldwork data.

2. Factors or gaps that hinder or foster community resilience against violent extremism in North Macedonia—the stakeholders' perspective

2.1 The role of government and state institutions

The field work research in North Macedonia found that community resilience in Tetovo and Kumanovo is affected by a number of actors and factors. One of these is the government's response to the problem of extremism. Some of the interviewees were highly sceptical about the government's national strategy against violent extremism and raised concerns about the state's actual motivations as well as the ability of state institutions to implement an efficient P/CVE strategy. They argued that the issue was seen by the government as a simple box-ticking exercise to address the concerns of the international community and not as a real community security threat requiring a comprehensive response on multiple levels.[1] In this context, interviewees repeatedly raised the issue of the state authorities' sluggish and inefficient response, given that local communities had pointed early on to the risk posed by the increasing influence of radical personalities in their communities. They said the official state institutions had only mobilised when the issue was raised by the international community (UN, US, EU) and/or in the context of the European integration process. Which is to say that the local-level stakeholders exhibited higher levels of awareness and resilience and mobilised early on, while the state was slow, inefficient, and mobilised mostly when pressured into doing so by international actors. The latter's interventions and pressure served to increase the possibility of resilient institutions developing at the national and local level.

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[1] Interview with a civil society representative in Kumanovo, conducted in July 2021.

In Their Own Words

"The whole strategy was built in a month or so, because… North Macedonia had to have a positive recommendation from the European Commission and one of the things they had to have in place was this strategy… Quite often, things are done here just to tick a box to say it's done."

[Civil Society Representative, Kumanovo]

Like the other countries in the region, North Macedonia has adopted a multi-stakeholder P/CVE approach involving national and municipal government, law enforcement and the criminal justice system, civil society organisation (CSOs), schools, and religious institutions. At the centre of the country's P/CVE mechanism stands the NCCVECT: the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism. This body is engaged in community engagement, community policing, and in early prevention in general. With the support of international donors, the NCCVECT has trained youth, parents, educators, teachers, police officers and law enforcement officers to recognize the early signs of radicalisation in their communities. North Macedonia has made progress in its P/CVE strategy, but its main mechanisms, tools, and programmes lack funding, material, and human recourses as well as coordination with other societal actors. Ensuring cooperation and coordination between state actors at the central and local level, civil society practitioners, and faith-based practitioners and leaders is a key challenge in North Macedonia.[2] The lack of multi-stakeholder coordination is seen by many interviewees as one of the main factors hindering community resilience against radicalisation. In particular, the field work revealed key capacity gaps in the area of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes in which Former Foreign Fighters (FFFs) and their family members are the protagonists.[3] The absence of unified working protocols for handling the case work on FFFs and violent extremist offenders is undermining effective disengagement. This in turn leads to recidivism, increasing the risk of FFFs becoming agents for extremist ideas in their communities and impeding any efforts by local institutions to build resilience. Similarly, the situation in the nation's prisons received plenty of criticism from interviewees, according to whom the problematic P/CVE work in North Macedonia's prisons is an alarming issue with a high risk of "prison infection" becoming "community infection".[4] Thus, the high probability of prisoners returning to crime after their release increases the risk of violent radicalisation. All in all, North Macedonia, despite the observable progress made, still lags behind in establishing the sort of fully functional and operational P/CVE

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[2] Shabani, S., Kadri, A., & Veli, S. (2019). "Building Dialogue Towards Reintegration Programs". Skopje, North Macedonia: Horizon Civitas

[3] Vachoski, A., Shikova, N., & Musliu, A. (2020). "Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terroririst Fighters: Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization, and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia". Skopje, North Macedonia: Association of Citizens – Nexus Civil Concept.

[4] Interview with representative of civil society in Skopje, conducted in July 2021.

mechanism which many interviewees consider the key step towards strengthening community resilience against radicalisation and violent extremism.

In Their Own Words

"Resocialization should take place in prisons, but the inmates in our prisons do not receive quality resocialization… so half of all the prisoners in Macedonian prisons return to crime"

[Civil Society Representative in Skopje]

The local communities play a central role in resilience-building efforts through their responsibility to contribute to the system of institutional P/CVE measures. Municipal authorities can effectively coordinate at a local level the work of various stakeholders relating to P/CVE efforts. Both Tetovo and Kumanovo, have established their own local prevention councils with the participation of various stakeholders including the municipal authorities, the police, schools, and social services. Both municipalities have also established special committees that deal with P/CVE activities in the context of the local prevention councils.[5] However, the functionality of these local structures is often compromised, mostly by the different views stakeholders have on the subject of violent extremism, but also because issues relating to violent extremism are only obliquely addressed on agendas. At the local level, police stations and units are providing the basics for carrying out preventive activities, but community police officers lack the capacity to tackle cyberspace in general and chat rooms, gaming platforms and other open and dark online spaces in particular.[6] This impacts negatively on the development of community resilience to online extremist narratives.

Despite the various shortcomings in North Macedonia's multi-stakeholder P/CVE approach, the country's authorities are now not only more responsive to the threat of violent extremism, but also better prepared to deal with it than in the past.

2.2 The role of religious communities

All the participants in the fieldwork conducted in North Macedonia agreed that faith-based actors and religious communities can play a decisive role in P/CVE activities by encouraging dialogue and critical thinking about faith-related issues, but also about personal and community matters. In this context, the fieldwork revealed the community resilience that has been exhibited by the country's official Islamic Community. For example, local official Islamic Community institutions have tried to raise the awareness of the relevant state authorities (e.g., secret police, security institutions) to threats, and demanded that

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[5] Interview with representatives of the Municipality of Tetovo and Kumanovo, conducted in July 2021.
[6] Conclusion from the Focus Group organized in Kumanovo in July 2021.

they respond to efforts by marginal radical elements to infiltrate the local community and create bases of local support[7].

In Their Own Words

"The fact that the IRC has not managed to reach out to the community, and in particular to young people, has created fertile ground for Muslims in the main to look to the other side, allowing extremist groups or personalities even to "capture" the mosques they control in the capital."

[Journalist in Tetovo]

However, the state authorities either failed to act or postponed their response. In terms of approach, the Muslim Community in Kumanovo intervened when the risk of violent incidents with a religious dimension occurred along with a top-down attempt at exploiting them to fuel inter-ethnic tensions. Local mobilisation prevented any escalation of the tension and stopped an ethnic character being ascribed to such incidents. The Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia (IRC) is cooperating with national institutions and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to prevent the spread of extremist ideas through misinterpretations of Islam. In this context, IRC has worked to counter ideas spread by extremist preachers by raising awareness. There is no doubt that cooperation between religious communities, civil society actors and state authorities is necessary at every P/CVE phase, from primary prevention to interaction with at-risk individuals and from there to the reintegration and rehabilitation of former foreign fighters (FFFs). However, the inclusion of religious communities in North Macedonia remains a challenge[8], due to the lack of a unified approach among its practitioners.

Competition for the "hearts of minds" of Muslims is ongoing between radical Islamists and the official institutions of the Islamic Community in the country, which maintains a moderate stance, rejecting any kind of violence in the name of faith. In this context, the educational opportunities provided by the Islamic Community (e.g., the theological faculty for local imams) is a factor which helps increase its resilience against radicalisation. However, despite its extensive resources and well-organised structures, the Islamic Community tends to be quite slow and bureaucratic in its responses to radical challengers. Even though the Muslim community maintains officially that it has full control over the country's religious life, many of the interviewees agreed that the lack of consensus among religious practitioners on how to deal with the issue has allowed many self-proclaimed imams who endorse radical views to operate in their communities; many of these imams are also very popular. Many of the interviewees accused the Islamic Religious Community of being unable to control certain mosques in North Macedonia, especially in the

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[7] Interview with representative of the religious community, conducted in Tetovo in July 2021.
[8] Kambovski, V., Georgieva, L., & Trajanovski, N. (2020). "Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans". Barcelona, Spain: European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed).

Kumanovo region. Inevitably, they argue, this development has left space in which extremist narratives have flourished.

The IRC's refusal to officially recognize the Bektashi Community in Tetovo is also viewed with considerable scepticism and as working against inter-religion cooperation. In fact, the state's general stance towards this community is considered problematic. North Macedonia has two officially registered Salafi communities, but the application from the Bektashi community remains pending. The recent approval granted by the competent state authorities for the setting up of separate Islamic community structures for Salafist groups is viewed by some interviewees as a move that will likely consolidate the position of radicals in the country and further weaken the authority of the official, moderate Islamic religious community; others see it as an effort by the state authorities to keep the radicals under control. In any case, the peaceful co-existence of different religious groups and a healthy relationship between the state and religious communities are considered pre-conditions for building community resilience. The country's Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups can help in this direction, even though the institution has yet to play the role it deserves in North Macedonia's P/CVE mechanism.

The Islamic Religious Community is not the only religious institution which came in for heavy criticism from the interviewees. The Orthodox Church's official stance of remaining silent when it comes to issues relating to radicalisation and violent extremism is also viewed in a less than positive light, especially when local priests are simultaneously engaged in spreading nationalist propaganda. The general impression gleaned from the fieldwork is that the Orthodox Church has hardly been involved in P/CVE at all, and lacks awareness of the role it could play. Some local and international NGOs are working to engage the Orthodox Church in P/CVE activities and initiatives.

From the fieldwork, it is obvious that consolidated community institutions of faith are the primary stronghold of resilience. No other institution, including the state, has such a decentralised approach, since every single neighbourhood has both its imam and its priest. Official religious communities play an important role, as they represent an authoritative alternative to radicals and radical narratives; conversely, when these official religious communities are insufficiently proactive, space opens up for radical actors.

2.3 The role of civil society

Civil society has established itself as an essential actor inside North Macedonia's P/CVE mechanism. Local CSOs are implementing a range of projects to build resilience within local communities. These projects offer *inter alia* digital skills training for marginalised youth, opening youth centres, and other initiatives focused on bringing young people from diverse backgrounds together, strengthening the role of women, improving the capacities of professionals and practitioners, and reintegrating returnees from conflict zones. The implementation of Rehabilitation and Reintegration (R&R) programmes for ex-foreign fighters has become a bone of contention between the government and CSOs, with civil society members accusing the state authorities of trying to leave CSOs with relevant experience and expertise out of the process, so they can fully control the management of the funds provided by the Global Community Engagement and

Resilient Fund (GCERF). The government has rejected this accusation, arguing that dealing with FFFs is a security issue and the state should therefore be in charge of it. It is obvious that the state apparatus is not keen on civil society playing any important role here. The reintegration of FFFs is a very complex issue, and taking a security-centred approach to it could backfire. State actors are not always the best suited to conducting R&R programmes, as they sometimes enjoy less trust than civil society organisations or religious leaders. In addition, government actors are not well-suited to acting as agents for rehabilitation: they tend to lack credibility as effective actors with the target audiences.

The inclusion of civil society in the process is thus considered essential at a local (bottom-up) level; CSOs can function as a bridge between the authorities and the radicalised individuals, and can also serve as a factor convincing ex-foreign fighters to join one of the country's R&R programmes. In any case, the role CSOs play in strengthening the resilience of local communities against violent extremism was recognised by every interviewee, many of whom made specific references to youth centres established by local NGOs. These centres have emerged as important loci for building resilience, going some way as they do to filling the gap left by the country's segregated education. All in all, civil society plays a central role in building community resilience. Thus, any effort by the state to underestimate the role of CSOs in order to limit their inclusion in the implementation of R&R programmes for FFFs actually works against community resilience.

In addition, civil society members repeatedly raised a problem of considerable concern related to the P/CVE initiatives implemented at both the local and national level. In their opinion, these initiatives are project-based and unstructured. They also argued that North Macedonia is somehow being pushed by the international community to work on this topic, even though it should be the responsibility of state institutions to systemise such efforts and allocate a given budget. In short, civil society representatives pointed out the need for North Macedonia to generate successful and truly locally owned projects and policy-making tackling this critical problem.

2.4 The role of the international community

The P/CVE mechanism in North Macedonia could not function without the support of international donors and organisations which fund it through grants. The "Community Policing and Prevention of Radicalisation" project implemented by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) helps communities develop CVE tools aimed at detecting radicalisation early. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has a presence in several municipalities with youth-led initiatives, community dialogues including parents and religious practitioners, and training sessions for teachers. The Council of Europe (CoE) is active in countering violent extremism and radicalisation in prisons through the appropriate training of prison staff. The intervention of internationals and the pressure they apply helps develop resilient institutions at the national and local level. The involvement of internationals has raised the stakes and mobilised official state authorities.

In Their Own Words

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"The influence of the civil society sector is enormous. The problem is that projects are very difficult to find, because most of them are dictated by donors. They have never let the civil society sector decide on its own needs. Instead, civil society focuses on what the donor wants. And the biggest problem is (the lack of) continuity. We have been working on a project for a year, we have reached the target group, the results are impressive, but there is no continuity…".

[Member of civil society in Kumanovo]

But the flip side of that influence is that internationals have shaped or even imposed the agenda to suit their own concerns and preconceptions, overly highlighting the religious narrative as an explanation for extremism, and making religious extremism the main domain of their interventions. The internationals' agenda has not necessarily aligned with the true nature of the problem, as local stakeholders have understood and events in different localities have made clear. For example, local stakeholders insist that, at the local level, extremism is a multifaceted and multi-causal problem, and that religion is only one of several inter-linked dimensions. Accordingly, international solutions and interventions have not always been tailored primarily—or at all—to local needs. This is despite the best intentions by international stakeholders: international actors tend to misidentify the types of extremism by misreading its forms in a way that fits their own agendas; this results in the tools to combat radicalisation being used wrongly. The lack of alignment between the international actors' intentions and the community's needs hinders resilience directly. We are experiencing a constant state of déjà vu at present, since the state and some international actors continue to emphasise Islamist extremism and pay scant attention to other forms of extremism—such as right-wing, nationalist extremism and football hooliganism—that are on the rise in the country.

In the same context, the interviewees emphasise the international preoccupation, perhaps even obsession, with the issue of foreign fighters. While this is indeed a serious problem, the interviewees detested the single-minded focus, which obfuscates a far more complicated local picture of policy challenges and needs. Similarly, P/CVE programmes initiated and funded by international organisations have often tended to provide delayed and untimely interventions. Some of the interviewees cited the example of international programmes aimed at countering the problem of Macedonian citizens travelling to the Middle East to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) when that problem had already been consigned to the past; as a result, the local communities were left without adequate international support to confront the new primary challenge now confronting them: dealing with returned foreign fighters. In addition, international projects tend to be quite bureaucratic and slow in their implementation, rendering them unable to address immediate concerns and policy problems pertaining to extremism and resilience. Overall, the international community has shown itself to have plentiful resources, but also to be slow and poor at organising or orchestrating responses to community resilience challenges.

2.5 The role of local politics

The field work revealed that community resilience against radicalisation is strongly connected to local politics and the willingness of local politicians to tackle the issue. Possibly the single most powerful group of explanations offered by interviewees for the weak response to the challenge posed by extremism centre on factors and failures at the political level. This cluster of explanations point to weaknesses in the capabilities of official institutions, but more often to a lack of political will and to inadequate and/or misplaced priorities. A number of examples and political features have been offered in this context: 1) a lack of political will to counter extremism, despite persistent calls to do so by local communities; in the end, the internationals decided to put the issue on their agenda; 2) state institutions turning a blind eye to the activities of radicals, simply because of insufficient incentives for them to act; this continued until the problem had exploded in scale; 3) biased state policies that tend to discriminate against entire communities or to identify entire communities with the criminal actions of certain individuals; 4) the politicisation of everything that relates to the problem of extremism, with a view to scoring inter-party or inter-ethnic political points; 5) politics rather than security or social policy determining priorities in the response to the challenge posed by extremism.

In Their Own Words

"It suited the government's agenda to allow Salafism to be present. I think the public institutions were quite well informed, but knew they could exploit the existence of these people, because they knew there will always be a need for ethnic conflict and there will always be a need for religious conflict, as well. And it is interesting, because in Macedonia we have never really had religious conflict."

[Representative of civil society in Skopje]

Within the complex web of radicalisation's different dimensions, many of the interviewees identified ethnic differences and inter-ethnic relations as an area of particular concern in their narratives. The complex inter-ethnic reality on the ground has led the country's two main ethnic communities to take a different stance to the issue of radicalisation; this has hampered community resilience.

2.6 The role played by diaspora

The empirical research revealed contradictory views and positions vis-a-vis the role of diaspora as a factor in vulnerability or resilience. The one role does not necessarily exclude the other: it seems the diaspora is a factor in both radicalisation and resilience.

The role that the diaspora has played in the economic development of local populations is viewed as a major driver in community resilience by all interviewees. This was mainly expressed through comparisons of Kumanovo and Tetovo, with many interviewees arguing that Tetovo has been less affected by religious radicalisation and extremism than Kumanovo, because it has been more economically vibrant and

prosperous than the latter.[9] As they see it, the large number of individuals from Tetovo who have emigrated to Europe has helped to build resilience. At the same time, individuals living in the diaspora are seen by many interviewees as the most vulnerable to manipulation by extremist narratives. There are many reasons why individuals within a diaspora can turn radical: feelings of isolation and social exclusion can influence their sense of belonging, especially among the second generation which neither feels completely part of the country they live in nor entirely North Macedonian. As a result, diaspora communities see religion affiliation and traditional values as a way to safeguard an identity which is bound up with their country of origin. The lack of interest which the governments of their countries of origin have in them, expressed primarily through their reluctance to invest in these communities through cultural centres and language classes, makes their desire to protect their identity stronger still. This situation is exploited by extremist groups, with radical preachers seeking to fill the gap left by national politics. The involvement of North Macedonians in terrorist attacks in European countries is making the equation more complicated, raising concerns about possible links between extremist networks in the diaspora with local extremist groups operating in different communities inside the country— groups that could also engage in home-grown terrorism.

2.7 The stalling of the EU accession process

The stagnation of the EU accession process is also mobilising radical forces on all sides in North Macedonia. EU accession has always been considered a centripetal force contributing to national unity. While it has always enjoyed broad support across all ethnic communities and major political parties, this support has traditionally been higher and less conditional among ethnic Albanians and left-wing parties.[10] The benefits of joining the EU were presented as the main incentive to participate in the referendum and vote for the Prespa Agreement. However, the EU's subsequent failure to move the enlargement process forward (first due to French delaying tactics, and more recently because of the Bulgarian veto) has led to a rise in Euroscepticism and allowed anti-EU and anti-Western forces to claim, first, that the sacrifice relating to the name change was made in vain and, second, that the Prespa Agreement should be revoked. At the same time, also voices have proposed that North Macedonia should seek alternatives and be more open to cooperation with third countries (presenting Serbia's multi-vector foreign policy as an example to be emulated).

At the same time, similar attitudes were also reflected in opinion polls, with positive views of support for the EU dropping 5%, and positive perceptions of Russia, China and Turkey increasing by 17%, 14%, and 10% respectively.[11] The period coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, so the way in which the EU and its member states handled the crisis—in relation, too, to the countries aspiring to join the bloc (an initial ban on medical exports, the low visibility of the assistance provided, the lack of vaccines, etc.)—also

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[9] Interview with a journalist conducted in Tetovo in July 2021.

[10] Stefanovski, I., Petkovski, L., Nikolovski, P., Lembovska, M., & Mehmeti, A. (2021). "Sell Out, Tune Out, Get Out, or Freak Out? Understanding Corruption, State Capture, Radicalization, Pacification, Resilience, and Emigration in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia". Skopje, North Macedonia: EUROTHINK – Center for European Strategies, p.223.

[11] Public Opinion Research, (2021), "Citizens Register Concerns over Democracy, European Integration, Economic Recovery - Challenges Include COVID-19, Trust in Government, and Foreign Illiberal Influence", NDI North Macedonia. (Comparison between NDI surveys in 2018 and 2021).

contributed to this outcome, coupled with a massive disinformation campaign in favour, in the main, of non-Western third states.

All in all, the fieldwork confirmed the assumptions expressed in the existing literature: that building community resilience is a multi-faceted effort that should involve a variety of stakeholders in a coordinated way as part of a long-term commitment. North Macedonia's multi-ethnicity makes it imperative that any P/CVE efforts should also target good inter-ethnic relations and inclusivity.

The role of different actors in North Macedonia's P/CVE mechanism		
Relevant actor	**Factor building resilience**	**Gap hindering resilience**
State actors and institutions	- Adoption of a multi-stakeholder P/CVE approach with the involvement of national and municipal governments, law enforcement and criminal justice, CSOs, schools, and religious institutions - Both Tetovo and Kumanovo have established special committees that deal with P/CVE activities in the context of the local prevention councils. - At the local level, police stations and units provide the foundation for carrying out activities designed to prevent violent extremism and radicalisation.	- The main mechanisms, tools, and programmes lack funding, material and human recourses, as well as coordination with other societal actors. - The functionality of these local structures is often compromised mainly due to the different views stakeholders have on the topic, and to the fact that issues relating to violent extremism are not usually agenda items in their own right. - Community police officers lack the capacity to deal with the online space, especially with chat rooms, gaming platforms and other open and dark online spaces
Faith-based actors and religious communities	- Consolidated community institutions of faith are strongholds of resilience— educational opportunities provided by the Islamic Community (e.g., a theological faculty for local imams) is a factor which contributes to resilience to radicalisation. - The Islamic Religious Community cooperates with national	- The inclusion of religious communities in North Macedonia remains a challenge due to the lack of a unified approach among its practitioners. Centralized strategies at the national level lack religious insights and interfaith sensibilities since they have been developed without the involvement of religious actors. - Hardly any collective online initiatives have been implemented by the Islamic Community with this goal in mind. The

Community resilience against violent extremism in North Macedonia: the stakeholders' perspective

		other religious community, the Macedonian Orthodox Church, has an almost zero presence in the online counter-narrative space. It has done nothing to question the online narratives of ethnic-nationalist and Far Right extremist groups, despite the considerable influence enjoyed by priests in these two groups
	institutions and NGOs to prevent the spread of extremist ideas through the misinterpretation of Islam. In this context, it has worked on countering ideas spread by extremist preachers by raising awareness.	
Civil society actors	- Numerous local CSOs are implementing various projects to build resilience within local communities. - The community centres for young people created by local NGOs have emerged as important spaces for building resilience; they help fill the gap left by the country's segregated education.	- Efforts by the state to downplay the role of CSOs, and thus limit their involvement in the implementation of R&R programmes for FFFs, works against community resilience - The P/CVE implemented by NGOs are project-based initiatives which are not structured and not integrated into the government's policy-making process.
International community actors	- The intervention of internationals and the pressure they exert increases the capacity for developing resilient institutions at the national and local level. The involvement of internationals has raised the stakes and mobilised state authorities.	- The internationals' agenda has not necessarily been in line with the true nature of the problem, as understood by local stakeholders and manifested locally. International actors tend to misidentify the types of extremism by misreading its forms in a way that fits their own agendas. This leads to the tools used to combat radicalisation being misused.

3. Recommendations

This section outlines key recommendations for governments, civil society, and the international community. The recommendations rely on the findings and understanding of the problems under investigation, which the research team reached through fieldwork research conducted in the municipalities of Tetovo and Kumanovo in North Macedonia.

3.1 Recommendations for local institutions (government, municipalities)

- The government should design activities to improve the operationalisation of national and local P/CVE structures, investing in the participation of all local stakeholders and thereby ensuring inclusivity. Better coordination between the local community units, police officials, local religious communities, school authorities, and local NGOs is necessary.

- The government should couple CVE actions with community- and relationship-building. Community-building programmes can strengthen communities' resilience, capacity, and leadership. The creation of referral programmes which provide training for social service providers, school counsellors, teachers and psychologists, law enforcement officers and clergy on how to identify individuals susceptible to CVE could contribute to the effectiveness of these programmes.

- The government should develop local monitoring tools and evaluation frameworks based on specific indicators that would allow the competent local authorities to monitor the impact of P/CVE projects and note whether violent extremism is declining or increasing.

- The government should enhance the capacity of local authorities to deal with the re-integration of ex-foreign fighters. Specific employment, housing, and financing projects should be formulated by the authorities in question, while the involvement of the private sector should also be considered.

3.2 Recommendations for the international community

- The US government and the EU must work together to end EU policymakers' ambivalence towards the Western Balkan region, filling the vacuum created by the stagnation of the EU accession process. This is an essential first step towards challenging the influence of radical and extremist groups in North Macedonia. EU stagnation is mobilising radical forces on all sides.

- The internationals' agenda needs to be aligned with the true nature of the problem, as this is understood by local stakeholders and as it manifests locally. Accordingly, international solutions to extremism should primarily be tailored to local needs and encompass all forms of extremism.

- The international community should continue to fund non-governmental community-based actors to develop grassroots programmes, but in a more structured way to ensure their effectiveness and continuity. Community-based NGOs are the most appropriate agents for CVE messaging and other activities.

- There is an evident lack of coordination among the various stakeholders involved in P/CVE, and no national consensus on P/CVE priorities in North Macedonia. To enable a coordinated and more

effective response to violent extremism, the international community must encourage and facilitate the engagement of all stakeholders in both the public discourse and the formulation of specific policies.

3.3 Recommendations for civil society

- When it comes to the involvement of CSOs in CVE, there is a need to strengthen the formats of cooperation with state and public institutions in both quantity and quality. Increasing the breadth of collaboration and coordination in this way would generate the critical mass necessary to enable the networked governance of CVE activities.

- The local CSOs should take ownership of the P/CVE projects and develop capacities needed for that endeavour. When local NGOs enhance ownership of their projects and initiatives, they can influence donors to adjust their calls to the community's actual needs, ensuring greater sustainability and long-term viability for their actions.

- Civil society should work at improving cooperation with religious groups and faith-based organisations by staging common activities and workshops.

- Religious communities should play a more active role in P/CVE actions, including maintaining a presence on online communication platforms where religious practitioners can spread messages of unity. It is more crucial than ever that religious practitioners are engaged in raising awareness and dispelling myths and misconceptions about ethno-national and religious radicalisation through the use of technology and the online space. The Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia should enhance its cooperation with national institutions and NGOs in order to prevent the spread of extremist ideas through misinterpretations of Islam. It should also work at establishing a unified approach among its practitioners when it comes to issues of radicalisation and extremism. They should also work with the competent state authorities to prevent the creation of parallel structures (such as madrasas, schools or kindergartens) by radical groups. The Orthodox Church should also start to engage in this sphere more actively.