

Preventing violent extremism in the Balkans

D5.4

Workshop: European Café Debate and presentation of initial findings from the Albanian speaking cases



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European Café Debate “External actors’ efforts in preventing violent extremism in the Western Balkans – lessons learned and a look ahead”

Date: Tuesday, 02 February 2021

Time: 15:00 PM – 16:30 PM (CET)

Venue: Zoom platform

Duration: 90 minutes

The Centre for Advanced Study Sofia, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM, Tirana) and the Group for Legal and Political Studies (GLPS, Prishtina) organized an online Café debate to share with a broader public the main insights of the PREVEX Policy Brief on EU and other stakeholder’s prevention strategies towards violent extremism in the Western Balkans (WP5.1), and more particularly those related to Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

Stoyan Doklev, CAS Sofia Researcher and discussion moderator, briefly presented the panellists: Leonie Vrugdman (IDM) and Arber Fetiu (GLPS) and outlined the main discussion topics.

Diana Mishkova, CAS Sofia Director, opened the discussion by pointing to the wider outreach this debate seeks in presenting the first stage of the complex analytical agenda of the PREVEX project. After summarizing the overarching and comparative stakes of the PREVEX project as well as its organizational structure Diana Mishkova made a brief overview of the reasons why the Western Balkans have turned into an important part the project focus. The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ensuing social displacement in the newly emerging countries, combined with other international factors, created what the project conceives as enabling environment, statistically confirmed by the high rate of jihadists – some 350 fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq from Kosovo, BiH and North Macedonia. The purpose of the Policy Brief that PREVEX scholars presented was to highlight the way foreign stakeholders address these realities, the kind of narratives and measures (hard and soft) they apply, and in return how these are perceived by local actors and communities. The methodology used thereof relied primarily on desk research and interviews with experts and community leaders on the field since, due to the COVID-19 restrictions, research could not benefit from field work.

Leonie Vrugdman’s (IDM) presentation focused on the Albanian case, which – she stressed – meant Albanian citizens (not ethnic Albanians) who were involved in different forms of violent extremism. The issue came to the fore in 2012-2014 when jihadists and whole families from Albania joined the Assad opposition. This motivated various state responses: 1) change in the penalty code; 2) a special bodies to counter violent extremism. However, what the presenter emphasized is that the Islamic religious communities in Albania have been very responsive and cooperative in regards of all these measures. As a result since 2015 no Albanians have left for Iraq and Syria, and no terrorist attack has been committed inside Albania. Leonie Vrugdman listed all the international actors who contributed decisively for the implementation of various hard and soft measures in P/CVE. Upon concluding she tried to summarize some of the deficiencies of the situation in her country: P/CVE initiatives lack local ownership; lots of projects but with no persistency and sustainability. Leonie Vrugdman appealed for more attention to soft measures which should actively involve different civil actors and concluded that we should not leave aside far-right extremism – it should be tackled not just in state strategies but also in the EU and US approach and their pressure on local governments.



Arber Fetiu's (GLPS) overview presented briefly the historical conjuncture in Kosovo. Before 2014 Islamic extremism was not an issue there, however more than 300 Kosovo Albanians joined the fights in Syria after that year. At the time they joined the foreign conflict these acts were not yet criminalized and this created obstacles in applying the penalty code retroactively. The prevention strategy of Kosovo state actors was developed with the assistance of US and EU as everywhere in the region but a set of social and economic factors - lack of institutional resource – hinder the full scale implementation of the strategy, both hard and soft measures it calls for. Similar to the Albanian case, Arber Fetiu underlined the lack of communication and consultation with the local community and the domination of top-down approach in deploying certain measures and initiatives. Another aspect which should be further accentuated is that in Kosovo the discourse of violent extremism is mainly focused on Islamic radicalism while far-right movements, for example those in Northern Kosovo, which are well integrated within a wider international network of far-right extremists, are neglected.

Discussion: At the centre of the ensuing discussion was the question of reciprocal extremism: Does Islamic extremism induces far-right extremism and vice versa? **Ebi Spahiu**, (Embassy of Netherlands in Tirana) wanted to hear more about far-right ethno-nationalism in Albania and how it is manifested. In their responses both Leonie Vrugdman and Arber Fetiu expressed their doubt that there was a direct link between these two forms of extremism. In the case of Albania, according to Vrugdman, far-right extremism is very marginal and accidental in its manifestations due to the long tradition of religious co-existence among ethnic Albanians. The case of Kosovo is slightly different in that there are very clear and deep religious lines of division, however, there is no hard evidence that Islamic fundamentalism / violent extremism and far-right radicalism feed each other. They are more dependent on international networks and this is where their incitement mainly comes from.

Simeon Evstatiev (CAS Sofia researcher) shared some of his observations on the North Macedonian case based on interviews with stakeholders and experts on the ground. He stressed that the Macedonian case is very indicative of religious intersection and presents a potential fertile ground for detecting eventual reciprocity of extremisms. However, he agreed with the partners from Albania and Kosovo that the link between Islamic violent extremism and the growing visibility of far-right rhetoric and activity is rather discursive and displayed on the political level rather than based on real clash and competition on the ground. Nevertheless participants agreed (**Luis Bekteshi**, Center "Perspektiva") that we should continue to examine and evaluate right-wing extremist groups as well as political actors who gain prominence and social recognition through their outspoken support for such sentiments, but at the same time be careful in our methodological treatment and careful in discriminating between concepts like radicalism, political violence, violent extremism and terrorism.



Annex 1: Participants

No.	Name	Organization
1	Alba Jorgaxhi	OSCE Presence in Albania
2	Anida Qose	Student
3	Arber Fetiu	Group for Legal and Political Studies
4	Astela Veis	Epoka University
5	Brunilda Halil	Student
6	Daniel Prroni	Albanian Helsinki Committee
7	Diana Mishkova	CAS Sofia
8	Dimiter Dimov	CAS Sofia
9	Ebi Spahiu	Embassy of Netherlands in Tirana
10	Elizabeta Nikoloska	Analyst in UNMIK
11	Entela Kaleshi	Institute for Change and Leadership in Albania
12	Erisa Lame	Embassy of Switzerland in Albania
13	Eurona Leka	AIPA Executive Director
14	Filip Stojkovski	Regional Intelligence Analyst for Europe/CIS
15	Fioralba Trebicka	Italian Embassy, Tirana
16	Flutura Xhabija	n/a
17	Galentin Georgiev	OSCE Presence in Albania
18	Jenny Sør vold	Norwegian Embassy in Pristina
19	Kari Osland	Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
20	Kolindo Vjerdha	Student
21	Leonie Vrugdman	IDM
22	Luis Bekteshi	President of the Board Youth Center "Perspektiva"
23	Magdalena König	Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, PhD candidate
24	Migena Lika	Student
25	Miriam Katharina Heß	German Council on Foreign Relations
26	Njomza Arifi	Group for Legal and Political Studies
27	Paola Zefi	Psychologist at SHIS
28	Parashqevi Dhimoshi	n/a
29	People in Focus	Albanian NGO
30	Simeon EVSTATIEV	CAS Sofia
31	Stoyan DOKLEV	CAS Sofia
32	Susanna Naltakyan	OSCE, Albania
33	Tzamalís Konstantinos	Embassy of Greece in Tirana
34	Vojsava Killo	n/a
35	Xhulio Zeneli	CRCA/ECPAT Albania



Annex 2: Invitation



Group for Legal
and Political
Studies



Institute for Democracy and Mediation
Instituti për Demokraci dhe Ndërmjetësim



The *Centre for Advanced Study Sofia* (CAS Sofia), the *Institute for Democracy and Mediation* (IDM, Tirana) and the *Group for Legal and Political Studies* (GLPS, Prishtina)

are pleased to invite you to a virtual round table discussion

External actors' efforts in preventing violent extremism in the Western Balkans – lessons learned and a look ahead

The discussion will be organized via **Zoom platform on Tuesday, 2 FEBRUARY 15:00h.**

Speakers will introduce participants to the main conclusions presented in a policy brief summarizing EU and other stakeholders' prevention strategies towards violent extremism in the Western Balkans. The policy brief outlines the dominant external approaches and narratives behind the prevention and countering of violent extremism. It is part of a wider research endeavor, conducted within the framework of the [PREVEX](#) project which gathers experts from EU, Western Balkans and MENA region, supported by the European Commission through Horizon 2020 research and innovation program.

Following the presentation, participants are invited to engage in an interactive discussion and provide their views on the research findings, as well as on the following questions:

- What are the lessons learned from international stakeholders' engagement in addressing (violent) extremism and terrorism in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia?
- How (violent) extremism has evolved in the past three years? What are the dominant forms of (violent) extremism, major drivers, and their protagonists' *modus operandi*?
- To what extent returning foreign fighters present a threat to their local community?
- To what extent different forms of extremisms reinforce each other?
- What are the effects of the implementation of countering violent extremism strategy? How new strategies should be designed? What should they prioritize? How should new strategies build resilience to (violent) extremism?

Introductory note: Diana Mishkova (CAS Sofia)

Speakers: Leonie Vrugtman (IDM)
Arber Fetiu (GLPS)

Moderator: Stoyan Doklev (CAS Sofia)

The event is **open to the public.**

Please confirm your participation at cas@cas.bg by Monday, **1 February** the latest. The Zoom coordinates will be sent to you in due course.



Should you have any questions, please contact Dimiter Dimov at dimov@cas.bg

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