Preventing violent extremism, the Balkans

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Editors:	Kari Osland, Morten Bøås
Authors:	Simeon Evstatiev, Diana Mishkova
Reviewers:	Morten Bøas, Kari Osland, Pernille Rieker
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1. Introduction

While most research on violent extremism (VE) focuses on why people turn to violence, this policy brief looks at the issue the other way round. We sum up the lessons learnt from our findings on why the majority of those living in enabling environments often choose not to get involved in violence and, against this background, to (re-)consider the EU's measures for prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) in the Western Balkans (WB).

In this region, the issue of VE became particularly pressing after the outbreak of the war in Syria and the participation of citizens of the WB countries as foreign fighters (FFs) in the Syrian conflict. Over 1,070 persons from Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM), Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro made their way to Syria and Iraq with the aim of joining the ranks of primarily the Islamic State (IS or ISIS) and to a lesser extent al-Qaeda affiliates. Other estimates count 1,353 men, women, and children from the WBs who had travelled to Syria and Iraq. From the outset of the Syrian conflict, the countries that registered some of the highest rates of jihadi mobilization in Europe are Kosovo, BiH, and North Macedonia. Currently, the WB is the region with the highest number of returned foreign fighters in Europe. Moreover, as following the collapse of former Yugoslavia and the bloody wars accompanying its disintegration radicalization has spread in the WB, VE in the region has taken on two forms: Islamist extremism, ideologically based mostly on Jihadi-Salafism, and ethnonationalist/far-right extremism. Still, why is it that some communities display much greater resilience to violent extremist ideologies than others and what are the lessons learnt about preventing radicalization in the context of the EU's P/CVE strategies?

Building on our earlier study of the EU's policies and instruments for PVE, including EU's and other stakeholders' P/CVE strategies in the Western Balkans, our newly released PREVEX working paper brings to the fore the drivers, occurrence, and non-occurrence of violent extremism in the Western Balkans. In that working paper, while considering the drivers of occurrence, our research has also emphasized cases of non-occurrence of VE in five different yet closely interrelated contexts: Albania, BiH, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and the area of Sandžak in Serbia. In order to address the issue of the majority resilience we have analysed those factors that shape and reshape enabling environments of VE in the WBs, taking into account the role of competing authorities and local-global connections. In this policy brief, we will present the implications of our findings for the treatment of the enabling environments in terms of the P/CVE and recommend a series of measures that the EU needs to take in order to not only maintain non-occurrence but also foster stronger resilience.

Previous research has put forth explanations of resilience along the lines of diversity of the religious sphere, logistical and financial barriers to violence, strong ideas against the use of violence, family influence as well as the "efficiency argument" that the benefits do not justify the costs. As it is impossible to understand pathways to radicalization without grasping why individuals resist VE, the P/CVE policies need to be two-directional – weakening the drivers of VE and strengthening the factors of resilience. Under PREVEX, we have outlined sets of factors strengthening community resilience against VE relative to two periods: during the

radicalization wave throughout the WB in the years 2011–2014 and the subsequent de-radicalization of Islamic extremism from 2015 onwards, combined with a rise of ethnonationalist/far-right extremism. The first includes religious counter-narratives, social cohesion and civic values as the main factors propping up community resilience at the peak of the radicalization wave. The second involves both a "hard" approach, applied mostly by governmental institutions, and a "soft" response by civil society organizations and external stakeholders, including the EU.

2. EU measures to prevent violent extremism in the Western Balkans

Under PREVEX, we have found out that in most EU member states the PVE agenda is quite a recent phenomenon and principally aims at preventing violent Islamist extremism through community engagement.[1] The EU's and other stakeholders' approaches towards violent extremism in the Western Balkans are defined along the continuum of "hard" and "soft" policies and measures. Hard approaches focus on security and securitization, while soft approaches entail programmes aimed at social cohesion. Modern state-building and identities in the WB bear historical and structural specifics precluding a uniform approach to the concept of the state and to the assessment of the externally sponsored preventive measures. Although there is a long-standing tradition among the Balkan nation-states of perceiving themselves as "victims" of the Great Powers, they are not, and do not perceive themselves as, post-colonial creations as is the case in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the Sahel. Yet certain structural similarities within the WB and across these regions are significant. Although in a different sense and to a different extent, the countries of the WB region share common problems and challenges with respect to their internal stability. BiH, Kosovo, and to a large extent North Macedonia could be considered as fragile states and as such "recognized as a danger both to international security and to the security of their neighbors, as well as to the well-being of their own people."[2] Donors and international stakeholders tend to define as a "fragile state" a "country at risk of instability" or "under stress", or even a "difficult partner."[3] A common feature of the entire WB region, at that, is the state's malperformance by dint of widespread corruption practices of governments and administrations, which adds to and aggravates the complexity of inter-ethnic and ethno-religious relations. Such a political framework, coupled with the social and economic precarity of these societies, affects the prospects for the emergence of VE and the effectiveness of the P/CVE strategies.

WB countries themselves have rarely been the target of terrorist attacks inspired by al-Qaeda or the IS, but the transnational type of radicalization and VE spread throughout the region, coupled with the "export" of FFs, brought Islamist violent extremism into the focus of the EU's P/CVE strategies. The EU strategy towards VE in the WB is spelled out in the EU Directive 541 of the European Parliament and the Council of Europe of 15 March 2017 on

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[1] Blockman, S., G. Fahmi, M. Giske, P. Rieker, O. Roy and A. Vellante, *Working Paper on the Implementation of the EU's Policies*, PREVEX D4.2, 31 December 2020, pp. 32, here 3ff.

[2] S. D. Kaplan, *Fixing Fragile States: A New Paradigm for Development* (Westport, 2008), 2.

[3] Cammack, D., D. McLeod, and A. R. Menocal, *Donors and the 'Fragile States' Agenda: A Survey of Current Thinking and Practice*, Report, London: Overseas Development Institute, 2006, 16.

combating terrorism,[4] which replaced the Council Framework Decision from 2002 (475/JHA) and amended Council Decision from 2005 (671/JHA). It builds on the 2005 EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which envisages countering radicalization by "promoting even more vigorously good governance, human rights, democracy as well as education and economic prosperity, and engaging in conflict resolution."[5] In 2020, while pointing to the dangers posed by far-right and far-left forms of VE, the EU restates that the Islamist movements, such as al-Qaeda and the IS, remain the main threat for the Union.[6] Therefore, even in countries like BiH, where ethnonationalist radicalization is of growing concern, the EU Delegation Advisor on counter-terrorism Holger Engelman confirms that "the most dangerous threat in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains Islamist groups."[7] In contrast to the EU approach, the USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), the largest US program in BiH, has recently expanded its definition of PVE in the Bosnian context so that its projects are now focusing on ethnonationalist and political along with religious VE.[8] At the same time, while the EU and other external stakeholders, notably the USA, seek to combine hard and soft approaches, the USA is still prioritizing the former, whereas the EU the latter type of measures.

When it comes to influencing the P/CVE policies of WB states, the EU possesses a set of comparative advantages that are not available to governments in the MENA and the Sahel. The Union's enlargement and integration process is instrumental as an incentive for most of the WB countries to undertake various reforms concerning not only implementation of preventive measures, but also enforcement of the rule of law, democratization, and transparency. This is evident in the two countries currently seeking to launch a negotiation process for EU accession – Albania and North Macedonia. Furthermore, the Western Balkans are directly bordering the EU and this region's security has a direct effect on the Union's stability.[9] Since 2018, all EU engagements in the region have been aligned with its overall strategy for the WB.[10] Compared to earlier regional strategies, this one puts more emphasis on CT and P/CVE.[11] To strengthen their co-operation on P/CVE, the EU and the governments of WB countries signed a "Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans 2018–2020."[12] This action plan builds on the outcomes of a series of high-level CT visits ("CT Dialogues") in 2017–2018 with the participation of ministers of the interior and justice, police heads, intelligence agencies,

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[4] European Council, "Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA," *Official Journal of the European Union* 88 (31 March 2017): 6–21.

[5] European Council, "Counter-Terrorism Strategy," Doc. 14469/4/05, 30 November 2005, art. 11.

[6] European Council, "Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Council Adopts Conclusions on EU External Action," 16 June 2020.

[7] Interview with Holger Engelman, 13 November 2020.

[8] Interview with Brendan Wilson-Barthes (Country Representative for the USAID/OTI BiH program), 26 November 2020.

[9] Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020; interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.

[10] European Commission, "A Credible Enlargement Perspective for an Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans," COM2018 65 final, 6 February 2018.

[11] Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.

[12] European Commission, "Signature of the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans," 5 October 2018.

CSOs, and umbrella structures like national CVE Coordination Centers.[13] Complementing this joint initiative, between 2018 and 2020, the EU concluded separate bilateral "arrangements on antiterrorism cooperation" with the governments of all WB states.

While seeking to encompass the whole of the WB through a web of coordinated and connected agreements and convergent actions, the EU has made a concomitant effort to devise context- and country-sensitive P/CVE policies in the region. Overall, unlike in the MENA region, where the EU pursues a "security first" approach,[14] the Union's P/CVE strategy in the WB has been predominantly soft, entailing measures targeting democratic and systemic reforms or community-addressed initiatives. In some "hot" areas, like Kosovo and BiH, the EU approach also involves security-based programs prioritizing de-radicalization in prisons and of released violent extremist offenders. In countries like Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, where VE is considered less strongly manifested and/or a pre-accession negotiation process is pending, prevention is targeting primarily infrastructural and systemic reforms concerning rule of law, democratic procedures, human rights, and transparent governance as well as soft community-based PVE measures. In the absence of intelligence and military instruments for a hard securitizing approach, the EU's measures considerably differ from those deployed by the USA, which emphasize actions like law enforcement or tracking and persecuting terrorists. Across the WB, while the EU is funding many civil society projects and is increasingly perceived as a significant external stakeholder, it is still seen as second to the USA in P/CVE.[15] And while some Western governments have begun investing in projects intended to combat far-right extremism inspired by ethnonationalism, especially in BiH and Serbia, the major EU efforts remain focused on Islamist violent extremism.

3. Why violent extremism does *not* erupt in the enabling environments of the Western Balkans

When tackling the question of why VE occurs in some cases and not in others, we must take into account (1) the lack of VE/terrorist incidents locally and, at the same time, the "production" and "export" of FFs, and (2) the different dynamics of Islamist and ethnonationalist radicalization/VE as specific for the WB region. In 2021, the WB PREVEX research team undertook in-depth studies aimed at revealing the context-specific factors of occurrence and non-occurrence of VE in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, North Macedonia and the Serbian area of Sandžak. The working paper, summarising the results of this research, juxtaposes these different contexts and throws into relief their common ground and distinguishing features.

We have outlined three main types of drivers of VE that shape enabling environments throughout the WB: (i) societal factors, including social and economic conditions, poverty,

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[13] Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020.

[14] E. Skare, A. Mhidi, G. Fahmi, N. Ahmed, K. Palani, M. Ababsa, O. Roy and D. Ala'Aldeen, *Policy Brief Summarizing Lessons Learnt on the EU's Measures to Prevent Violent Extremism in the Middle East*, PREVEX D7.5, 31 December 2021, pp. 8, here p. 4.

[15] Fetiu, A., D. Mishkova, E. Bećirević, E. Stanchev, L. Vrugtman, P. Petrović, S. Evstatiev, S. Doklev, *Policy Brief Summarizing the EU and Other Stakeholders' Prevention Strategy towards Violent Extremism in the Balkans*, 21.

social exclusion and marginalization, low trust in institutions, structural set-ups that reinforce societal divides such as the educational systems in BiH, North Macedonia or Kosovo that strengthen segregation along ethno-religious lines through the "two schools under one roof" approach; (ii) political factors, such as political malperformance and polarization, manipulation of ethnic and religious grievances for political ends; (iii) religious/ideological indoctrination. Although it can be presumed that such factors lead to a much greater proportion of people joining violent groups, this is not the case. The factors of resilience identified during our fieldwork-based research pertain to three major groups: (1) local communities exhibiting social cohesion and civic values; (2) the role of imams and individuals of authority; and (3) preventive measures.

Most Muslim communities in the Balkans adhere to a locally embedded tradition related to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, to which religious interpretations perceived as radical are largely alien. Besides, half a century of communist rule in Eastern Europe instilled a sense of secularism in Balkan Muslim communities and gave rise to a local Muslim culture palpably different in its interpretations and practices from its more conservative counterparts in the Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. Hence, many refer to Muslims in the Balkans as "progressive Muslims" or "cultural Muslims."[16] These specific features of mainstream Muslim communal life in the Balkans draws on inherited prevailing traditions of religious and inter-ethnic tolerance. Notable exceptions are the relations between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo and between Serbs and Bosniaks in BiH badly impaired during the Milošević regime and the subsequent violent conflicts.

Nevertheless, more recently, even in Kosovo these traumas and tensions are being calmed down in environments where imams and priests demonstrate respect to each other using communal religious celebrations to build religious harmony.[17] In North Macedonia, such stable traditions of tolerance are explained as ensuing from the fact that the local Albanian population consists of *starosedeltsi* (lit. "natives" or "long-time residents"), who form an old, traditional community in the region.[18] "Natives" of Debar are, for example, contrasted with the "Kosovo migrants" in Kumanovo and Skopje to indicate major cultural and social differences within the Albanian group itself.[19] In contrast to the capital Skopje where minority isolation, bordering ghettoization, and anonymity prevail, Debar represents a relatively small community, where most people know each other, which makes it possible for the inhabitants to reproduce certain patterns of social cohesion and good practices of neighbourhood as well as "traditional" forms

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[16] Akyol, R. A. "Want to Cultivate a Liberal European Islam? Look to Bosnia," *The Atlantic* 13 (2019), accessed 27 December 2021.

[17] For example, "Ipeshkvi Dodë Gjergji i uron Myftiut Tërnava dhe besimtarëve myslimanë Bajramin," *Koha.net*, 31 July 2020, accessed 28 December 2021.

[18] Interview with an Orthodox Christian priest – Debar, 17 August 2021; interview with a monk from the St. Jovan Bigorski Orthodox Monastery, 18 August 2021. Similarly, an interlocutor coming from the city of Kičevo, another case of non-occurrence of VE, noted that there were no intercommunal tensions in this city even during the 2001 insurgency in Macedonia and attributed it to the character of the local Muslim communities there, namely 'old Turks' (interview with an NGO activist, Skopje, 24 August 2021).

[19] Interview with an Orthodox Christian priest, Debar, 17 August 2021; interview with a politician, member of the current parliament of North Macedonia, Skopje, 20 August 2021; interview with a former North Macedonian politician, Skopje, 20 August 2021.

of Islam.[20]

Examples from Albania confirm the importance of social cohesion. As an interlocutor in Maliq put it, "We are a very small community where most people know each other. This is probably why we did not have cases of VE."[21] Communities with stronger social cohesion are less conducive to the occurrence of VE because social connections within, and between, communities help mitigate the risk factors associated with VE.[22] Mainstream Muslim institutions can play a crucial role in this respect as the cases of Kosovo, Albania and BiH clearly indicate. In addition, local populations themselves can mobilize to isolate radicals and demonstrate resilience. In Sandžak, the intrusiveness of the first generation of Salafis resulted in physical violence between them and traditional local Muslims. One group of militant Salafis was sentenced for terrorism-related offenses, including plans for the assassination of the then-Mufti Muamer Zukorlić (d. 2021).[23] The local population isolated the most aggressive and obtrusive Salafis, boycotting their shops and products and refusing to socialize with them. Gradually, many Salafis saw themselves impelled to take on a more "moderate" stance, which contributed to their (re)-integration into the local community and the official structures of the Islamic Community of Serbia.

Economic incentives, sometimes of locally specific nature, also play a role. In 2020, protests were organized in both Trebinje and Bileća (BiH) in support of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which clashed with the former Montenegrin government over a contested law on religious rights. As a journalist from Trebinje explains, the Church leaders were concerned about the way protests were organized as entailing potential violence – they had to show Orthodox solidarity, and yet they did not want to disturb the image of Trebinje as the tourist town where people of all nationalities feel welcome.[24] This adds economy as a contextual factor of resilience – not only by providing jobs and greater security but by discouraging political conflict that would make the town less attractive.

Given the entanglement of ethnicity and religion in Balkan nationalisms, BiH presents an illuminating case that foregrounds ethnonationalist extremism and at the same time exemplifies reciprocal soothing of tension. An Orthodox priest in Trebinje spoke of the need to learn how to tolerate the various narratives in a society, citing the example of Vienna, home to 150,000 Serbs: "The vast majority of Serbs who live in Vienna," he said, "believe that Gavrilo Princip (the assassin of Archduke Franz Ferdinand) was a hero. Other people in Vienna believe that he was a murderer, but Serbs and Austrians do not clash over that."[25] Informed by such perspectives, it is not surprising that the relations between Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community in Trebinje are generally good. A local imam, in turn, rejected the idea that the presence of a radical ethnonationalist neo-Chetnik movement in Trebinje represents a real

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[20] Interview with an Orthodox Christian priest, Debar, 17 August 2021.

[21] Focus group with mixed group of people in Maliq, 31 August 2021.

[22] Ellis, B.H. and S. Abdi, "Building Community Resilience to Violent Extremism through Genuine Partnerships," *American Psychologist* 72, 3 (2017): 289–300.

[23] "Osuđene vehabije iz Novog Pazara," *RTS*, 3 July 2009, accesssed 28 December 2021.

[24] Interview with a local journalist in Trebinje, 22 August, 2021.

[25] Interview with an orthodox priest in Trebinje, 23 August, 2021

threat, explaining that they only appear during reunions and do not cause problems. At the same time, he noted their presence in online spaces and argued that police attended events organized by the Islamic Community not out of concerns with Muslim extremism, but to discourage Serb extremists from intimidating Bosniaks.[26]

Such examples highlight the role of imams and other individuals of authority for non-occurrence of VE and strengthening resilience. As explained by a Muslim official in the Albanian area of Maliq, there are certain sensitive topics that radicals exploit, and through these forms of "scouting" they manage to polarize people.[27] These topics are mostly religious, but sometimes also of social nature, and, according to this interlocutor, most of the official imams had done a good job by not allowing people from outside the community to indoctrinate their followers: "There were incentives for radicalized individuals to approach mosques, but since they weren't allowed in the religious space, recruiters found it difficult to connect with believers in another way."[28] In Kosovo, too, major radicalization drivers were neutralized in areas such as Podujeva and Prizren, because imams refused to accept groups that promoted such ideas. Muslim officials from the Islamic Community in North Macedonia also stressed the efforts exerted by their institution at combating religious radicalism. While this institution did not pre-define the texts to be read at the sermons in the mosques, it closely monitored their content and the religious leaders criticized the radical ethos of "those who had returned from studies in the Middle East and with whom one cannot talk in a normal way."[29] Some Christian religious leaders also acknowledge that "the Islamic Community is indeed fighting against radical Islam, although this is a very difficult task."[30]

In other cases, such as Serbia, quietists Salafi leaders have also contributed to resilience. Bekir Makić, an influential imam in the Sandžak Salafi community and part of the Sandžak diaspora, vocally advocated that Muslims must solve their personal, family, and community problems first. People in Sandžak, he taught, should not worry too much about global issues and world politics, as there are more urgent issues in the region that their involvement can solve, whereas the conflict in Syria is too complex as it features a struggle among global and local powers, and one cannot be sure whose interests ISIS serves in the end. This Salafi imam claims that the greatest evil that happened to Muslims in Syria and Iraq, as well as globally, is the IS.[31]

While all these factors inhibited the spread of VE in the communities during the 2011–2014 radicalization wave, the hard and soft preventive measures deployed after 2014 have contributed to the prevention of VE in a different way. First, the hard measures have limited VE activity to propaganda, as violent extremists are now more easily spotted and risk facing criminal proceedings for recruitment activities. This has influenced their *modus operandi* by making it harder for them to be organized in groups. As a key source in Kamza (Albania) stated:

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[26] Interview with a local imam in Trebinje, 26 August 2021.
[27] Interview with Muslim official in Maliq, 31 August 2021.
[28] Interview with a Muslim official in Maliq, 31 August 2021.
[29] Interview with local representatives of the Islamic Religious Community, Tetovo, 25 August 2021.
[30] Interview with a monk from the St. Jovan Bigorski Orthodox Monastery, 18 August 2021.
[31] Bajrović, A. "Sandžak: Ekstremizma ima, a uzrok su i verske i političke podele," *RSE*, 15 February 2017, accessed 21 December 2021; Kurucić, M. "Debata: Radikalizam i ekstremizam – izazovi, uzroci i posledice," *Forum 10*, 14 February 2017, accessed 22 December 2021.

"We have certain radical individuals, but they are detached from each other, consequently, they do not have any major influence. They try to build physical contact with others but are very careful because the police authorities can track them."[32] In countries, such as Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo, the hard approaches to P/CVE receive, and are often dependent on, the strong support from the US government.

The soft measures are mainly supported by foreign actors, including the EU. Besides measures taken by WB governments, non-state actors, such as international and civil society organizations have been engaged in the P/CVE through setting up referral mechanisms, capacity-building initiatives, awareness-raising campaigns, and grassroot projects that aim to build stronger community resilience. In some WB countries, like BiH and Kosovo, however, training programs are still in great demand. Thus, in BiH, Bilal Bosnić managed to form a small Salafi community in Bužim (not far from Bihać), which continued to function after his arrest and trial. There is almost no social interaction between this community and the mainstream population in Bužim, and local police and individuals close to the Islamic Community told researchers they have no particular strategy for dealing with these local Salafis, who keep to themselves and communicate almost exclusively among themselves. As one local citizen admits, "our strategy is to react on the spot when a problem with them arises."[33] It is, however, significant that no one stepped into the leadership role of Bosnić while he was in prison until recently, and that his community shrank in his absence. Some members moved away, while others joined the local official Islamic Community after de-radicalizing and reasserting their identity as "normal Bosnian Muslims." Over time, the Salafi community in and around Bihać has diminished so significantly that a police officer acknowledged: "Nobody even really pays attention to the Salafis anymore. Migrants, and the departure of young people from the area, are much bigger problems."[34] Such cases are telling on how important the interrelations between the three types of factors is: hard and soft preventive measures combine with the decisive role of local community and individuals of authority to bolster resilience.

4. Implications for and lessons learnt on the EU's P/CVE policies in the Western Balkans

Resilience is systemic in that it does not depend on one single factor, but rather on the interconnection of factors and the role played by actors in shaping those factors. Overall, local resilience to VE in the WB is determined by the social cohesion and civic values of the community; the efficiency of the preventive measures and interventions undertaken by state institutions, religious authorities, and community actors; and the community's attitude towards these measures.

We have found out that hard preventive measures have had tangible deterring effects in post-radicalization situations and, in combination with the changes in the international environment, are in great measure responsible for reducing the threat from Islamist VE. Soft

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[32] Interview with a civil society representative in Kamza, 2 August 2021.
[33] Interview with a local citizen of Bužim, 13 July 2021.
[34] Interview with a police officer in Bihać, 15 July 2021.

measures that prevail in the current P/CVE policies of the EU, on the other hand, have been particularly important in fostering youth resilience, which is crucial since the data suggests that the age group most susceptible to recruitment for violent *jihad* is 21–25 years. In the opinion of our interlocutors, many localities that had previously registered higher levels of radicalization and occurrence of VE have benefited from multiple initiatives carried out by civil society organizations and state authorities, concerning awareness-raising and the threat of VE. However, concentrating efforts in areas where there has been an occurrence of VE threatens to oversaturate certain communities, while ignoring the needs of communities that are commonly acknowledged as "resilient" based on VE non-occurrence.[35]

Policies devised to prevent and counter VE must draw on the premise that non-occurrence and resilience are highly context specific. The VE dynamics in BiH is inextricably linked to the wars of the 1990s, and to the competing, ethnicized narratives that emerged in their aftermath. The ethno-nationalist and religious extremism that fuelled the war in BiH has only been consolidated in the decades since, especially among older generations of politicians, who have effectively mainstreamed some forms of radicalization. Still, for the most part, our researchers have found that youth in BiH reject ethnic segregation and the prevailing politics of division. The consistency of this finding indicates that younger Bosnians represent a real opportunity for the country to begin seeing through a new frame and moving away from the ubiquitous "ethnic lens". However, many are emigrating, chasing the potential of a more prosperous and stable future elsewhere. As long as ethnonationalist leaders like Milorad Dodik are actively pursuing anti-democratic objectives and ethnic exclusivity, it is hard to imagine that many young Bosnians who have left the county would return.

In Kosovo, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has been a key player in the multi-agency efforts to counter VE, and positive developments notwithstanding, deficiencies and failures in the P/CVE work have been revealed.[36] Two important issues need to be highlighted in this respect: (1) the permanent coordinating mechanism for implementation of *Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalism Leading to Terrorism 2015–2020* has ceased to exist since 2020, and (2) the position of National Coordinator for counterterrorism has been abolished. Although Kosovo is among the Balkan countries with the highest number of sentences on FFs, the country's average prison sentences have decreased. Moreover, Kosovo's law, that outlaws joining foreign armed conflicts, does not deal with probation after imprisonment.[37] The country also lacks a national reintegration plan that would help the resocialization of vulnerable individuals.[38] The inter-ethnic tensions between the inhabitants of

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[35] Mishkova, D., S. Evstatiev, E. Bećirević, S. Doklev, K. Gashi, M. Ignjatijević, S. Kelmendi, P. Petrović, A. Sadiku, R. Shehu and E. Stanchev, *Working Paper on Enabling Environments, Drivers and Occurrence/Non-Occurrence of Violent Extremism in the Balkans*, 88.

[36] Peci L. and A. Demjaha, *Kosovo – Macro-Drivers of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*. CONNECT, 7 September 2021, accessed 22 December 2021.

[37] Law No. 05/L-002 on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory, *Kosovo State Gazette*, 7 (2015).

[38] Evidence in terrorism cases is proving difficult to find, while experts warn that the reintegration and rehabilitation of foreign fighters is an even greater challenge (Rovcanin, H., F. Mejdini, S. Kajosevic, X. Bami, S.-J. Marusic, Balkan States Find Prosecuting Terrorism a Challenge, Hedaya & BIRN, May 2020).

South and North Mitrovica as well as the failure of the authorities to ensure the safe return of families back to their homes, continues to engender potential for further spread of ethnonationalism. Whereas the focus on Islamist FFs has shaped the prevailing governmental approach to VE, in recent years political and ethnonationalist extremism is increasingly moving to the fore.

Experts in the P/CVE field in North Macedonia, on their part, hold that although it is generally recognized that "wounded dignity" stimulates the politicization of ethnic identities and mutual antagonism, the psychological element is often neglected when it comes to programs treating VE.[39] For some observers, the Albanian aspirations are less a struggle for rights than a "struggle for recognition." Their armed resistance back in 2001 failed to bring the respect they strived for, even though it brought them the political rights they desired. In this sense, they remained with a "maligned identity, as the violent birth of their collective freedoms functioned to reinforce the negative images Macedonians already harboured of Albanians."[40] It was also noted that, induced by the multiple crises and potential threats in the post-Yugoslav space, the NGO sector in North Macedonia had become overblown and "inflated" by external donors. Many NGOs without the necessary capacity obtain grants in the P/CVE sector turning this funding into "profitable business."[41]

As in certain EU member states,[42] engaging with religious communities in the WB countries, including imams and other officials, play an indispensable role in both creating close-knit communities, where radical elements are easily identified within preventing, countering, and awareness-raising efforts. As a rule, mainstream imams in Albania, Sandžak, North Macedonia, Kosovo and BiH refuse to allow radical recruiters in their mosques, which makes it difficult for recruiters to reach out to believers. In order to counter the effects of the radicalization efforts, they often resort to counter-narratives castigating religious VE. As one interviewee put it, "a qualified imam of a small community knows each member of his *jamaat* and is capable of recognizing who has more impulsive tendencies. Imams often work on an individual basis to persuade them to not fall prey to radical religious preaching".[43] On the other hand, as the case of Sandžak indicates, imams and individuals of authority and influence over Salafi groups have also played an essential role in their (re)-localization and integration into the moderate local community.

In devising EU's P/CVE policies we should bear in mind that Salafism is intimately context specific. It has different appeal in the Muslim-majority societies of the Middle East, where Islamic identity is already established and where it concerns mainly theology, and in

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[39] Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field, Skopje, 27 August 2021.

[40] Vasilev, G. "Multiculturalism in Post-Ohrid Macedonia," *East European Politics and Societies* 27, 4 (2013): 685–708.

[41] Interview with a representative of the NGO sector, Struga, 18 August 2021, Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field, Skopje, 26 August 2021, Focus group with representatives of the NGO sector – Skopje, 26 August 2021.

[42] For some parallels with EU member states underscored under PREVEX, see Blockman, S., G. Fahmi, M. Giske, P. Rieker, O. Roy and A. Vellante, *Policy Brief on the Implementation of the EU's Policies*, PREVEX D4.3, pp. 13, here 11.

[43] Interview with an imam in Mëzez, Tirana, 16 August 2021.

Europe, where it has to do mostly with identity.[44] In the WB contexts, Jihadi-Salafism spread most widely in places where the quest of a revived Islamic identity blended with severe social disruptions, such as the Bosnian and Kosovo wars. Secondly, despite its global appeal and transnational channels of spreading, Jihadi-Salafism in the WB becomes increasingly "localized" – meaning that some radicalized individuals become theologically and institutionally re-accommodated into local "traditional Islam" and its official institutional representation. Thus, local Muslims who had previously "globalized" through Salafism and its jihadi branch, undergo a process of "re-localization" by finding a *modus vivendi* with the "traditional" Hanafi school of Sunni Islam.[45] For this (re)-localization, the official Muslim institutions in the WB countries also have an important role to play vis-à-vis society at large.

5. Policy recommendations

- The shift of focus towards non-occurrence of VE requires aligning prevention and reintegration programs with community needs. It takes account of the often contingent nature and diverse drivers of VE occurrence. Such an approach entails also more generic measures related to the socio-economic conditions and political corruption that underwire much of the WB populations' grievances.

- Authorized religious institutions, espousing and cultivating what is perceived in the region as "traditional Islam," should receive state support to exert effective jurisdiction and control on their communities. They should be helped to increase their online visibility utilizing social media to engage more effectively with young people and civil society.

- More effort needs to be invested in empowering individuals of authority and local community leaders spreading counter-narratives among their communities (*jamaat*s). Both state and civil society organizations should work closely with such individuals, enhancing their capacity to mitigate the risks of radicalization more efficiently.

- In societies as divided along ethno-religious, and often also political, lines, such as Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia's Sandžak, communal isolation should be countered by programs aimed at creating "inclusive environments" through continuous dialogue and inter-communal socialization. Promoting interculturalism instead of multiculturalism among communities in various spheres – from education to employment – will increase the efficiency of the ongoing P/CVE efforts by cultivating tolerance among youth, especially at public schools, where the segregation along religious and ethnic lines in the form of the current "two schools under one roof" should be overcome.

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[44] Hegghammer, T. "Radicalization, Salafism, and the Crisis of Jihadism", in *Salafism: Challenged by Radicalization? Violence Politics, and the Advent of Post-Salafism*, ed. T. Blanc, O. Roy, EUI: Florence, 2021, 26.

[45] For a similar process in the Middle East, see J. Drevon and P. Haenni, *How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads: The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria*, EUI Working Papers, RSC 08/2021, 27.

- While legitimately focusing on Islamist violent extremism in the WB, the EU should not neglect other context-specific manifestations of extremism in the region, such as right-wing politically motivated violent ethnonationalism, especially in BiH, Kosovo, and Serbia. State authorities and civil society organizations alike should be encouraged to counteract more firmly all forms of extremism.