



# Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia

Filip Stojkovski & Natasia Kalajdziovski

Country Case  
Study 1

### About this report

This country case study on Macedonia was produced, alongside three others covering Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, in the framework of a participatory research project on “Opportunities for Preventing Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans”. Together with four local research partners, we explore why some communities are particularly affected by individuals inspired by and/or joining the Islamic State (IS) or other similar violent extremist groups, while other communities may show greater resilience to the same phenomenon. Based on the research findings, the project partners will conduct policy outreach and local dialogue initiatives, in cooperation with local stakeholders and affected communities, in order to explore and develop strategies to prevent violent radicalisation in the Western Balkans.

### About the authors

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1 Rationale for the Study	2
1.2 Country Background	3
1.3 Violent Extremism in Macedonia – A Brief Overview	4
1.4 Current Approaches to P/CVE Programming	5
<b>2 Methodology</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Concepts and Terminology	7
2.2 Fieldwork Design	8
2.3 Analytical Framework	9
2.4 Limitations in Research	9
<b>3 Exploration Of Findings</b>	<b>10</b>
3.1 Analytic Approaches	10
3.2 Factors of Vulnerability	11
3.2.1 Enabling Environments and Support Structures	11
3.2.2 Extreme Ideologies, Networks, and Interpersonal Ties	17
3.2.3 Collective and Personal Grievances	19
3.3 Factors Of Resilience	21
3.3.1 Multiculturalism	21
3.3.2 Community Engagement and Societal Awareness	23
3.3.3 Quality of Religious Education	24
3.3.4 Institutional Cooperation and Engagement	25
3.4 Conclusion	26
<b>4 Analysis Of Findings</b>	<b>26</b>
4.1 Enabling Environments and Support Structures	27
4.2 Extreme Ideologies, Networks, and Interpersonal Ties	29
4.3 Collective And Personal Grievances	30
<b>5 Conclusion and Recommendations</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Interviews and Focus Groups</b>	<b>35</b>



# Executive Summary<sup>\*</sup>

Increasingly, governmental strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) are regarded as a necessary complement to broader counterterrorism strategies. Such inclusion is an acknowledgement that a pure securitisation approach is not entirely effective, and that a strategy which includes a “soft approach” to countering terrorism must seek to address social factors as well. However, within the Western Balkans region – and particularly in the Macedonian context – strategies to counter terrorism have been slow in adopting P/CVE approaches.

As such, gaps in the literature on P/CVE in Macedonia exist. Research under the P/CVE banner has traditionally focused on the factors and drivers leading to violent extremism; while this kind of research has been critical, little has been done to delve more deeply into societal narratives. Given the “soft approach” inherent within the broader P/CVE framework, such a dearth in research is problematic from a policymaking standpoint. Therefore, this report puts forth a qualitative study on how community-level dynamics contribute to instances of violent extremism, and seeks to provide relevant data to help policymakers empower communities so that they may become mechanisms of social change in the fight against violent extremism.

To this end, the report investigates three municipalities that vary in their level of affectedness within the Republic of Macedonia – Cair, Gostivar, and Struga – which have been deemed highly affected, moderately affected, relatively unaffected by the phenomenon of violent extremism, respectively. Fieldwork was conducted to gather data through the use of semi-structured interviews and focus group consultation. Moreover, this report employs an adapted version of the framework created by Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins (2015) to represent the data and organise the report’s analysis.

Using the data collected during the fieldwork exercise, the report aims to determine what makes each aforementioned municipality more or less affected by violent radicalisation. Ultimately, the findings speak to the reality that radicalisation toward violent extremism is not a linear process; rather, it is a series of factors which come together to foster an over-arching environment conducive to the proliferation of extremism and violent extremism.

Based on the findings of this report, we propose three recommendations to improve preventative approaches towards violent extremism:

- 1) Macedonia’s P/CVE strategy should shift from being a top-down governmental approach to one that is more “holistic”, and engages, empowers, and educates local institutional actors in those efforts.
- 2) The discourse on preventing and combating violent extremism should evolve to also include forms of ethno-nationalist and right-wing extremism that are on the rise in Macedonia.
- 3) Further pointed and exhaustive research needs to be undertaken to examine the relationship between ethnicity, perceptions of power, and societal division in an effort to determine how these variables foster vulnerability within a municipality. The findings of this research must inform the basis of P/CVE programming.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Rationale for the Study

Within the global narrative of developing effective measures to counter terrorism, strategies regarding the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) have increasingly been adopted by governments alongside and in complement to counterterrorism measures. Where there was once only an effort to prevent an act of terror before it happened, often expressed through a lens of securitisation, P/CVE has now developed as a “soft approach” to countering terrorism which “underscores the fact that violent extremism is as much, if not more a social issue, as a security one” (Aly 2015, 1). As Anne Aly argues:

*Approaches that focus only on public safety, national security, law enforcement and punitive measures not only neglect this fact, they also disempower communities and civil society organisations to become mechanisms of social change (2015, 1).*

As such, a singular, securitised approach to countering terrorism is problematic, does not address or involve all stakeholders in the reduction of extremism, and does little to provide a comprehensive policy response to deal with what is increasingly seen as complex societal issues.

In the context of the Western Balkans, and particularly in the Republic of Macedonia, the adoption of P/CVE initiatives, including the development of P/CVE action plans by Western Balkan governments alongside counter-terrorism strategies, have been slow in development and implementation. While some research has been undertaken in this area, and in particular by regional think tanks, successive Macedonian governments have prioritised the aforementioned securitisation approach in their strategies. Moreover, much of the research undertaken has focused solely upon the individual drivers and factors contributing to the rise in violent extremism (for example, Kadri and Shabani 2018, Selimi and Stojkovski 2016). Further, compared to fellow Western Balkan countries such as Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular, less research has been conducted within the Macedonian context. As such, gaps in the literature exist.

Therefore, the purpose of this research paper is to expand upon the current body of research, and address the phenomenon of violent extremism from a hitherto unexplored avenue – it seeks to investigate, understand, and contextualise community-level dynamics of municipalities within the Republic of Macedonia deemed to be highly-affected, moderately affected, and unaffected by the phenomenon of violent extremism. It is the aim of the report to provide policymakers with further data, guidance, and context in developing a comprehensive strategy for the prevention and countering of violent extremism. Moreover, the research scope is not general; rather, it delves into the specifics of three municipalities in Macedonia – Cair, Gostivar, and Struga – in an effort to determine what makes one municipality more or less affected by violent extremism.

The report is divided into three broad chapters – methodology, exploration of findings, and the analysis of findings – and ends with an overall conclusion based on the findings of the report. The ethos of the fieldwork is described first, then the findings themselves presented, followed by an analysis of said findings. By constructing the report in such a way, it is the aim of the researchers for the readers to develop a deep understanding of the country context and how the overall findings are specific to the Republic of Macedonia.

## 1.2 Country Background

According to the last census, undertaken in 2002, the population of the Republic of Macedonia is 2,022,547. Regarding the ethnic backgrounds of its citizens, 64 percent are ethnic Macedonians, comprising the majority

group. Ethnic Albanians are the second-largest ethnic group, making up 25.17 percent of the population, with Turks in third place at 3.85 percent, followed by several other ethnic groups amounting to numerically negligible percentages of the population. Overall, 33.3 percent of the population is Muslim. Religious persuasion is predominantly divided along ethnic lines, with most ethnic Macedonians practicing Eastern Orthodoxy, and ethnic Albanians practicing Islam (State Statistical Office 2002).

These various ethnic and religious groups have coexisted relatively without conflict for centuries, but tensions do exist; while Macedonia largely escaped the violent conflicts resulting from the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, these tensions did eventually culminate in violence. The 2001 Armed Conflict was a short-lived conflict between the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) and the Macedonian security forces. As a result, 75 Macedonians were killed, and as many as 100 NLA fighters were killed (Bender 2013, 341).

Though violent, the Armed Conflict resulted in the deaths of about 205 civilians (Bender 2013, 341) – far less when compared to the near 140,000 casualties of the wars of the 1990s following the breakup of the former Yugoslavia (International Centre for Transitional Justice 2009, 1). Peace was brokered through the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which increased the rights for ethnic Albanians living in Macedonia and established rules for power sharing between the ethnic Albanian minority and ethnic Macedonian majority. Despite these legal gains, nationalism and the exploitation of ethnic narratives on both sides are propagated to this day (Popovska and Ristoska 2015, 63).

However, although the grievance narratives on both sides did not have their inception with the Armed Conflict – rather, they have been decades in the making – the specific narratives leading up to the conflict centred around the perceived and actual exclusion of ethnic Albanians economically, politically, and socially from Macedonian civic life. For ethnic Macedonians, the grievance narratives centred upon the fears of territorial encroachment, and loss of majority status. While this subject of inter-ethnic tension and real/perceived discrimination on both sides could be an entire report unto itself, it is important to present the baseline narratives on both sides to better understand and situate the findings of the fieldwork.

While relations between the two ethnicities have ameliorated since 2001, the relationship remains fragile. Since the OFA entered into force, Macedonia has experienced several smaller-scale episodes of ethnic violence, particularly in the 2010s. These included violent protests, attacks on police, ethnically-motivated attacks, and beatings. Moreover, these usually increased in number and magnitude in the run-up to election periods, likely due to political parties on both sides exploiting ethnic tensions as part of their election strategies.

The tension between the two sides has resulted in two opposing and mutually-reinforcing areas of sensitivity: in general, Albanians experience both actual and perceived discrimination by and isolation from the majority ethnic Macedonians, and ethnic Macedonians, through various political events and the empowerment of Albanians, experience perceived loss of significance and status.<sup>1</sup> These tensions have the potential to make narratives of violent extremism more attractive to either side, and leave space for the potentiality of radicalisation.

More recently, a political conflict engulfed the Republic of Macedonia, and the legal ramifications are still being felt to this day. The former government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, was embroiled in a political crisis due to the uncovering of a mass wiretapping scandal that implicated the then-ruling VMRO-DPMNE party (Bechev 2017). Ethnic tensions were also reignited just months after the beginning of the wiretapping scandal when, in May of 2015, there was a brief but deadly conflict between an armed group and the Macedonian police in Kumanovo, a city 25 miles north of Skopje. The Director of the Intelligence Service, Saso Mijalkov, and the Minister of Interior, Gordana Jankulovska, resigned following the failure of intelligence to predict the conflict. The political crisis was only overcome with the signing of the Przino Agreement in July 2015, and elections were subsequently held in December 2016 (European

<sup>1</sup> Until the 2001 conflict, Ethnic Albanians faced discrimination regarding employment in the public sector, access to education, lack of access to materials in their native tongue, among others. Following the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, many rights were provided to the Albanians, which some Macedonians perceived as unfair. For a more detailed discussion, see Cecik and Petkovska-Hristova 2014.

Commission 2015). During the political crisis and subsequent election cycle, ethnic tensions were stoked through fearmongering, propaganda, and the political pitting of one ethno-nationalist narrative against the other for perceived political gain. After the formation of a new government by now-Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, the election of an ethnic Albanian as speaker of parliament led to the storming of Parliament by predominantly Macedonian nationalists protesting his election; resulting from this, 77 parliamentarians were injured in the fracas (Day and Sherlock 2017). While the events being described are at a high political level, the stoking of ethnic tensions and political uncertainty was undoubtedly felt at the local level by ordinary citizens. It is important to note that the previous regime of VMRO-DPMNE, which was the ruling party in Macedonia from 2006 through the political crisis of 2015-2017 until June 2017, tended not to abide by the rule of law in the country while using nationalist narratives to maintain its grip on power. It did this through fearmongering and propaganda that utilized conflicts and divisions with ethnic Albanians to feed the nationalism of its people, by intimidating media and civil society as well as the opposition, and through corruption/bribery. Inducing ethnic conflict was not their main goal but was merely used as a pretext to achieve destabilization, which would feed their nationalist narrative and strengthen their grip on power. This political context must be kept in mind when it comes to the actual and perceived marginalization of ethnic Albanians in the country and its ability to drive them to various forms of extremism.

Despite these initial incidents of violence, from a political standpoint the election of a new government holds the potential for improved engagement and interaction between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. However, the conditions that led to the development of the foreign fighter phenomenon remain largely unchanged and, as such, must be addressed before violent extremism can be eradicated in full.

### 1.3 Violent Extremism in Macedonia – A Brief Overview

As of 2018, 150 Macedonian citizens had left the country as foreign fighters to join paramilitary formations in Syria and Iraq (FOIA Act Answer, MOI). The overwhelming majority of these foreign fighters have been ethnic Albanian Muslims (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski 2018). Comparatively to other Western Balkan countries, Macedonia has the highest per capita of foreign fighters emanating from its Muslim population – 1 in 4,545 people<sup>2</sup> (see: Table 1). Moreover, Macedonia has the second-highest number of returnees (80) amongst its regional neighbours, second only to Kosovo at 130 (Azinovic 2018, 9). As Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski (2018, 12) highlight, these numbers pose significant questions about the general levels of non-violent extremism found within the Muslim population in Macedonia.

**Table 1: Foreign fighter recruitment among Muslim populations in the Western Balkans**

Country	foreign fighters per 100,000 muslims	prevalence of foreign fighters in muslim population
Albania	7	1 in 14,286
Bosnia and Herzegovina	13	1 in 7,692
Macedonia	22	1 in 4,545
Kosovo	18	1 in 5,555
Montenegro	19	1 in 5,263
Serbia	22	1 in 4,545

Source: Azinovic 2018, 6.

2 Tied for first place with Serbia.



Moreover, according to the Ministry of the Interior, there have not been any recorded foreign fighter departures since 2017 (FOIA Act Answer, MOI). Secondary research also indicates that as of 2017, foreign fighter flows out of Macedonia have effectively ceased, predominantly for reasons related to both the difficulty of reaching Syria and Iraq, given new terrorism legislation, as well as the disintegration of the territory in Syria and Iraq under control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski 2018, 12). However, this does not necessarily mean that support for extremist ideas has dissipated; rather, those extremists who are violently inclined no longer have a foreign outlet, which raises important policy questions regarding the Macedonian threatscape vis-à-vis the potentiality of those individuals conducting domestic attacks. Moreover, with the regionally-high number of returnees now back in Macedonia, it is important that P/CVE efforts also now shift to address those who have returned. Given the lack of reintegration and rehabilitation programmes in place to deal with returnees (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski 2018), however, the domestic landscape is becoming increasingly convoluted and problematic.

## 1.4 Current Approaches to P/CVE Programming

As of February 2018, the Republic of Macedonia adopted its first P/CVE strategy as part of a broader effort in countering terrorism. This is part of a four-year strategy (2018-2022) put forward by the current Zaev government, which aims to align Macedonian P/CVE and counter-terrorism efforts with those of the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). While this is a positive step, the adoption of such a strategy has come several years after the implementation of P/CVE strategies by fellow Western Balkan countries. Moreover, the strategy itself is insufficiently comprehensive, lacking in expertise, and predominantly focuses on the security and law enforcement aspects of P/CVE – it does little to acknowledge that extremism and violent extremism are not just a security issue, but a social one as well.

Regarding personnel responsible for C/PVE, no coordinating body existed before 2017. For a brief period, there was a counter-terrorism (CT) coordinator, who also worked on CVE. After he left, the position was vacant for a year and a half. The appointment of coordinators in June 2017, with a focus on P/CVE in addition to CT, is a very positive step in that it is in keeping with the shift from a securitization-focused approach to a more holistic, society-based approach to VE. However, although a national P/CVE coordinator and deputy coordinator were appointed, these individuals lack the human and material resources to carry out this strategy. For example, the coordinators were not given a physical office space for several months by the government in which to fulfil their obligations.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, international institutions have given significant support to the coordinators: The OSCE Mission to Skopje and the Embassies of the United States and the United Kingdom have supported them in writing the strategy and in organizing roundtable discussions with community representatives.

From a civil society standpoint, P/CVE efforts have traditionally been quite thin on the ground. Some initiatives have been put in place, such as the Mother Schools project carried out in Cairo by Women Without Borders or the Educate2Prevent programme carried out by Nexus Civil Concept and its partners. The Mother Schools project is an international project, which aims to raise awareness on how to counter extremism; it seeks to enhance the competences and capabilities of mothers by empowering them to help build community-based strategies to counter radical ideologies. Similarly, Educate2Prevent aims to enable parents and front-line school workers to help identify and prevent violent extremism amongst youth. However, while ambitious in their scope, there is no evidence to determine the effectiveness of these initiatives.

In addition to these projects and programmes, there have also been some prescriptive research efforts carried out relating to P/CVE by the International Organization for Migration, Analytica Think Tank, and the British Council.

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3 As of mid-2018, the coordinators now have an office.

Finally, it is important to briefly discuss the potential relationship between the implementation of peacebuilding efforts in Macedonia following the 2001 Armed Conflict, the current status of ethnic relations across the country, and extremism. Given the nature of the Armed Conflict that occurred in Macedonia, peacebuilding was undoubtedly an effort to bridge the gaps that existed between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians after the outbreak of violence in 2001. However, much of the critique of the post-OFA period has been related to its implementation – while there were significant structural changes that were implemented at the state and municipal levels to address ethnic issues, little was done to implement any concerted, long-term, locally-driven peacebuilding activities.

In broad terms, the OFA – the agreement that resulted in the cessation of violence – provided the framework for equitable representation of ethnic Albanians within government. While the peace was certainly welcome and seen as a positive outcome, critiques of the OFA have come from all sides. Some critics of the OFA argue that it “promotes collective as opposed to individual rights [...] thus, Albanians are now identified as a collective rather than as Macedonian citizens” (Pearson 2002, 6), which has left some ethnic Albanians seeing the OFA as inconsistently implemented (Milovanovic-Fazliu, 2015). Moreover, some ethnic Macedonians interpret the OFA as having “put an end to the conflict” but not “an end to the sources of the conflict” (Reka, 2011), and thus maintain grievances on their end for what they see as Albanian territorial aggression. As such, an “us versus them” mentality has continued to flourish in some communities in Macedonia – both for ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians – thus leaving an environment that is potentially conducive to extremist narratives to take hold.

In sum, while a discussion of the post-conflict implementation of the OFA in Macedonia is a topic worthy of its own lengthy report, the effort here is to question how effective the implementation of any P/CVE strategies can be without considering the ramifications of the OFA, and how realistically sustainable such strategies can be without addressing the residual societal outcomes and realities of the post-Armed Conflict period.

## 2 Methodology

This research aims to provide an insight into three different municipalities within the Republic of Macedonia – Cair, Gostivar, and Struga – and seeks to understand what makes a municipality affected or unaffected by the proliferation of violent extremism. This is in contrast to previous reporting on this topic, which has generally provided a broad overview of violent extremism within the Macedonian context.

Cair, Gostivar, and Struga<sup>4</sup> were selected as “sites” of investigation based on their perceived levels of affectedness by violent extremism, as determined by the researchers. This selection of municipalities was based upon the researchers’ previous knowledge and experience on this topic within the Macedonian context, and upon the figures of foreign fighter emanating from these municipalities. Based on this analysis, the researchers identified Cair as highly affected, Gostivar as moderately affected, and Struga as relatively unaffected by violent extremism.

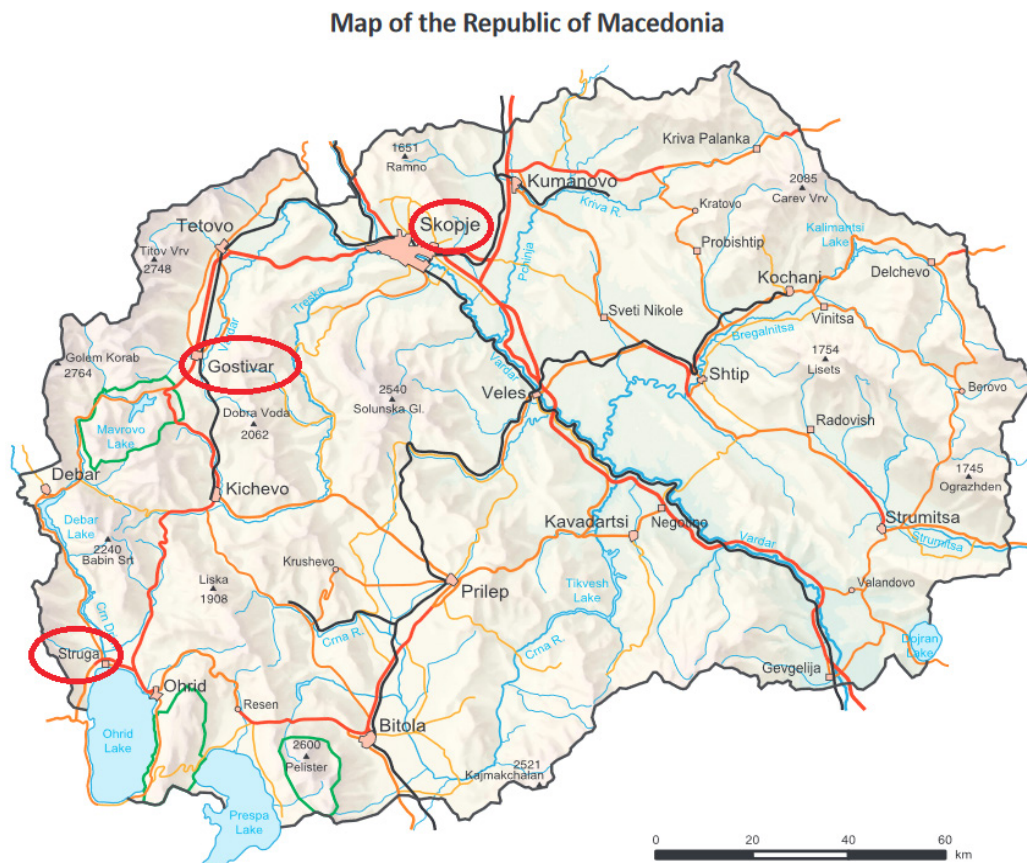
These municipalities are all predominantly ethnically Albanian, similar in size in terms of population, and are all urban areas. Cair is one of the ten municipalities that forms the Macedonian capital of Skopje, and houses a population of approximately 65,000 people (Makedonija.name, 2018). Struga and Gostivar are separate cities that are located within the western region of Macedonia that borders on Albania. Their

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4 See map for municipality locations, circled in red. Please note that Cair is one of the ten municipalities that form the city of Skopje.

populations are 37,000 and 51,000 respectively (World Population Review, 2018). However, as the last census in Macedonia was taken in 2002, the numbers regarding educational attainment, employment, and other socioeconomic data that is relevant for this analysis are outdated.

While all three municipalities are multi-ethnic, Cair is widely viewed as being the most ethnically divided of the three – indeed, of any municipality within the Republic of Macedonia – and is characterised by heightened tensions between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians. Moreover, while Cair itself is majority ethnic Albanian, it is but one municipality Skopje, a city which whose majority population is ethnically Macedonian.



Source: State Statistical Office ([www.stat.gov.mk](http://www.stat.gov.mk))

## 2.1 Concepts and Terminology

Before engaging further with the methodology, it is important to define what is meant by the terms radicalisation, extremism, and violent extremism. Rather than engaging in a lengthy academic debate about the myriad interpretations of these terms, for the purposes of this report, the researchers have chosen specific definitions for the aforementioned terminologies.

According to Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins (2015, 960), **radicalisation** “involves adopting an extremist worldview, one that is rejected by mainstream society and one that deems legitimate the use of violence as a method to effect societal or political change”. Within the context of this report, an “extremist worldview” refers to Islamist extremism; that is, a kind of **extremism** “based on an informed by the political ideology of Islamism” (Mahood and Rane 2017, 17) which, according to the

British government, constitutes an “absolute rejection of democracy, personal liberty and human rights, as well as a commitment to restoring a self-proclaimed ‘caliphate’ and establishing a brutal and literalist interpretation of sharia law” (HM Government 2018, 16). In the most literal and broad sense, an extremist individual espouses such a worldview, but has not engaged in violence toward its implementation.

Further, according to USAID (2011, 2), violent extremism “refers to advocating, engaging in, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic, and political objectives”. As such, **violent extremism** is defined by violence of action undertaken in line with and in support of extremist narratives and objectives. It is critical to note that all of these phenomena are different from terrorism, which is also broad in definition, but can refer to “any action...that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such act...is to intimidate a population or to compel a government or international organization to do or abstain from doing any act”.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is important to note that not all individuals who espouse an extremist worldview as defined above will become violent; rather, while some may turn to violence, others may just remain ideologically extreme. Equally important, moreover, is the understanding that just because an individual does not become violently extreme does not mean that they do not pose a potential threat. Non-violent extremism can foster an environment that is conducive to violent extremism, wherein individuals who are not-yet-violent can more easily take the step toward violence. Individuals who are not-yet-violent differ from those who are non-violent insofar as the former non-use of violence is “is based merely on pragmatic, tactical and/or temporal considerations [...] not on a principled political philosophy (Schmid 2014, 14). Therefore, the not-yet-violent extremist lacks not the desire for violence – just the means.

## 2.2 Fieldwork Design

The fieldwork was conducted on location within the three municipalities, where both interviews and focus groups were held. Overall, there were three focus groups conducted in each municipality, in addition to six interviews in Cair, nine interviews in Struga, and seven interviews in Gostivar.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with relevant local actors, including NGO representatives, teachers, local government leaders, and religious figures. The rationale for including these voices within the research was to identify how the issues of violent extremism and community affectedness are perceived by grassroots actors and stakeholders, and to include a diverse range of perspectives within the report’s dataset. The research team ensured that those interviewed were authoritative voices on the topic of preventing and countering violent extremism, as it related to their various fields, and their responses were analysed for trends and commonalities. Finally, gatekeepers were not required for access to these individuals; rather, the researchers’ extensive network of contacts within the country proved sufficient in this regard.

A variety of focus groups were held in each municipality, and were divided along different demographic lines. The effort here was to ensure that diversity was represented in as many categories as possible. In each municipality, there was one focus group held that comprised individuals within the 18-25 age range, as well as another group for individuals within the 25-45 age range; both of these groups were gender-mixed. It was also important for the researchers to conduct a focus group in each municipality that was all-female. This was written into the research design to better enable women’s voices to be heard, as gender roles in certain ethnic groups in Macedonia make women feel less empowered in mixed-gender settings; in this way, all-female focus groups were designed to make women feel more comfortable expressing their opinions on the research topic.

Although the focus groups were categorised based on age demographic and gender, there was one commonality for all the groups held – the researchers ensured that each group was multi-ethnic. This was

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5 United Nations 2004. Quoted in Schmid 2004. 393-394.



written into the research design for two key reasons. First, it was to ensure that no particular ethnic group was being excluded, over-represented, made to feel isolated, or singled out for being seen as “extreme”. Second, it was important for the research to represent, as much as possible, the ethnic make-up of the Republic of Macedonia, thus providing a richer narrative on how local specifics may contribute to the affectedness or unaffectedness of a municipality.

To collect the fieldwork data, the researchers mainly took notes during the interviews and focus groups. While a few of the interviews were recorded, the researchers tried not to rely on this method too significantly, as they thought that the participants would feel more comfortable and freer to express themselves on such a sensitive topic without the added pressure of being recorded. Where recordings existed, these were stored safely in the offices of the project’s manager.

The collection of research data remained ethically sound, as the participants were not named, nor asked to divulge information which may have placed them in harm’s way. The participants were left to speak freely on that which they deemed appropriate, and were not pressured to speak on topics to which they felt uncomfortable. The interview and follow-up questions were open and objective, and designed to spark the sharing of individual opinions rather than leading individuals in any particular direction. Moreover, the researchers aimed to provide comfortable, non-judgemental environments for the interviews and focus groups to take place.

## 2.3 Analytical Framework

To undertake its analysis, this report employs an interpretation of Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins’ Puzzle Theory, which is a theoretical synthesis for understanding pathways to violent extremism. It proposes four factors – personal and collective grievances, networks and interpersonal ties, political and religious ideologies, and enabling environments and support structures – as its framework for analysis. However, based on the findings of the fieldwork, this report has chosen to synthesise these four factors into three broader factors:

- ≡ Enabling environments and support structures
- ≡ Extreme ideologies, networks, and interpersonal ties
- ≡ Collective and personal grievances<sup>6</sup>

Hafez and Mullins’ framework was employed as a frame of analysis because it is derived from a synthesis of empirical research on the topic of radicalisation, and concludes that the above-mentioned factors are the most-commonly identified and examined within that body of literature. As such, the factors are an embodiment of a scholarly consensus. Moreover, the theory provides space for an analysis that is cognizant of the fact that although the factors appear within the scholarly body of work, the “context and circumstances of their convergence varies”. As Hafez and Mullins (2015, 961) explain:

*Just as similarly constructed jigsaw puzzles can reveal different images once their pieces are interconnected, cases of radicalisation can exhibit tremendous diversity even when the variables of radicalisation are reoccurring.*

In this way, Hafez and Mullins’ theory provides a framework through which once can present radicalisation toward violent extremism as a multifactor process that is both diverse and multifaceted. Such a framework ensures that a contextualised approach can be espoused in understanding an individual’s trajectory toward violent extremism.

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<sup>6</sup> The four factors found in Hafez and Mullins’ theory were synthesised into these three broader factors as to better reflect the trends found in the fieldwork data.

## 2.4 Limitations in Research

The data collected through the fieldwork exercise is qualitative in nature. In most circumstances, however, due to the access-to-information environment in Macedonia it is difficult to complement this qualitative data with quantitative data. The report needed to rely solely on the perceptions and experiences of those individuals living in the researched municipalities, as it was difficult to acquire specific statistics and numerical data relating to instances of violent extremism within said municipalities due to the constraints of governmental information disclosure.

Additionally, due to legal constraints, the researchers could not directly engage with any individuals who had left these municipalities to become foreign fighters.<sup>7</sup> Such engagement would have afforded the researchers a more comprehensive picture as to what impacts upon an individual's susceptibility to violent extremism. As such, the research is limited to describing the perceived factors leading to violent extremism, obtained through observation.

Finally, the researchers attempted to offset any potential personal biases they had toward the subject-matter by designing the research questions and follow-up questions for both interviews and focus groups to be open-ended and non-leading.

# 3 Exploration Of Findings

Without understanding the factors leading to violent extremism in the Macedonian context, it is impossible to discuss what makes a municipality and the individuals therein more or less resistant to the extremist call. For the three municipalities examined in this report – Cair, Gostivar, and Struga – this section seeks to present and examine a thematic overview of the vulnerabilities observed through the conduct of fieldwork.

## 3.1 Analytic Approaches

As articulated in the methodology chapter, these findings will be presented based a methodology developed by Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, in their theoretical work on empirical approaches to homegrown extremism.<sup>8</sup>

While Hafez and Mullins' methodology argues that there are four factors which, in varying levels of connectivity, come together to produce violent extremism, this report has synthesized those into three broad factors based on the findings of the fieldwork. Moreover, it should be noted that while the findings have been categorised in this way, the overlap and interconnectivity between these factors is what gives the core methodology its groundings in examining pathways to violent extremism. Finally, the

<sup>7</sup> The legal restraints mentioned here refer to Article 322-A of the Macedonian criminal code, which was introduced to address violent extremism and flow of foreign fighters from the country. This article also broadly states that if an individual has any information relating to violent extremism, that individual must report it to the police or face up to five years in prison. This hampered the researchers' access to information insofar as potential interviewees with either a suspected direct or secondary connection with violent extremism had no desire to be interviewed. Additionally, this made the researchers' ability to conduct interviews with incarcerated violent extremists in prison impossible, thus further compounding the researchers' ability to engage with either returnees or individuals incarcerated on terrorism-related offences.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this methodology, please see: M. Hafez and C. Mullins (2015). "The radicalisation puzzle: a theoretical synthesis of empirical approaches to homegrown extremism". *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38: 958-975.

factors which are more thematically structural in nature are presented first, followed by those which are individual, in an effort to understand how vulnerabilities at the broader structural level trickle down and affect the individual, grassroots level.

The three factors are as follows (based on Hafez and Mullins 2015, 961):

- 1) Enabling environments and support structures
  - ▶ These factors relate to both physical and virtual settings, ranging from access to extremist materials both in the virtual and real worlds, to “sites” of extremism, such as *para-jamaats* and extremist educational facilities
  - ▶ Equally, “environments” can be in reference to a high-level view of both the societies and municipalities at large, and how those environments can be conducive for extremist narratives to take hold
- 2) Extreme ideologies, networks, and interpersonal ties
  - ▶ The influence of “master narratives about the world” that “frame personal and collective grievances into broader political critiques of the status quo”
  - ▶ Ideologies are able to be propagated, diffused, and authenticated through networks and interpersonal ties
  - ▶ Networks as milieus offer “opportunities for socialisation with radicals”, the satisfaction of “psychological needs such as the search for meaningful relationships and a quest for significance”, and they may also “entrap individuals through dynamics of peer pressure [and] groupthink” which can “increase exit costs and solidify commitments to violence”
- 3) Collective and personal grievances
  - ▶ The use/abuse of grievance narratives such as cultural alienation or economic marginalisation, feelings of victimhood and personal disaffections and crises that leads “one to seek a new path in life”

Once this thematic overview is presented, the findings will then delve into the perceived areas of resilience and discuss each within the context of the Cair, Gostivar, and Struga municipalities. Building on this section, the subsequent chapter will engage in a broader analysis of the interplay between vulnerability and resilience factors, and discuss how these factors shape the dynamics of the municipalities in question vis-à-vis the threat posed by violent extremism

## 3.2 Factors of Vulnerability

### 3.2.1 Enabling Environments and Support Structures

#### Continued inter-ethnic tension as vulnerability

Although less explicitly articulated by respondents in some municipalities, the prevailing underlying factor across each, from a broad strategic level, was the oft-unaddressed inter-ethnic tension that belies Macedonia as a whole. As mentioned previously, one of the defining factors for Macedonia in the post-Armed Conflict period has been the management of what became a structurally multi-ethnic society after the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, and the subsequent developments after that accord. While the Agreement set the groundwork for increasing the rights of ethnic Albanians and formalised power-sharing agreements, the country has seen occasional ethnic clashes and the stoking of ethnic identities at the state level for political gains. At best, the situation has remained precarious, and at worst, has provided exploitable grievance narratives for extremist ideologues and recruiters. Moreover, the reality that virtually

all of the Macedonian foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria have been ethnic Albanians emphasises the notion that ethnicity, while not being on its own a determining factor of radicalisation, is associated with conditions that make individual more vulnerable to extremism, and this is largely due to socio-political determinants within the Macedonian context.

If one were to investigate the political structure of Macedonia at the state level in the post-Armed Conflict period, it is possible to see how political actions undertaken during this timeframe have influenced the creation of an “enabling environment” for extremism within the country. In their report on issues of radicalisation in Macedonia, Qehaja and Perteshi’s (2018, 8) fieldwork uncovered that amongst their respondents, there was a prevailing feeling that the nationalist rule under VMRO-DPMNE from 2006-2015 was defined by the government’s efforts to “maintain a tense inter-ethnic situation to incite fear in order to preserve their political domination in Macedonian politics”.

During this period, Qehaja and Perteshi (2018, 8) attest that ethnic Albanians “were often marginalised, leading many individuals to seek alternatives, which included participation in radical groups”. Moreover, in her testimony to the United State Senate Committee on Foreign Relations’ Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, Dr Majda Ruge (2017) argued that “nationalist rule [is] the single most important domestic driver of [...] radicalisation” within the Western Balkan region, in which nationalist leaders “prevent reconciliation by manipulating societal divisions in order to distract from failures in governance”.

While the details of the post-Armed Conflict Macedonian context are unique, the over-arching factors leading to this fragility are not unique within the Western Balkans. As Karakatsanis and Herzog (2016, 199-204) outline:

*The emergence of contentious politics in South-Eastern Europe in the late 2000s can be comparatively examined from the perspective of radicalisation processes involving both societies and states amidst a contemporary crisis of liberal democracy. These events and processes took place within a wider growing transnational geography of protests and claim-making at the end of the first decade of the new millennium... [These processes can] amplify ‘politics of closure’ and intensify phobic-conservative violent responses in the name of protecting national or communal homogeneity, values and/or public order.*

To put this in the Macedonian context, it is possible to understand how nationalist politics overtook the desired post-conflict aims of liberal democracy, thus allowing space for more radical lines to be drawn within society. While this report is not attempting to argue that political posturing and decision-making is the *root cause* of extremism in Macedonia, it is putting forth the argument that such posturing has created an enabling environment in which Hafez and Mullins’ thematic factors leading to violent extremism can gain purchase.

## **Institutional apathy and the lack of public trust as an enabling environment**

Fieldwork analysis has indicated that a general perception exists amongst respondents regarding the connection between institutional vulnerability or weakness and the spread of extremism within Macedonia. While much of this discussion surrounded state institutions and structures, respondents also criticised the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) and the media for their inadequate responses to the spread of extremism.

### **a) State Institutions**

Many of the participants placed some of the blame for the proliferation of extremism within Macedonia on state and local institutions for their lack of interest in engaging with the topic, and a lack of support for local entities attempting to fight this phenomenon. This sentiment was also shared when it came to the



issue of returning foreign fighters, where respondents saw a deficit in both policy and structure to deal with this burgeoning issue.

From a local perspective, a representative from the Mayor's Office in Cair criticised the lack of a specialised body at the municipal level to deal with countering and preventing violent extremism, but equally noted that "above all, we do not have the expertise [to address] this phenomenon" (Cair Mayor's Office). Similarly, in Gostivar, a representative from their Mayor's Office indicated that a municipal council had been established to engage with issues related to extremism, but that it was "no longer working due to institutional mistrust" and there is now no such body existing in the municipality (Gostivar Mayor's Office). Additionally, the 25 to 45-year-old focus group in Struga indicated that, in their experience, even when institutions did exist, individuals who were seeking information regarding the countering and prevention of violent extremism did not seek out help from said institutions "as a result of the fact that trust in the institutions is very low" (Struga FG 25-45).

Another issue raised by respondents was a lack of acknowledgement on behalf of state-level institutions regarding the risk that violent extremism posed in the Macedonian context. As the Struga-based NGO indicated, "the state institutions are not yet prepared to prevent the spreading of this phenomenon [...] until recently they even denied the existence of this issue; they do not have a clear idea or plan on how to counter this phenomenon (Struga NGO 1). The 18 to 25 year old Cair focus group indicated this sentiment as well: "the lack of interest from the state is the main issue" (Cair FG 18-25). As such, it is possible to see how the lack of structural integrity and forethought on behalf of state and local level institutions regarding the extremist threat is systemically problematic.

More broadly speaking, the level of public trust in state institutions is problematic. In 2013, 54 percent of ethnic Macedonians trusted the national government, whilst that number was only 35 percent for ethnic Albanians. However, when it comes to trust in local governments, the gap between ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian trust in state institutions becomes significantly narrower – around five percent, rather than close to 20 percent (Krzalovski 2013). This is suggestive of two realities, which work to reinforce exploitable narratives of exclusion: that ethnic Albanians trust their local leaders more than they trust the central government and that there is a perceived and/or actual marginalisation of ethnic Albanians on a national level in Macedonia.

### *b) The media*

There was a sense from respondents that, for the media, there was reluctance to talk about or report on issues related to extremism for fear of the repercussions of such debates and discussions. As one media representative from Struga indicated, "journalists here are frightened to inform or to speak on certain topics", and pointed to a lack of mechanisms on the state level to protect those who engage in debates surrounding extremism (Struga Media). The Gostivar Mayor's Office, moreover, indicated that even when debates do occur, they are often one-sided, and not inclusive of all stakeholders: "Cooperation between all actors is mostly ceremonial; media debates should be initiated where religious representatives will participate, but I am of the opinion that there is no real will in this regard" (Gostivar Mayor's Office). As such, it is possible to see that at a broad societal level, there is a lack of engagement with issues related to extremism, and when there is, it is not inclusive of all players. The societal environment as such lacks the permissiveness to engage with these issues due to their "taboo" nature, which is harmful for those attempting to counter and prevent extremism narratives.

### *c) The IRC*

It was the view of many of those interviewed that the IRC is lacking in public trust and does not have appropriate authority over certain mosques within Macedonia, thus allowing a space and enabling environment for extremist narratives to take hold. This was an issue noted across all the municipalities,

which suggests that the inception of this issue stems from the IRC itself, rather than specific communities in Macedonia. Moreover, these findings are reflected in secondary source data from the Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation (2016): their research indicated that public trust in the IRC has declined between 2008 and 2016, from 77 percent to 50 percent. This period also saw a significant rise in Macedonian foreign fighters, and the proliferation of extremist mosques.

Respondents from the Gostivar 25-45 year old focus group felt quite strongly in this regard, stressing that “the IRC as a religious institution has failed [...] and they do not have the trust from the population” (Gostivar FG 25-45). A Cair-based NGO articulated the same sentiment: “The problem is that the IRC do not want to confess and accept that they do not have the trust from the believers, they do not have the credibility and integrity, especially in Cair”. Respondents from the Struga all-female focus group added further that the IRC cannot interfere in the businesses of some mosques, as they are “financed from abroad and the building of these mosques was financed by these funds” (Struga FG Women).

Further on this point, one Gostivar-based imam highlighted that “there is not a department from the IRC that monitors and controls” mosques which are built and funded from abroad. He identified that imams are also brought in who have been educated abroad to preach at these mosques, but that there is no way to verify what interpretations of Islam they are preaching upon their positioning within Macedonian mosques. Most problematically, he outlined, was the “importation of ideas from Saudi Arabia” that have taken hold through the arrival of these imams (Gostivar imam).

Upon speaking with the respondents, much of this lack of credibility and integrity appears to stem from the proliferation of illegal mosques across the country, also known as *para-jamaats*.<sup>9</sup> These “parallel mosques” have been allowed to pop up alongside legitimate religious establishments, presumably within the power vacuum left behind by an ineffective IRC. The proliferation of these institutions has allowed for the simultaneous proliferation of the extremist narratives that they espouse, further legitimising their narrative and diluting the moderate narratives propagated by IRC-controlled mosques. Moreover, said legitimisation has allowed the creators of these *para-jamaats* to “gradually [set] up parallel structures in other vital areas, such as in education, social services and healthcare”, thereby entrenching parallel extremist structures within broader society. These *para-jamaats* are largely found in the greater Skopje area (particularly in the neighbourhoods of Cair and Saraj), and are headed by extremist imams who were often educated in Salafist state-sponsored programmes in the Middle East (Qehaja and Perteshi 2018, 15).<sup>10</sup>

Two respondents within the all-female focus group conducted in Struga noted the longevity to which *para-jamaats* have been a known issue to the IRC. Both respondents were formerly researchers with a local NGO who, through the course of their own work, spoke to a number of IRC-appointed imams during the 2009-2013 period. They found that as long ago as 2009, the IRC was aware of the encroaching proliferation of *para-jamaats*, but that the IRC had asked its imams not to speak publicly about the issue. In their estimation, while the issue between 2009 and 2013 was more problematic due to the IRC’s denials of the phenomenon, it is an issue that continues to pose problems for the future (Struga FG Women).

Further secondary research supports the claims made by respondents in Struga’s all-female focus group. Reporting as far back as 2010 indicates that *para-jamaats* were known, yet ignored by the IRC, who are alleged to have knowingly tried to cover up the presence of these mosques in the hopes that they would dissipate (see Jovanovska and Gjorgjeski 2010). Moreover, as also evidenced in Qehaja and Perteshi’s (2018) work on extremism in Macedonia, the IRC was not only unsuccessful in acting as a singular voice for all Muslims in Macedonia, it was also extraordinarily slow to act in the face of the growing *para-jamaat* problem.

This seeming lack of control, administration, and oversight by the IRC felt across all three municipalities is staggering. If the IRC is meant to be the institutional body which regulates and manages

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion on *para-jamaats*, please see: The Atlantic Initiative (2017), European Policy Centre (2017), Qehaja and Perteshi (2018), and Stojanović-Gajić (2018).

<sup>10</sup> Qehaja and Perteshi refer to these imams as propagating a “contrasting practice of Islam” in comparison to that of the IRC. These “contrasting practices” are ones which “pose a challenge to the traditional practice of Islam, which largely coexisted with the secular state” (2018, 15). For an in-depth discussion on these points, including a discussion upon the nascence of *para-jamaats*, please see: Qehaja and Perteshi 2018.

all mosques across Macedonia, their lack of control is easily exploitable by extremist preachers who – for those members of the Muslim community who are unaware of the perceived issues in IRC leadership and control – may afford extremist-run mosques the same respect and credence as those run by the IRC, thus giving said mosques an equal amount of authority.

## Educational factors

Educational factors for violent extremism were found to be varied in type: the lack of quality religious education, the lack of information and critical thinking ability amongst the population in general, and issues related to teaching staff more broadly. While each of these factors, presented on their own, are problematic as factors for violent extremism, they are rendered ever more compounding when all three are present in any one given scenario. Moreover, educational factors have been placed within this category under the Hafez and Mullins framework because under a functional scenario, educational systems ought to provide support structures for those most vulnerable to the call of extremism.

### *a) Deficit in Religious Education*

Across the board, the most oft-mentioned of these issues was the lack of quality religious education – this was either described as poor quality religious education, or an inability to access *any* religious education. According to respondents, this deficit in religious education creates a knowledge vacuum where extremist narratives can flourish; moreover, without an authoritative narrative offering a non-extremist interpretation of Islam, there is no way for those seeking religious knowledge to decipher between moderate and extremist viewpoints. Quality, in this sense, has multiple meanings: it refers to the “availability” of religious education, from both a geographic and gender standpoint; it is unregulated in terms of content, and; it provides no connection between religious scriptures and the everyday needs of Muslims.

In Cair, for example, this issue was further compounded by a perceived lack of desire on behalf of certain parts of the populace to seek out religious “truths” – that is, religious doctrinal information about Islam – thus further allowing space for extremist narratives to take hold. While individuals from the 25-45 year old Gostivar focus group cited the “non-implementation of proper religious studies in schools” (Gostivar FG 25-45), respondents in Struga, moreover, pointed to a lack of religious education generally – whether it be Islam or Orthodox Christianity – which is reflective of a deficiency across the board in Macedonia.

### *b) Deficits in Critical Thinking*

Following this, respondents also criticised the quality of education in Macedonia more generally. The education system, they argue, leaves individuals with an inability to engage critically with information presented to them. Secondary sources are also demonstrative of this finding and suggests that this issue is rendered more deeply problematic amongst minority populations. As demonstrated by the European Training Foundation (2013, 13), evidence exists of “continuing discrimination and exclusion of vulnerable groups” such as ethnic Albanians in equal access to education. Similarly, in their work on post-conflict reconciliation in Macedonia, Popovska and Ristoska (2015, 63) highlight that “critical thinking is not on the agenda in the educational process and the young people are expected to listen rather than think”.

Focus group respondents from Cair in the 18-25 demographic spoke to this issue by stating that “not everyone has been equipped with the capacity to filter the information and think about it critically” (Cair FG 18-25), while an individual interviewed from a Gostivar NGO noted that individuals have a “difficulty distinguishing” between sets of information (Gostivar NGO 2). Further, respondents from the women’s focus group in Struga pointed to not just a lack of ability to think critically by those who engage in violent extremism, but also their support structures – one respondent relayed the story of a young man who

travelled to Syria to fight, and whose parents, despite their non-extremist views, interpreted his actions as “brave” because they were unable to critically engage with the long-term ramifications of his actions (Struga Women’s Focus Group).

While respondents pointed to this deficit in critical thinking abilities, they also stressed that this issue was further compounded by a lack of access to information regarding the dangers of extremism. This seemed to be particularly problematic within the Cair context, where the polarised nature of the municipality has impacted heavily. One high school teacher articulated that individuals “are isolated and they have a lack of integration among different nationalities; there is a lack of religious and national tolerance” which works to compartmentalise narratives and leaves little space for discussing issues that affect the community as a whole. Moreover, respondents pointed to a lack of volition to even engage in a discussion about the dangers posed by extremism in their municipalities. The Mayor’s Office in Cair articulated that “the community is not at all informed about this phenomenon – there is a big lack of debates related to this topic” (Cair Mayor’s Office). Further, a Cair-based NGO described the phenomenon as such: “There is no debate happening. They do not want to accept reality; we do not want to talk about the bad habits in [Islam]”.

### *c) Lack of Educational Support*

Respondents identified that teachers in schools were inadequately prepared for the task of educating students on the dangers posed by violent extremism. At best, it appears that the topic of violent extremism is not discussed at the staff level because of its complex and delicate nature, and that school structures do not allow for such narratives to be addressed in a broad-reaching and effective way. To date, avoidance and non-engagement has been the strategy undertaken by schools, which continues to do a disservice to those most vulnerable to the call of violent extremism.

Struga respondents seemed to be the most vocal about this issue. One high school teacher lamented that, “we tend not to talk with our students regarding these issues”, and expressed “I think that education should play a huge role here given [Struga’s proximity to] Albania” (Struga high school teacher). The Mayor’s Office in Struga touched upon the issue of ethnicity as well, while also criticising educational institutions’ approaches to this topic, by outlining that “in some schools, to avoid interethnic tensions or conflicts, the schedule of the students is divided” (Struga Mayor’s Office).

This kind of division, particularly in relation to the need for education on violent extremism within the school context, causes further polarisation and less volition on behalf of educators to address such issues. A Struga-based NGO has attempted to engage with teachers to help foster this kind of dialogue in schools, but to no avail – “there have been many initiatives in the framework of various projects to form groups that would break this lack of communication, but their lifetime is not long-lasting”. As such, even when collaboration in this area is offered, there is hesitation on behalf of educators to find space for these discussions at the institutional level.

Furthermore, the issue of teacher-based extremism must also be discussed. Within the Cair context, respondents from the all-female focus group outlined instances in their school experiences where teachers were demonstrating signs of extremism. For example, one respondent relayed an experience where she discovered that a teacher was running unauthorised prayer circles within the school library; although the director of the school was informed, nothing was done. While “unauthorised” does not automatically denote “extremist”, the occurrence of such activities does demonstrate that religiously-themed unsanctioned activities do occur, administered by individuals in positions of authority and unbeknownst to mainstream society. Another respondent from the group shared an experience of a math teacher in her school devoting one hour a day to extremist religious teachings rather than his obligations under the math curriculum, in which students were “publicly judged for their immodest clothing” and were taught extreme interpretations of Islamic religious tenets. Once again, however, nothing was done when it was brought up with the school authorities (Cair FG Women). These are critical examples – a lack

of educational support is not just something that is experienced at the teacher-student level, but also at the student-educational institution level, thus leaving students to suffer multiple points of failure.

#### *d) Gender-Based Educational Vulnerabilities*

One notable finding from the fieldwork in this area was the gendered aspect of the issue of educational vulnerability. Respondents from the all-female focus group conducted in Struga voiced that, in their experience, ethnic Albanian women in rural areas had less access to education, and thus had underdeveloped critical thinking abilities, as societal norms in those areas do not place significant value on female education. Furthermore, they are not in a position where they are able ameliorate their situation:

*[Women] do not have any kinds of rights within their families and society, they are discriminated, their only right is giving birth and raising their children, they only listen to what others say to them (Struga FG Women).*

The Cair-based 18-25 year old focus groups articulated similar sentiments: “We don’t care about a woman’s education as a primary and important process to undertake during her life...we care more about the gifts she is going to give people when she gets married” (Cair FG 18-25). In this way, female empowerment is quashed from a young age, as girls are not afforded the same political and social space as men within the ethnic Albanian community. Although a smaller finding amongst those interviewed through fieldwork, it is important to note that there is space in Macedonia for gendered approaches to countering and preventing violent extremism, which take some of these gendered rural realities into consideration.

## 3.2.2 Extreme Ideologies, Networks, and Interpersonal Ties

### **Ideological influence and ideological proximity**

In this context, “ideological proximity” refers to the ease with which an individual can access extremist materials, individuals, and viewpoints, both from a physical and temporal standpoint. The fieldwork findings demonstrate this phenomenon at play in multiple, interconnecting ways.

According to the findings in all three municipalities, there was a sense from respondents that the wide availability of extremist materials on the internet – most often propagated through social media – has undoubtedly eased the process of radicalisation and recruitment to extremist groups. One NGO representative interviewed in Gostivar articulated that the permeation of extremist materials on the internet gave the content found within a kind of added validity due to the ease of searchability, and the seemingly high quality of the media product leaves individuals less inclined to critique the information found therein (Gostivar NGO 1). On the latter point, this kind of sleek and stylised approach to media production has been the hallmark of ISIL’s media strategy, where it is possible to see this exact interplay at work (see Ingram 2016). Therefore, the idea of “proximity” to ideological influence is thus rendered smaller through electronic connection. While Macedonia may be a small country in both size and population, ease of access to extremist materials online makes that ideological influence much more proximal in reach and, perhaps paradoxically, more global in scope. Interviewees from all municipalities noted this phenomenon of ideological proximity as being both local and global.

Additionally, social media can be employed as a tool to target individuals who may be perceived to be open to extremist narratives. Interviewees in Gostivar found this to be a particular issue in their community compared to the other municipalities. One Gostivar-based imam described this as “the blind pursuit and the exploitation of weakness” by recruiters (Gostivar Imam), and the NGO representative interviewed articulated that recruiters were in the business of convincing vulnerable people of their



isolation from broader society, preying on this, and positing their extremist ideology as highly-inclusive (Gostivar NGO 1). Additionally, social media platforms have been used to quash moderate voices who attempt to dispel extremist narratives. As one media representative interviewed in Struga explained, he was “trying to give more balanced information” via online platforms, but “was threatened by anonymous people on social networks” for the articulation of his moderate views (Struga Media).

Ideological proximity, however, does not merely manifest in online platforms; rather, proximity to extreme lectures, preachers, and mosques had the effect of ‘proliferating’ nonphysical extremist material, such as the “material” disseminated orally by lectures, preachers, and mosques. This was noted as a particular point of concern in the Cair context amongst those interviewed, especially amongst mosques that were not regulated by the IRC. Respondents from the all-female focus group conducted in Cair noted that the Abdyl Kadri mosque is known for its extremist lectures that use “extreme spiritual rhetoric” and do not shy away from “open calls to join extremist groups” (FG Cair Girls 2). The group also noted that the mosque has a dubious background, as there is little known about it and its financing source is shrouded in mystery (FG Cair Girls 2).

Problematically, evidence suggests that the Abdyl Kadri mosque is not the only such mosque in the municipality. The Tutunsuz and Jahja Pasha mosques, for example, is where the infamous Rexhep Memishi – widely accepted to be the preeminent recruiter of foreign fighters in Macedonia prior to his incarceration – used to base his operations, and are located in Cair as well. In its study on the foreign fighter phenomenon in Macedonia, The Atlantic Initiative (2017, 106) noted that many foreign fighters emanating from the Cair municipality “knew each other and were influenced and recruited in the same manner” by Memishi at these mosques. The fieldwork conducted as part of this report cited similar findings for Cair, with one respondent suggesting that “there is not one single person who had not been touched by extremism in Cair”, particularly those who grew up in similar friend groups and neighbourhoods (Cair FG Women).

Furthermore, as Hafez (2016, 15) has noted, the ideological permeation of extremism among friend groups has led to the creation of radical socialisation and formation of extremist networks:

*Tight-knit kinship and friendship ties offer opportunities for radical socialisation that simultaneously satisfy psychological needs such as avoidance of cognitive dissonance, the need for maintaining meaningful relationships, and validation from valued peers [...] kinship and friendship ties can transpose radical political commitments, and these commitments, in turn, intensify the bonds of loyalty among kith and kin.*

In both Cair and Gostivar, focus group respondents pointed to individuals that they had known indirectly who had eschewed their previous friend and family networks for more extremist socialisation, and noted that this was one of their first steps on the pathway to violent radicalisation. Proximity, in this sense, is geographic – physical access to extremist preachers and their spheres of influence cause a kind of extremist socialisation, in which individuals are rendered, paradoxically, increasingly alienated from their former friend and kinship networks and further socialised with like-minded extremist thinkers into a broader network of extremism.

## **Deficit in familial cohesion**

On the whole, across all three municipalities, the respondents identified that parental figures played a critical role in articulating non-extremist interpretations of Islam, and dispelling some of the narratives found in extremist viewpoints. Respondents pointed to the link between critical areas of understanding in childhood and vulnerabilities toward extremist narratives later in life. For example, when discussing this finding with the Cair focus group comprised of 18 to 25 year olds, the familial connection became

acute. As one respondent articulated, “we didn’t have the chance to understand first the core concept of religion in order to choose later if we want to be a part of it or not. I think the young people still don’t know why they are Muslim or why they pray – they just do it” (Cair FG 18-25).

Respondents in Struga spoke to this phenomenon as well. A respondent who formed part of the Struga focus group with individuals aged 25 to 45 described a story involving a student who had been caught watching extremist materials online at school; the student’s teacher attempted to meet with the father multiple times, but to no avail (Struga FG 25-45). This example speaks not only to the need for parental figures to be involved in religious education but, more presciently, the need for them to be engaged in a continuous dialogue with their children regarding extremism, particularly in instances where educators require support from parental figures in combating radicalisation.

### 3.2.3 Collective and Personal Grievances

#### Isolation, alienation, and marginalisation as grievance narratives

In the three municipalities studied, a sense of isolation, alienation, or marginalisation was framed as an exploitable grievance narrative, in which individuals who were seeking to belong to a higher purpose or group were most vulnerable. This individual grievance is in opposition to broader society, which is responsible for a vulnerable individual’s feeling of isolation, alienation, or marginalisation.

Critically, there is a key juncture within the formation of grievance narratives where personal grievance meets collective grievance. The social aspect of extremism is critical in this regard, wherein marginalisation creates an extreme need for belonging; this is manifested in the concept of the “group” or the “brotherhood” where larger narratives of more global forms of exclusion and inclusion are simultaneously at play. According to Mahood and Rane (2017, 18), this sense of exclusion and desire for belonging are co-opted by extremist narratives, who posit the *umma* as the ultimate allegiance for Muslims; it is:

*[...] the sense of grievance that is evoked in relation to the suffering of Muslims around the world directly due to the policies of Western governments or indirectly due to Muslim rulers who they support. This sense of grievance is generally not a consequence of personal experience but fostered by the narratives of Muslim oppression.*

Recruiters then chart this participation in and belonging to the *umma* with a kind of moral obligation for action toward its protection by demonstrating the importance of “correcting the injustice that was caused to the Muslim people on a local and global level” (Cair NGO). This kind of grievance exploitation is what the United States Agency for International Development (USAID 2009, 16) refers to as “glocal grievances”, in which global issues are superimposed onto local obligations and realities.

Within the Macedonian context, this grievance narrative must also be understood within the post-Armed Conflict context as well as within the decades of exclusion and subversion that led to it, and the perception of loss felt on the part of ethnic Macedonians. As such, the perceived targeted violence against the ethnic Albanian population, as presented by those propagating extremist narratives, “is used within recruitment narratives [...] of victimhood that are propped up by remaining post-conflict realities” (Ruge 2017). While a singular ethnic Albanian individual may feel a sense of isolation, alienation, or marginalisation from broader Macedonian society, their grievances are superimposed into the larger, collective grievance narratives of the ethnic Albanian population, as defined by extremist ideological narratives.

This desire of belonging within the context of the municipalities was described as an emotional volition, in which extremist narratives afforded those vulnerable to extremism with the opportunity to find broader

meaning beyond themselves. For many, extremist interpretations of Islam addressed the isolation, alienation, and marginalisation grievances they had against broader society, and provided a sense of belonging – an ideological community based in strict and extreme religious adherence, where the singular identity of the individual was able to be superseded in importance and moral obligation by the larger idea of the *umma*.

The analysis from the fieldwork is also in line with secondary research. USAID has identified that “in many cases, what brings violent extremists together is their shared dedication to a particular vision of how society ought to be organised, and/or their strong questioning of the foundations upon which their societies are presently organised” (USAID 2009, 12). In this way, the propositioning of extremist narratives as a remedy to isolation, alienation, and marginalisation narratives within the Macedonian context afforded for the continuous reinforcement of ideologically-based narratives, which work to counteract feelings of social and political isolation for those seeking meaning and purpose beyond their individual selves.

Residents in Cair expressed that a feeling of isolation, alienation, or marginalisation – perceived or otherwise – was a persistent and ongoing feature in the dynamics of their community. For example, the all-female focus group conducted there noted that Cair suffers from many forms of extremism – be it Islamist or nationalist – and that its inhabitants live in a kind of friction with one another, where political extremism is deeply tied to ideological and religious extremism. They noted that this friction is a kind of polarisation of inhabitants, leaving little space in between for critical discussion for fear of further polarisation of the community. Moreover, in their estimation, Cair was a kind of “strategic political touchpoint” which has been historically “politically misused” and, as such, the individuals living there are “marginalised and judged” by those living elsewhere in Skopje (Cair FG Women). In this way, individuals of this community are effectively grouped, or socialised, into extreme groups on either side of the spectrum. From a standpoint of grievance narrative formation, a Cair-based NGO described this phenomenon as individuals being afforded “the opportunity to establish their status in society, in the sense that they will be part of an ‘elite’ group who share similar views”.

Respondents in Gostivar also noted that a sense of isolation, alienation or marginalisation played a role in extremist recruitment in their municipality. However, there was a sense amongst many respondents that age demographics played a role in determining the vulnerability of an individual to this kind of driver. Both a focus group and an NGO articulated that younger individuals in their teens or very early twenties were most vulnerable to feelings of isolation, as this time in their lives was predicated on the importance of group dynamics and a desire for belonging. In particular, extremist recruiters preyed upon the “victimisation and marginalisation of certain groups” (Gostivar Teacher), and were seeking out individuals who “see themselves differently from others” and who felt “an inability to express their ideas in their country or their environment” (Gostivar NGO). In this way, extremist narratives provide an identity to those who do not feel associative with mainstream society, and their socialisation with like-minded individuals helps to propagate, build up, and legitimise these narratives.

Comparatively to Gostivar and Cair, Struga seemed to be the outlier amongst the municipalities studied, insofar as isolation amongst minority groups was not systemic, but rather periodic. It was noted that isolation as a driver of extremist socialisation was most notable during election periods. In recent years in the Macedonian context, election periods have been defined by the hijacking of ethnic narratives by some parties in the support of their political agendas. The stirring of nationalism amongst both ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian voters undoubtedly impacts upon the amount of political capital that is awarded to extremist narratives, leaving little space for moderate dialogue during these periods. As one respondent from a Struga-based NGO noted, “extremes of non-acceptance of multiculturalism are achieved in the period of election campaigns” (Struga NGO 1). The NGO elaborated on this point further: “it is noticeable, the hate, the feeling of solidarity is not very much developed among the community” (Struga NGO 2). In this way, the polarisation of multi-ethnic communities is normalised, and identity politics – based on a broader sense of ethnic belonging – are manifested in extreme ways.



## Economic grievances

Macedonia currently suffers from a high rate of unemployment stemming from a poor economic climate, which currently stands at 22 percent – and reaches upwards of 55 percent in the youth demographic (CEIC 2018; European Training Foundation 2013, 8). Comparative statistics regarding the economic situation of ethnic Albanians versus ethnic Macedonians in Macedonia (e.g. employment rates, average salaries, disposable incomes, etc.) are unfortunately unavailable. This would certainly be an area for future research as an examination of general economic comparisons between the two groups, as well as a research area having a relationship to extremism, as demonstrated anecdotally by the research of this report.

Although not indicated as a primary grievance narrative associated with violent extremism, many of the respondents noted that financial motivations based on the poor economic climate of Macedonia were a potential driver toward violent extremist activity. However, it is equally important to note that respondents from one municipality – Struga – indicated that a financial motivation toward extremist activity was negligible in their context, and was more an addendum to other, more prevalent drivers toward violent extremism.

Respondents in Gostivar and Cair seemed to be on the same page regarding the potentiality of economic grievances playing an impactful role in their municipality. One teacher in Gostivar suggested that young people were particularly at risk vis-à-vis financial incentives as a potential driver, given the economic situation facing them in Macedonia (Gostivar teacher). Those interviewed in Cair felt similar: in the focus group conducted with 18-25 year olds, respondents suggested that, “for a young person to be indoctrinated is quite easy, especially when they come from the lower strata of society where they face financial issues – they find [financial incentives in response to their economic grievances] as a solution and a support” (Cair FG 18-25). However, respondents from the faith based ngo did not agree with these views (Cair NGO 2).

Respondents in Struga were less inclined to see economic grievances as potential drivers toward extremism within the context of their municipality. As one media representative articulated, “I do not think that the economical factor is influential because the people here, when they have some kind of financial issue, decide to go to western countries to work and find solutions” (Struga Media). Other Struga-based respondents felt differently, indicating that it was possible that financial arguments were a driver, although they had no concrete evidence to substantiate these claims. The only outlier in this respect was the all-female focus group conducted in Struga, who had heard instances of some families in Struga accepting \$300-\$500 USD to join extremist groups. As such, while it is possible that financial motivations may be a driver in violent extremism in Struga, there is currently no indication that it plays a significant role.

## 3.3 Factors of Resilience

As part of the fieldwork exercise, respondents were also asked to identify where sources of resilience exist within their respective municipalities – including any initiatives, programmes, or communal approaches – as well as where space could be made in the future within their municipalities for factors of resilience to take root. These findings have been grouped into thematic areas, with findings from each municipality articulated therein.

### 3.3.1 Multiculturalism

Across all municipalities, those interviewed highlighted the need for and presence of projects that stress the importance of diversity and respect within a multi-ethnic society. However, there was a significant divergence between municipalities regarding how this need was being met, if at all.

Cair respondents signalled that little was being done within their community to foster positive narratives regarding diversity – particularly, how to co-exist peacefully between different ethno-religious

groups – which was of concern to the respondents given the multi-ethnic nature of the Cair municipality. In some instances, respondents noted that there was a sense of resistance amongst certain community members to engage across multi-ethnic lines. For example, the all-female focus group identified that school-aged children would often eschew reading books by authors of a different religious background to their own, and that it was common for students to segregate by ethno-religious lines, thus separating themselves physically from their peer groups at a young age (Cair FG Girls 2). To address these gaps, Cair respondents stressed the importance of introducing low-cost or free educational projects and activities which would allow young people to engage with individuals from a variety of cultural, national, and religious backgrounds, as well as setting aside time during the school day to focus on issues related to integration.

Individuals in Gostivar and Struga responded more positively to the theme of multiculturalism in regards to approaches that their respective municipalities have taken, and noted that these initiatives have influenced their municipalities' resilience. Respondents from the 18-25 year old focus group in Gostivar identified that the individuals in their age demographic were “well-informed and practice the values of multiculturalism, tolerance, and solidarity in everyday life” (Gostivar FG 18-25). The respondent from the Gostivar Mayor's Office echoed these sentiments as well, pointing out that the Gostivar Youth Council is the main architect of organised multi-ethnic events and festivals in the municipality (Gostivar Mayor's Office). The aforementioned focus group also suggested that individuals in the community have a baseline level of respect for people of different ethno-religious backgrounds, and that there is a freedom of association, which crosses these ethno-religious lines (Gostivar FG 18-25).

However, some Gostivar-based respondents iterated that more could be done to help promote diversity and, in particular, the implementation of educational programmes to help individuals identify the links between ethno-religious intolerance and extremism (Gostivar FG women). Similarly, while the respondent from the Mayor's Office praised the efforts of the Youth Council, they noted that aside from their efforts, multi-ethnic projects across the board “have not been numerous” (Gostivar Mayor's Office).

Respondents in Struga also highlighted similar findings as their Gostivar counterparts, albeit with some notable differences. A Struga-based NGO representative articulated that individuals within the Struga municipality generally ascribe to the promotion of co-existence amongst different groups in society. For example, to aid in this effort, the NGO organises trips for young people to a variety of different locations so that they may learn from and interact with individuals outside of their ethno-religious background; youth in particular are targeted in this way as the NGO believes that they are most susceptible to extremist messaging and so use these initiatives to help counteract this phenomenon. Moreover, NGOs in Struga were broadly seen to play a key role in the facilitation of multicultural events. As one interviewee highlighted, NGOs “play a major role in organising different activities to raise awareness of violent extremism [...] many created in the absence of recreational activities and facilities in Struga”, thus inferring the importance of these actors in the face of a perceived lack of municipal initiatives.

Following this, all respondents from Struga argued that while individuals within Struga proper were less vulnerable to extremist narratives, this was not so for the villages within the municipality. Broadly speaking, the respondents described Struga as “more liberal” compared to the predominantly ethnic-Albanian villages surrounding it, and less religiously-inclined; in their view, this secularisation of Struga society made them less vulnerable to religiously-based extremist narratives, whereas this was not the case for those outside the city.<sup>11</sup> Many respondents pointed to the village of Labunishta as a particularly problematic village, with one interviewee going so far as to say that “there is a radical spirit in this village”, and the respondent from the Struga Mayor's Office describing how “almost every [...] girl in the village is covered from a young age”. Providing an insight into why rural villages within the Struga municipality may be more vulnerable to extremism than the city, the respondents from the all-female focus group

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<sup>11</sup> As articulated by: Struga Women's Focus Group, Struga 25-45 Focus Group, Struga 18-25 Focus Group, Struga Mayor's Office and Struga Interview with B.D.

conducted in Struga noted that it was difficult for P/CVE narratives and efforts to enter these villages, both literally and figuratively:

*If the Macedonian side takes some initiative on this issue, it will be automatically misunderstood in the sense that they are doing something against the Muslim or ethnic Albanian population; on the other hand, if the ethnic Albanians take these kinds of initiatives, they will be seen through a political context.*

While it is also important to note here that individuals who participated in the fieldwork for this project were not from the rural areas of the Struga municipality, and as such could be “othering” their more rural counterparts to an extent, it is nonetheless critical to further investigate the urban/rural divide in the application of P/CVE programmes.

Finally, some respondents in Struga identified that there was a gender-based gap in addressing vulnerabilities to extremism within their municipality. As the 18-25 year old focus group described it: “In Struga we can often encounter [...] gender discrimination as a kind of extremism, where women are seen at a ‘lower level’ and are not equal to men” (Struga FG 18-25). The all-female focus group conducted in Struga highlighted that educational activities needed to be directed at young women “because in these environments, the role of women in the family and in society is not discussed at all”. This lack of female empowerment, as mentioned previously, was a gendered factor of vulnerability identified by respondents. Without a gendered approach to countering extremism, respondents argued, it would be impossible for women to feel the same stake in their societies as their male counterparts enjoy within the Struga municipality (Struga Women’s FG).

### 3.3.2 Community engagement and societal awareness

Respondents stressed the need for public debates and engagement on the dangers posed by violent extremism, and extremism more generally. There was a feeling amongst all individuals that raising awareness of these subjects was critical, so that everyone in their municipalities equally understood the risks and dangers associated with allowing extremism to take hold within their societies, thus fostering another line of resilience against this phenomenon.

Across Cair, Gostivar, and Struga, respondents pointed to how engaging in debates regarding extremism within their municipalities has the potential to help foster resilience. For example, in Cair, there has been a municipally-led initiative to introduce debates and lectures within three high schools in Cair on the topic of extremism (Cair Mayor’s Office); however, the long-term impacts of this have yet to be seen given how recent the initiative’s implementation. The fieldwork suggests that this is the first attempt of this kind of initiative in the municipality. In Struga, a respondent from the municipality’s media community told the researchers about a project they had initiated for developing public debates, as no such initiative had existed prior, and the positive impact that this project had amongst community members. However, although they had run a repeating cycle of around twenty debates across the community, this project had to be stopped due to a lack of state funding (Struga Media). In this instance, while it is possible to see the positive impact of community-driven initiatives, without state support, these initiatives will not be able to have the longevity that is required for their continued impact and success.

Regarding the impacts of such initiatives, respondents in Gostivar highlighted how community engagement in and societal awareness of the dangers posed by extremism have impacted positively upon the resilience in their municipalities. For example, one respondent within the 25-45 year old focus group relayed an experience where a colleague had “tried to radicalise her” by imposing his extreme viewpoints upon her every day; however, “he did not succeed because [she] opposed him with her learned facts and ideas”, gleaned from the societal engagement amongst the Gostivar community regarding the dangers posed by extremism.

### 3.3.3 Quality of religious education

Respondents from each municipality stressed the need for an increased and streamlined quality of religious education, the propagation of moderate Islamic principles within broader society, and access to a spectrum of religious information from competing theological belief-sets so that individuals could understand both their own religious traditions, and where theirs fits into broader religious traditions at large. Most importantly, respondents from a variety of backgrounds – NGOs, imams, teachers, etc. – all indicated that access to proper religious education was a key tool in the fight against extremism.

It is possible to see the impact of improved religious education at play within the Gostivar context. For example, the 25-45 year old focus group identified that, since the publication of Islamic religious texts translated into Albanian from their original Arabic, more young people have access to what is viewed as mainstream (Hanafi school) rather than extreme interpretations of Islam, and can self-educate on religious aspects most interesting and relevant to them (Gostivar FG 25-45). While this has been an important milestone, a Gostivar-based NGO equally stressed that it was critical to see religious education such as this as a long-term strategy, in which future credible voices for moderate interpretations of Islam are fostered. Such an approach would foster a cyclical development of moderate interpretations of Islam that are solidified in trust, and leaves less space for extremist interpretations to take root. In this effort, the IRC would need to become the key agent of change, but much of their positioning in this role must be predicated by addressing their deficit of authority and jurisdiction over segments of the Islamic Community in Macedonia.

Moreover, proper religious education must also be propagated at the community level as well, as highlighted by respondents in Struga. Individuals in one of the focus groups relayed to the researchers a story about a newly-appointed imam who arrived at a mosque in Struga – when he began preaching in a radical way, the local population reacted instinctively and resolutely, and he was promptly removed from his position (Struga Women’s Focus Group). The importance of this act must not be underplayed. Respondents in Struga indicated that religious figures such as imams or muftis were the most influential people within smaller villages in Macedonia, and were, as such, amongst the most trusted institutional figures in those communities (Struga BD; Struga Media). Were an extremist imam to take hold of a mosque in a community less resilient than Struga, the ramifications would be significant.

In terms of future projects within the Struga context, the individuals consulted in another one of the focus groups indicated the importance of creating youth-orientated community spaces, in which religious education can be implemented *by* members of the municipality *for* members of the municipality. As the respondents articulated, a municipality can only be as strong as the individuals who inhabit it, and such measures would lead to the fostering of an environment in which critical thinking and debate can evolve and grow within non-ethnically-segregated narratives (Struga 25-45 Focus Group). In this way, individual resiliencies could trickle upward to strengthen the resilience of the municipality as a whole, across ethno-religious or political lines.

Within Cair, respondents indicated that there is still much to be done in terms of ameliorating both religious education generally, as well as access to it. As mentioned previously, Cair in particular has had significant issues with extremist mosques, in which extremist interpretations of Islam were perceived to have authority and authenticity given the mosques’ role in the community. As one Cair-based teacher highlighted, “religious education, whether Islamic or Christian, is the basis of protection from radicalisation”; without it, individuals are rendered more vulnerable to extremist messaging, as they do not possess the tools and the facts with which to counter it. Given the authority currently enjoyed by imams in communities, imams – in tandem with the IRC – could prove to be the integral agents of change in this area.

However, while religious education was deemed to be a critical tool in the fight against extremism, there was a sentiment shared amongst all respondents that, from a general education perspective, the teacher-student relationship could also play an important role. Given that respondents previously indicated

that this relationship often could be a factor of vulnerability for school-aged individuals – or rather, the misuse of this relationship – a strong and robust student-teacher relationship could work to eradicate those vulnerabilities. Such a relationship would help a teacher to determine if an individual in the youth demographic was undergoing a process of radicalisation, would provide the student with a trusted authority figure if they felt vulnerable toward extremist messaging, and would provide teachers with a platform to take necessary counter-messaging measures and act as a touch-point within the educational community.

While respondents in Struga articulated the above, they also highlighted that it is important for educational programmes to be streamlined so that teachers across a given municipality are all teaching the same thing, and simultaneously be identified if teachers are deviating in an extremist way from the established narrative. For example, one high school teacher stressed the importance of forbidding religious propaganda in schools that is delivered by teachers, and that teachers should “compile a general strategy regarding the issue of extremist thought” (Struga High School Teacher). Much of this streamlining effort would need to come from the state level, however. As outlined by the European Training Foundation, the current educational system in Macedonia is not focused on student achievements or attainment, nor attempts at educational standardisation across the county, but rather financial inputs into a system where the potential for corruption exists (Mojsovksa-Blazevski and Ristovska 2013, 7). Thus, the overall approach to education at the state level would need to be overhauled in order to meet the desire for streamlined education that works toward the needs of all students across the country, regardless of their ethnic or religious background.

### 3.3.4 Institutional cooperation and engagement

Based on the information gleaned from respondents, there is a varying degree of institutional cooperation in the combatting and preventing of extremism within each community. On the whole, however, respondents indicated that significantly more could be done in this context, and that institutional engagement in combatting and preventing this phenomenon has been insufficient for the needs of each community – albeit with varying levels of insufficiency. Institutions, in this context, refer generally to local, municipal, and state-level governments, religious institutions such as the IRC, educational institutions, institutions related to health care, and societal institutions such as NGOs, amongst others.

Respondents in Gostivar expressed that while there is some cooperation in this sphere between governmental institutions, which has aided in the community’s resilience, there is insufficient cooperation between those institutions and other community stakeholders. For example, respondents from the Young Muslims Forum highlighted that there is space for greater collaboration with religious institutions and representatives who, as highlighted previously, are seen as trusted figures within the community and could act as a bridge between governmental prerogatives and the broader community at large. Individuals from one of the Gostivar-based focus groups articulated that while there was a perceived reduction in the spread of violent extremism after the “Cell” police actions first undertaken in 2015,<sup>12</sup> a lack of cooperation with other community stakeholders did little to impact upon the proliferation of extremism more generally within the country (Gostivar FG 18-25).

Within the context of Struga, this phenomenon can be seen at play as well. As mentioned, while NGOs and other social institutions, such as the Youth Council, have been proactive in organising different activities to raise awareness about the dangers of extremism and to promote ethno-religious collaboration, the closing and/or absence of recreational centres within the Struga municipality means that they often struggle to find physical spaces in which to host these activities. While one individual from the all-female

<sup>12</sup> The “Cell” operations, first commencing in August 2015, were a series of police actions undertaken by the Ministry of the Interior to arrest a number of individuals who were under suspicion of organising and recruiting foreign fighters in Macedonia. The cities at the heart of these initial raids were Skopje, Gostivar, Tetovo, Kumanovo, and Struga. The Cell operations remain the most significant police action undertaken by the Macedonian government as part of a broader counter-terrorism effort.



Struga focus group identified that there is some collaboration between NGOs and the municipal government, that collaboration is not as effective as it could be and is lacking in adequate engagement (Struga Women's FG). Further, more formalised NGO collaboration with the Struga municipal government, for example, could help to facilitate these events and further solidify resilience efforts within the community.

Further, one individual interviewed from within the Struga Mayor's Office also identified the importance that individuals play within the promotion of an institution's collaboration with other community stakeholders. The individual found that political figures play a key role in setting a tone within a community: "I think the current mayor is quite liberal and is trying to create an environment which fosters multiculturalism, and this was the same with the previous mayor" (Mayor's Office Struga). When considering the Macedonian context, in which ethnic divisions are often exploited for political gain, the election of such figures is critical in establishing contexts in which both the desire for stakeholder collaboration is present, and that there is an openness toward diversity at the governmental level. While it must be noted that this opinion comes from an individual from within the Mayor's Office, they nonetheless present an important observation that has tangible implications at the grassroots level.

### 3.4 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to engage with the fieldwork in a comprehensive way, and to present the findings using the Hafez and Mullins framework. The effort here was to demonstrate how respondents viewed their own municipalities, to derive commonalities amongst those views, and to investigate how one municipality compares to another vis-à-vis the three factors established at the beginning of this chapter. Furthermore, this chapter presented a thematic overview of each municipality's perceived factors of resilience in order to help establish a comprehensive understanding of the Cair, Gostivar, and Struga contexts. This presentation of findings will now be used as the qualitative dataset from which analysis will be drawn in the following chapter.

## 4 Analysis of Findings

Following the presentation of findings, this chapter seeks to engage in a broader analysis of the interplay between what respondents identified as factors contributing to the affectedness of a municipality, well as the relationship between the Cair, Gostivar, and Struga municipalities themselves. Moreover, this chapter will discuss how the aforementioned factors shape the dynamics of the municipalities in question vis-à-vis the threat posed by violent extremism and extremism more broadly. Importantly, they will attempt to address why Cair is the municipality most affected by extremism, why Gostivar is moderately affected, and why Struga is the least affected of the municipalities examined in this report. To this end, the analysis will once again employ the Hafez and Mullins framework in its investigation.

### 4.1 Enabling Environments and Support Structures

Enabling environments and support structures, within the Hafez and Mullins framework, refer to both physical and virtual settings that foster breeding grounds for extremism, including high-level examinations at the institutional and societal levels. This sub-section seeks to analyse what commonalities the

municipalities share in terms of the fostering of such environments, and equally endeavours to determine what individual factors have likely contributed in determining their varied affectedness by extremism.

In his work on extremism in the Western Balkans, Azinovic (2018, 7) has identified that areas in which Muslims are a (relative) minority are more conducive to violent extremism. Even though all municipalities studied in this report are Muslim-majority, when Azinovic's findings are more deeply considered within the context of Cair, the most affected of the municipalities studied in this report, the findings are telling. Although Cair itself is a majority-Muslim municipality, it is only one of the ten municipalities that make up the Eastern Orthodox-majority capital city of Skopje, whereas the other two are municipalities in their own right. As such, in psychological perception, a Muslim within Cair is a minority within his or her own city. It is plausible that inter-ethnic tensions, therefore, are felt more presciently in the Skopje space given this finding and Skopje's place as the capital of the Republic, thus resulting in an environment possibly more amenable to extremist leanings. When analysed from a continued inter-ethnic tensions unaddressed in the post-Armed Conflict period have undoubtedly led to a rise in an "us versus them" mentality in some communities, which is an easily exploitable narrative for extremist ideologues and recruiters within such an environment.

In Gostivar and Struga, however, there have been notable efforts to promote multiculturalism, diversity, and the values of an inter-ethnic society. Respondents suggested that members of these municipalities are well-informed about the values of diversity. Struga, moreover, noted that a concerted effort is placed upon the creation and promotion of activities and programmes fostering inter-ethnic integration and collaboration, thus further strengthening municipality-wide resilience toward the factors which contribute to an extremism-enabling environment. In Cair, comparatively, there was no evidence to suggest that narratives promoting diversity and ethno-religious cohabitation have been implemented.

Across the board within all three municipalities, the research indicated that institutional apathy helped to foster enabling environments for extremism, particularly at the state level. At a functional level, there was a perception that state institutions possessed neither the volition nor the knowledge to adequately address the extremist threat, and that the state has more broadly chosen to focus on *violent* extremism only through their policies of criminalisation, rather than implementing initiatives at the local level to address the proliferation of extremism within municipalities. Such a dearth in structures supporting municipal engagement in countering and preventing extremism has undoubtedly impacted upon the creation of enabling environments.

However, the idea of enabling environments caused as a result of institutional issues manifested in differing ways across all three municipalities. While municipal governments in both Struga and Gostivar had set up local bodies to address issues related to the countering and preventing of violent extremism, in both instances, these bodies were deemed to be ineffective due to low levels of institutional trust. Comparatively in Cair, however, according to the report's findings no such bodies exist or have existed, which – considering the general lack of desire amongst the community to even discuss issues related to extremism – is in line with Cair's findings across the board.

Moreover, the findings suggest that while some institutional cooperation has been undertaken within Gostivar and Struga, much more can be still be done to bolster the effectiveness of such efforts in diminishing enabling environments for extremism. Further cooperation and engagement by all stakeholders would create an environment that would foster a more holistic approach to countering and preventing violent extremism and could work to tackle the proliferation of extremism more broadly within each municipality. Further, a holistic approach could simultaneously build municipal resilience through individual engagement, as it could work to encourage pan-ethnic belonging rooted in civic engagement.

At a religious institutional level, there was significant critique across all municipalities, and this was linked to a perceived inadequateness in religious education in particular. In all circumstances, the respondents were heavily critical of the IRC, who were described as lacking in public trust, had little-to-no authority over rogue mosques, and were found to have been wilfully ignorant of the burgeoning issue of *para-jamaats*. Taken together, the inaction of the IRC – whether through choice or difficult circumstances – has allowed for enabling environments conducive to the proliferation of extremism to take hold. Most problematically, the

IRC's lack of control had significant ramifications in Cair, in which known extremist *para-jamaats* – found in the highest numbers in Cair, alongside the municipality of Saraj – helped to radicalise their adherents in significant levels. While respondents in Struga and Gostivar signified their displeasure with IRC leadership, neither identified *para-jamaats* as a specific, identifiable problem within their municipalities.

Deeply linked to the IRC critique by respondents was an identified lack of religious education; comparatively, however, the experiences of Struga and Gostivar varied significantly to that of Cair. Findings in Gostivar noted that the issue related to ineffective implementation of religious studies in schools, whereas Struga's findings indicated that religious education in schools did indeed exist, but was in need of diversification. In the Struga context, moreover, the issue of education was also presented through a gendered lens, in which educational vulnerabilities were less along ethnic lines, but rather along gendered lines, particularly in rural areas. Given the propensity of radicalisation to occur along ethnic lines, the kind of enabling environment for extremism is thus rendered least problematic in the Struga context.

Moreover, both Gostivar and Struga have introduced divergent but similarly-effective support structures which seem to have had a positive impact on diminishing enabling environments from an educational standpoint. In Gostivar, for example, religious texts have been translated into Albanian, thus affording individuals direct access to the gospels in their native language. However, while important, this initiative does not seem to be part of a longer-term strategy for improved religious education. In Struga, religious resilience can be interpreted as locally-driven, in which the municipality has attempted to prop up and support moderate religious figures such as imams. Such structures, particularly at a locally-institutionalised level, have likely impacted positively in diminishing any enabling environments within the Struga municipal context. Again, however, this does not seem to be part of a longer-term strategy and does not include key stakeholders.

As alluded to previously, in the Cair context, the polarised nature of society and the proliferation of extremist mosques makes it difficult for educational initiatives to take hold and prop up the municipality's resilience to environments that help to enable extremism. The findings also indicated that there was a lack of desire amongst the populace to seek out religious truths, and the divided nature of Cair society only works to compartmentalise ethno-religious narratives. In this way, a lack of integration, as well as religious and ethnic tolerances, has worked to create a closed society in which individuals exist on the ideological margins with little desire to see beyond their own viewpoints. As such, a self-marginalised society thus creates space for further extremist narratives to take hold.

Ultimately, while respondents in all three municipalities share commonalities in terms of factors contributing to enabling environments conducive to extremism, the factors are experienced at varying degrees and in differing municipal contexts. Cair's positioning as a minority community within a larger city has undoubtedly played a role, and sets it apart from the on-the-ground realities experienced by Gostivar and Struga. As we look deeper, Cair's outlying affectedness by the *para-jamaat* phenomenon has indicated that, at the local level, there is space for extremist narratives to take hold, with little to no institutional support structures to help prevent such an environment.

## 4.2 Extreme Ideologies, Networks, and Interpersonal Ties

As adapted from the Hafez and Mullins framework, the impact of extreme ideologies speaks to how influential such narratives are within a given municipality and, on an individual level, why such narratives resonate so deeply. Such ideologies are propagated through networks, and networks are bolstered through interpersonal ties between recruiters and those open to the extremist call. As such, this sub-section seeks to identify what factors contribute to a municipality being more or less affected by the nexus of ideologies, networks, and interpersonal ties within the Macedonian context.

The research indicated that *proximity* to extremism was a significant factor in the affectedness of a municipality. As indicated previously, "proximity" refers to both physical and virtual access to extremist materials, ideas,



and propagators. Although it will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent sub-section, proximity can also refer to how “close” an individual feels toward an extreme ideology; that is, how relatable and significant that ideology is to their personal narratives. As such, networks need not be physical, they could equally be virtual; moreover, interpersonal ties can be created through both forms of interaction.

Respondents from all municipalities identified that there was connection between ideological proximity and processes of radicalisation, although their experiences of that phenomenon varied greatly. Findings from Gostivar and Struga, for example, demonstrated that social media rendered ideological proximity as both global and local; for Gostivar, social media was seen as a tool for recruiters to identify potential recruits, either transnationally or locally, whereas for Struga, it was used as a medium by extremists to quash moderate views that were either locally or internationally relevant.

For Cair, however, ideological proximity was almost entirely expressed through real world interaction. As highlighted in the previous chapter, Cair was home to a number of extremist mosques – *para-jamaats* – and was the source for a high concentration of foreign fighters who travelled to the territory in Syria and Iraq under the control of ISIL. These findings would suggest that being in the physical presence of recruiters and extremist ideologies – rather than just their presence online – render an individual more susceptible to radicalisation, and allows for the coming-together of like-minded extremist individuals in a self-perpetuating phenomenon of radicalisation.

This suggestion, moreover, is in line with findings from The Atlantic Initiative (2017, 15), who have demonstrated that within the Western Balkan context, face-to-face interaction is a much stronger radicaliser than online interaction, in which face-to-face meetings are “followed by peer-to-peer interaction, often with like-minded individuals, whereby a very specific worldview is reinforced through group dynamics”. In this way, comparatively to Struga and Gostivar, proximity as vulnerability within the Cair context can be seen as geographic, with physical interaction between recruiter and vulnerable individual creating an environment in which a kind of extremist socialisation can flourish.

Unlike Cair, Gostivar and Struga have attempted to counteract extreme ideologies through the socialisation of community members in debate and conversation. The findings indicated that, in particular, the fostering of public awareness regarding the dangers posed by extremism helped individuals in the aforementioned municipalities to engage in common anti-extremist narratives. In Struga, most notably, this was aided by a media-originated lecture and debate series with key stakeholders; however, although anecdotally effective, this was not a state-run initiative and lacked long-term financing, which speaks to some of the issues related to institutional cooperation highlighted in the previous chapter.

While it is important to note the counter and preventive measures that Gostivar and Struga have taken in an effort to offset extreme ideologies, the key difference between the three municipalities ultimately resides within the question of proximity. Both fieldwork and secondary research indicate that face-to-face interaction – otherwise described as ideological locality rather than globality – is the more effective radicaliser compared to online interaction, thus signifying the important relationship between local, physical networks and extreme ideologies within the Macedonian context. As such, this finding would help to explain the high affectedness of the Cair municipality.

### 4.3 Collective and Personal Grievances

Within the Hafez and Mullins framework (2015, 963), collective and personal grievances are used by extremists to propagate a “communalist identity” that is “in defiance of the hegemonic culture”. The acceptance of such narratives leads to a “self-reinforcing dynamic of exclusion” which works to further propagate the “otherisation” of a group (2015, 963). This sub-section, therefore, briefly seeks to analyse the manifestations of collective and personal grievance narratives within the studied municipalities, and what role such narratives play in determining the affectedness of municipality in regards to extremism.

As articulated in the previous sub-section, the findings demonstrate that all three municipalities

experienced pull factors toward extremist ideologies through both local and global frames. These pull factors, moreover, were often articulated through grievance narratives that were also framed through a global and/or local lens – that is, recruiters exploit both local and pan-Muslim grievance narratives to target those most vulnerable to extremist messaging. The common factors expressed across all three municipalities were a sense – perceived or otherwise – of alienation, isolation, or marginalisation.

In the context of Gostivar, the isolation frame, as articulated through hijacked grievance narratives, was noted to play a role in radicalisation in a systemic way, but was seen to predominantly affect certain age demographics; specifically, those in their teens or early twenties. Contrary to this, findings from Struga saw the usefulness of isolation as a grievance narrative as *periodic* rather than systemic for individuals in that municipality. Election periods – often defined by the fostering of temporary divisions within society for political gain – were seen as critical moments when a sense of alienation could render members of the municipality more susceptible to extremist messaging. In this way, grievance narratives which preyed on the ethno-nationalist sentiments and the exploitation of identity politics in extreme ways expressed during election periods were made to feel more resonant. However, the findings suggested that, unlike the Gostivar context in which this perception of alienation or isolation was persistent, this was not the case for Struga, thus rendering the community less vulnerable from this perspective.

Cair, once again, was the outlier of the three municipalities in these findings. Cair, as defined by its respondents, is a municipality of many extremes; a society which is polarised along multiple convoluted and sometimes overlapping lines, which fosters a deep seeded and long-festering isolation of subgroups within the larger Skopje community. In this context, political extremism is deeply tied to ideological and/or religious extremism, and individuals are socialised in extreme groups on either side.

Given that Cair is a predominantly ethnic Albanian district within Skopje, this sense of perceived and/or self-alienation and isolation is rendered all the starker for individuals both inside and outside that community. As such, the municipality exists in a constant state of marginalisation, thus rendering its members – and the community as a whole – more vulnerable to grievance narratives which collectivise experiences. With Cair, it is possible to see what Hafez and Mullins refer to as the “self-reinforcing dynamic of exclusion” at play: the deep division within the municipality on both sides works to further reinforce a perceived sense of exclusion, and ensures that grievance narratives become normalised. In this way, ethno-nationalist narratives are woven together with extremist ideologies to carve out resonant collective grievance narratives, which cyclically work to recruit and radicalise.

Without question, the persuasiveness of collective and personal grievance narratives is lost if a society in question is relatively unified. With Struga, defined as least affected within the structure of this report, it is possible to see how the “periodic-ness” of resonance is reflected within its levels of extremism. Above this is Gostivar’s systemic resonance contributes to its mid-range of affectedness, and given the inherent extremity of Cair as a municipality, the impact of grievance narrative resonance is self-evident.

## 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, this report sought to investigate what makes one municipality more or less affected by the phenomenon of violent extremism than another. To this end, the report examined three municipalities in the Republic of Macedonia – Cair, Gostivar, and Struga – through the conduct of semi-structured interviews and focus groups in an effort to effectively engage in this discussion. After a detailed presentation of the fieldwork findings, the report then presented an analysis of the research to help identify some of the causations and correlations of violent extremism in the Macedonian context.

In its analysis, the report used a modified version of the framework propagated by Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins. Through their work on synthesising empirical approaches to analysing extremism, they have argued that radicalisation is not an undertaking which follows a step-by-step guide; rather, it is described as puzzle comprised of multiple, interlocking pieces which build an extremist picture. As Hafez and Mullins (2015, 970) outline:

*Just as similarly structured jigsaw puzzles can reveal different images once their pieces are interconnected, cases of radicalisation can exhibit tremendous diversity even when the variables of radicalisation are reoccurring. [...] The puzzle metaphor is also useful to highlight the interdependent nature of radicalisation variables, where one piece of the puzzle contains elements of the adjacent pieces.*

Within the Macedonian context, such an approach is critical. While it is impossible to derive absolute truths from such a study given the diversity of on-the-ground and local realities, the Analysis of Findings chapter of this report dives deeply into the research to draw municipality-specific truths that are ripe for further investigation. These findings speak to the reality that radicalisation toward extremism is not a linear process, but rather is a series of circumstances which come together to foster an over-arching environment conducive to the proliferation of extremism and violent extremism. Improving strategies for preventing violent extremism therefore has to start with an in-depth understanding of the local context, in order to act upon specific combinations of factors of vulnerability and resilience.

Generally speaking, the findings across all actors interviewed for the purposes of this report were similar. The factors of vulnerability to and resilience against violent extremism were often mirror images of one another – for instance, the lack of quality religious education as a vulnerability in one municipality vis-à-vis the quality/access to religious education as a factor of resilience in another. This “mirror-imaging” has been an integral finding, and provides a space from which policy recommendations can be derived.

In an attempt to address and speak to some of these findings, the report proposes three policy recommendations:

- 1) *Macedonia’s P/CVE strategy should shift from being a top-down governmental approach to one which is more “holistic”, and engages, empowers, and educates local institutional actors in those efforts.*

Such a shift in policy is important for myriad reasons. Above all, it would acknowledge that the approach of securitisation that has, to date, been implemented in Macedonia is insufficient. While the Macedonian government has recently made efforts to revamp its P/CVE strategy alongside its counter-terrorism strategy, these efforts have largely remained superficial and are not reflective of grassroots realities leading to radicalisation. Historically, moreover, these efforts have been *reactive* rather than *proactive*, thus having little impact upon extremism as a phenomenon and merely just its violent manifestations. Most importantly, however, such a shift in policy approach would demonstrate an important acceptance that

violent extremism and extremism within the Macedonian context are a social issue as well as a security issue, and action which reflects that shift in mentality needs to be embraced.

This shift would ensure that the change-makers in a municipality are members of the community themselves, and that the change that is being fostered is relevant to the local needs and narratives of the people in that community. Such a policy would see local institutional actors, such as educators, NGOs, social workers, religious leaders alongside state representatives such as municipality officials, be engaged in implementing preventative, long-term responses to extremism. It is critical that these individuals be engaged, empowered, and educated regarding the needs of their community in an ever-evolving counter-narrative to extremism, thus allowing for these efforts to be self-sustaining, local, and engaging.

- 2) *The discourse on preventing and combating violent extremism should evolve to also include forms of ethno-nationalist and right-wing extremism that are on the rise in Macedonia.*

Although this report focused predominantly upon the dangers posed in the Macedonian context by Islamist extremism, there needs to be an acknowledgement on behalf of policymakers that the phenomenon of extremism does not reside merely within one narrative. To date, most of the attention paid and research undertaken by intergovernmental initiatives and non-governmental organisations has focused on P/CVE targeted toward Islamist extremism only. From a broader perspective, such a focus has the potential to further marginalise and exclude Muslims in Macedonian society if effective and comprehensive P/CVE strategies are not implemented. This could potentially leave space for that community to feel specifically targeted by structural initiatives which have the potential to presume their guilt by virtue of their ethno-religious identity.

Moreover, the focus on Islamist extremism alone ignores the burgeoning ethno-nationalist and right-wing extremism that is on the rise in Macedonia. While not the purview of this report, it is important to note that the post-Armed Conflict era has equally left space for extreme pro-Macedonian extreme nationalist narratives to potentially take hold. Whereas those narratives are sometimes seen to be more legitimate within mainstream political discourses in Macedonia amongst some parties, a change in governance has moved those narratives back to the grassroots level, where they have the potential to further radicalise in a less-opaque manner, thus making them increasingly difficult to counter.

- 3) *Further pointed and exhaustive research needs to be undertaken to examine the relationship between ethnicity, perceptions of power, and societal division in an effort to determine how these variables foster vulnerability within a municipality. The findings of this research must inform the basis of P/CVE programming.*

From a high-level view, one of the greatest flaws of the government's current approach to P/CVE is that much of the strategy is rooted in assumptions rather than research. Where research has informed the government's strategy, it has been superficial and is reflective of broad findings related to extremism, rather than being country-specific to the Republic of Macedonia. The danger in such an approach is obvious – without Macedonia-specific findings informing P/CVE strategy, it is unlikely that said strategy will be successful. While the government's strategy has done well to align itself with EU and UN norms, it has not done so in a way that is grounded in comprehensive research.

Although research projects such as this report are important undertakings which could help formulate more effective policies, it is important for the government to engage with stakeholders across all levels of society in any research endeavour. From a standpoint of research focus, this report recommends – based on its own findings – that further research be undertaken which investigates the relationship between ethnicity, perceptions of power, and societal division; this would have the potential to speak to issues related to Islamist extremism, but also to ethno-nationalist/right-wing extremism as well. Ideally, this would lead to the creation of a well-rounded P/CVE strategy that is broad in its reach, comprehensive in its application, and – coupled with a “holistic” rather than “top-down” ethos – would ensure that P/CVE strategies are not merely reactive, but proactive as well.

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## Interviews and Focus Groups

### Cair

- Anonymous representative (Cair Mayor’s Office)**. Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (February 2018)
- Anonymous representative (NGO)**. Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (February 2018)
- Anonymous representative (Unnamed NGO)**. Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (February 2018)
- Anonymous teacher**. Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (February 2018)
- Anonymous teacher (Gymnasium Zef Lush Marku)**. Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (February 2018)
- Focus Group, 18-25 – Cair**. Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (February 2018)
- Focus Group, 25-45 – Cair**. Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (February 2018)
- Focus Group, Women – Cair**. Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (February 2018)
- Imam**. Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (February 2018)

### Gostivar

- Anonymous representative (Gostivar Mayor’s Office)**. Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (January 2018)

**Anonymous representative** (Unnamed Gostivar NGO – NGO 1). Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (January 2018)

**Anonymous teacher** (Unnamed Gostivar High School). Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (January 2018)

**Anonymous representative** (Unnamed Gostivar NGO – NGO 2). Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (January 2018)

**Anonymous representative** (NGO). Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (January 2018)

**Anonymous Salafi Preacher – Gostivar.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (January 2018)

**Focus Group, 18-25 – Gostivar.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (January 2018)

**Focus Group, 25-45 – Gostivar.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (January 2018)

**Focus Group, Women – Gostivar.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (January 2018)

**Imam.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (January 2018)

## **Struga**

**NGO representative 1.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**NGO representative 2.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**Anonymous imam – Struga.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**Anonymous media representative – Struga.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**Anonymous psychologist** (Unnamed Struga primary school). Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**Anonymous representative** ( NGO 1). Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**Anonymous representative** (Struga Mayor's Office). Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**Anonymous teacher** (High School Niko Nestor). Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**Focus Group, 18-25 – Struga.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**Focus Group, 25-45 – Struga.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**Focus Group, Women – Struga.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)

**Municipality coordinator.** Interview by: Macedonia Country Team (March 2018)