



Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism

Lessons learned from the Western Balkans

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Research Report

About this report

This comparative synthesis report – building on four country case studies covering Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina Kosovo and Macedonia – was produced in the framework of a participatory research project on “*Opportunities for Preventing Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*”. Together with 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 similar violent extremist groups, while other communities may show greater resilience to the same phenomenon. The project also includes policy outreach activities, both nationally and internationally, as well as 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 in light of the research findings.

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List of Abbreviations

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BIK	Bashkësia Islame e Kosoves, Islamic Association of Kosovo
BPC	Bosnian Podrinje Canton (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
C/PVE	Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
EU	European Union
FF/FTF	Foreign Fighters/Foreign Terrorist Fighters
FYROM	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
GCERF	Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GLTF	Global Counterterrorism Forum
IC	Islamic Community (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	Islamic Religious Community (Macedonia)
IS/ISIL/ISIS	Islamic State/Islamic State in Iraq and Levant/Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
MCA	Muslim Community of Albania
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOI	Ministry of Interior (Kosovo)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
OFA	Ohrid Framework Agreement
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
P/CVERLT	Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalisation that Lead to Terrorism (OSCE)
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN	United Nations
US(A)	United States (of America)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VE	Violent Extremism
VEOs	Violent Extremist Organizations
WB	Western Balkans
ZDC	Zenica-Doboj Canton (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Executive Summary

Western Balkan researchers have taken a growing interest in the phenomenon of violent extremism (VE) in recent years, particularly since the region has been in the international spotlight due to its position as Europe's top exporter per capita of volunteers fighting for radical and extremist armed organisations. Their findings and policy recommendations to date have informed various country strategies and shaped legal measures to counter or prevent violent extremism (C/PVE). Thus far, most C/PVE interventions have focused on top-down security approaches, with little community involvement. Researchers have not identified specific entry points for complementary interventions that would link central institutions with local actors such as schools and religious communities, in order to detect radicalisation leading to violent extremism in time and offer preventive measures to strengthen resilience at the community level.

This comparative report presents insights from a collaborative research project combined with community dialogue initiatives carried out in 2017/18 in four Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. Arguably, the four countries scrutinised in the study have many similarities rooted in shared historical grievances, but also linked to underperforming economies, bad governance and administrative dysfunctionality, national and ethnic tensions and unresolved identity issues. The research project focused on the meso-level and sought to identify factors of community vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism, and to formulate and test recommendations drawn from peacebuilding for effective prevention of violent extremism (PVE). In order to identify and understand what makes communities resilient to violent extremism, researchers analysed communities' characteristics in a given socio-economic, ideological and political context. Affected and unaffected communities were the main 'target' of the research, which aimed to explore and identify what makes a certain community stand out in its ability (by chance or choice) to prevent or resist the threats of violent extremism, or be influenced by ideological and/or physical forms of violent extremism. It quickly became clear that communities are neither fully affected nor completely unaffected – an unaffected community might still share the same 'breeding ground' traits as affected municipalities and an affected community could still display some features of a resilient community.

The research also explored the complexity of applying the concept of community resilience to the study of violent extremism, and identified three factors enhancing community resilience – awareness, action and attitude. Moreover, the research teams examined the link between PVE programming and peacebuilding, reconciliation and social cohesion, and found that viewing PVE research through a peacebuilding lens also implies the need to invest in systemic conflict analysis tools specifically tailored to transforming violent extremism. The need to engage in more detailed and contextual analysis of how drivers of conflict and violence relate to drivers of violent extremism and related fields of resilience became obvious during this research.

Finally, this comparative report draws up a set of recommendations for local and national policy-makers and for the international community already involved in studying and supporting the prevention of violent extremism in the Balkans and beyond.

1 Introduction

The Western Balkan countries have been in the international spotlight in recent years due to their position as Europe's top exporters per capita of volunteers fighting for Salafi Jihadi armed organisations such as ISIS and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (previously known as Jabhal al-Nusra).¹ Accordingly, regional researchers have taken a growing interest in the phenomenon, especially in countries most affected by it, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, but increasingly also in Macedonia and Albania. The findings and policy recommendations to date have informed different country strategies and shaped various legal measures to counter or prevent violent extremism (C/PVE).

Yet the reasons why some communities are more vulnerable than others to the appeal of ISIS or Al Qaida-affiliated groups in a region that is not known to be particularly prone to religious extremist tendencies – in comparison with conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia – have not been investigated sufficiently. As most C/PVE interventions so far have focused on top-down security approaches, with little community involvement, research is needed to identify entry points for complementary interventions that would link central institutions with local actors such as schools and religious communities, in order to detect radicalisation in time and offer preventive measures to strengthen resilience at the community level.

This report presents and synthesises the comparative insights from a collaborative research project carried out in 2017/18 in four Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. The project team consisted of researchers from the Berghof Foundation in Berlin, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation in Albania, Atlantic Initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies in Kosovo and Democracy Lab in Macedonia. Funded by the German Federal Foreign Office, this research project sought to identify factors of community vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism, and to formulate and test recommendations for effective prevention of violent extremism (PVE) programmes in the Western Balkans and beyond.² The purpose of this introductory section is to lay out the definitions and provide a review of the literature on the main concepts used in this report, and to describe the methodology which guided the research process.

1.1 Background and rationale

Unpacking the phenomenon and label of violent extremism

Despite the popularity of the growing discipline of C/PVE, its key concepts and terminology are problematic as they tend to be normatively loaded, conceptually flawed and empirically imprecise. For the purpose of this research, we consciously chose to embrace the terminology of violent extremism in order to engage the PVE research and policy communities 'from within', while being aware of its inherent limitations.

Extremism will be understood here as any ideology that opposes a society's core values and principles. *"In the context of liberal democracies this could be applied to any ideology that advocates*

¹ Most estimates place the number of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans who left for Syria and Iraq up until 2014 at around 900, which is lower than the foreign fighter numbers originating from countries such as France (The Soufan Group 2015). "The significance of this number becomes apparent in the context of the *combined* population across these small countries of less than nineteen million. Rates of mobilization relative to the population size—particularly in Kosovo but also in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia—are far higher than in western European countries most afflicted by the phenomenon." (Shtuni 2016, 2).

² In addition to intra-regional exchange, the project encompassed a cross-regional dimension by convening experts from the Western Balkans, the MENA region and Western Europe to exchange insights and policy lessons learnt on the prevention of violent extremism through community resilience. Two cross-regional exchange workshops were held in Berlin in May 2018 and February 2019.

racial or religious supremacy and/or opposes the core principles of democracy and universal human rights” (Neumann 2010). Most authors distinguish political from religious extremism: *“Political extremism (far left and far right) refers to opinions and behaviours of people who favor extreme political changes, while religious extremism is about excess in interpreting religious texts and in practising religion”* (Aroua 2018, 5). Although extremists do not necessarily engage in violence (ibid., 9), the phrase violent **extremism** is used in contexts when extremist worldviews are accompanied by the justification and use of extreme violence (such as atrocity crimes) against those who do not share the same belief or ideology. Violent extremism may be expressed by individuals or groups through speeches or media posts, by carrying out isolated acts of violence in the name of extremist ideologies, or by physically joining violent groups.

While violent extremism can be associated with any political or religious ideology, the term is usually equated with religiously-inspired, and especially Islamist-based, non-state violence. In a way, this research falls into the same trap, since it placed a particular focus on the patterns through which certain individuals become radicalised into espousing Salafi/Wahhabi-inspired Islamist ideologies and joining jihadi organisations as foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. However, throughout the research process we explicitly recognised, and sought to uncover, the mutual interactions between Islamist violent extremism and other forms of political (e.g. far right, nationalist) extremism, which contribute to their reciprocal radicalisation.³ From a peacebuilding angle, it is particularly important to highlight the linkages between the ‘foreign fighter’ phenomenon and the inter-group conflict legacy which fuels it. As highlighted by Holmer and Bauman (2018a, 18), *“violent extremist groups often harness their agendas to existing conflict dynamics and seek refuge and opportunity in poorly governed and conflict-prone environments. Understanding the root causes and dynamics that enable such groups to flourish requires a conflict analysis lens and relevant conflict analysis tools. Macro-level tools that examine VEOs without considering their relationships to other conflict dynamics run the risk of informing narrowly conceived C/PVE interventions that lack impact and sustainability”*.

Driving factors of violent extremism

The most popular approach to date in studying the phenomenon of violent extremism is to cluster its root causes and driving factors into two main categories: 1) *push factors* or structural conditions (e.g. poverty, grievances, lack of access to political processes or justice, protracted conflict); and 2) *pull factors* or direct drivers such as the ideological appeal or financial and social benefits of joining a violent group.

At the micro-level, the current research agenda on violent extremism tends to focus on the individual traits of radicalised youths, for instance by exploring cognitive propensities’ role in the formation of maladaptive, high-risk mindsets (Allan et al. 2015; Dandurand 2015). Macro-level explanations of the structural causes of violent extremism also abound. The most widely cited root causes of violent extremism include political oppression, social exclusion, state repression, relative deprivation, poverty and globalisation (Sandbrook/Romano 2004; Berko/Erez 2007; Dandurand 2015; Desta 2016). These structural explanations have marked a shift away from attributing violent extremism solely or primarily to religious beliefs. Scholars also emphasise the role of identity formation as a driving force for radicalisation processes (Bibliotheca Alexandrina 2006; Schmitt 2017; Search for Common Ground 2017), and identify other drivers such as gender roles and honour (Atran 2006). The role of education is also explored, whereby dysfunctional educational systems leave individuals with an inability to engage critically with information presented to them – especially among minority populations. The lack of proper religious education may further drive individuals to seek a simplified ‘truth’ – to be filled by religious indoctrination about Islam (or other belief systems) – which allows space for extremist narratives to take hold.

³ In this report, the use of the terms “cumulative” extremism and “reciprocal” radicalisation express the observation that current political polarisation does not happen in a vacuum but more often than not is a response to the actions and discourse of another group. They are of great importance in a public debate that is still willing to consider that radicalism and extremism are innate characteristics of a specific religion, namely Islam.

Such multi-causal and multi-level explanations are truly reflected in the Western Balkans, where weak political and economic institutions have produced a growing resentment amongst various communities towards the lack of social prospects and the unfulfilled promise of European integration. Weak institutions have also produced the evident inability of elected governments to provide social services and basic security to ordinary citizens, which in return has caused a widespread feeling of disaffection, distrust and vulnerability that has led to a decrease in the legitimacy of governments. Mistrust towards the state and formal religious institutions, coupled with the lack of strong community ties and sense of belonging, make individuals susceptible to the feelings of injustice, discrimination and dehumanisation that are favoured by a context of ‘civilisation despair’ (Benhabib 2015), in the making for years if not decades. Identity, or the lack of clear identity, has also been an issue in many of the countries in the Western Balkans. The historical context of the region is marred by inter-ethnic conflicts and issues of political and social inequalities that favour conflicting identities and produce blurred understanding of ideas such as notions of masculinity and femininity. The absence of trustworthy religious institutions in some of these communities, and the appearance of other self-proclaimed religious leaders and informal institutions (such as parajaamats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and takfirism in Kosovo and Macedonia) have intensified the problem.

The current research literature on violent extremism is vast and covers a range of disciplines from security and terrorism studies to political science, education, psychology, criminology, behavioural science, neuroscience, social psychology, peace and conflict research and development studies. This poses a particular challenge when drawing up policy recommendations to counter and prevent violent extremism that would fit all these disciplinary insights, especially since VE is increasingly becoming a global phenomenon and as such requires a case-specific and comparative approach as well as a regional focus.

From CVE to PVE: A peacebuilding approach⁴

Initially, policy approaches to the VE phenomenon predominantly looked through a restricted hard-power security lens, focusing on CVE initiatives to hinder the recruitment efforts of violent extremists. The concept of CVE is rooted in the increased counter-terrorism efforts by the US in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In the mid-2000s, realising that the use of force was not a viable response to the factors that cause terrorism, the US government explored new strategies to address the root causes and underlying conditions of violent radicalisation (Heydemann 2014; Desta 2016). The term ‘CVE’ itself is of relatively recent origin, but it has become institutionalised quickly, for example, through the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) CVE working group, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), Hedayah (the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism) and within many national bureaucracies. In 2014, the UN Security Council adopted the language of CVE for the first time in a resolution as part of its response to the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) volunteering to join the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria and Iraq.

For some actors, CVE efforts constitute an outreach attempt by security sector actors to gain intelligence and information; for others, CVE entails a broader range of prevention efforts, including initiatives by social workers, educators and development actors, which traditional security actors may not consider to be related to counter-terrorism. Nasser-Edine et al. (2011) divide CVE strategies between hard- and soft-power strategies. The former are in turn divided into offensive strategies (military, policing approaches, legislation) and defensive strategies (intelligence, infrastructure protection, crisis planning and border security). The latter include ideological, communicative, political and social approaches. Hard-power strategies, taken separately, are akin to classical counter-terrorism actions. The main feature that distinguishes CVE from counter-terrorism is the added value of soft-power strategies.

⁴ This sub-section is largely inspired by an internal Berghof Foundation paper on ‘Moving Forward from Countering Violent Extremism’, authored by Karin Göldner, Mir Mubashir and Véronique Dudouet. Berlin 2016.

With the reorientation of CVE from hard-power agendas to civil society-led (or co-led) soft-power approaches that understand the topic as a social as well as (or possibly even more than) a security issue, the UN introduced the concept of Preventing Violent Extremism, endorsing a more upstream and bottom-up focus. Since then, other actors have followed suit and integrated the UN's approach into their respective guidelines and policies, aspiring to implement a 'whole of government' strategy (Desta 2016). Therefore, policy approaches to C/PVE in recent years have slightly moved in the direction of development, peacebuilding and conflict transformation by focusing on promotion of equality, inclusiveness and how power is exercised and resources shared (Boutellis/Mahmoud 2017).

Today, PVE constitutes a field of theory and practice that regularly crosses disciplinary boundaries and uses a multitude of methodologies and concepts. As studies tend to take a highly specialised view of the subject, the field displays a need for more cross-topic as well as cross-country and cross-regional comparisons. Such approaches promise valuable insights into what works and what does not, especially as English-language literature from affected regions is in remarkably short supply. While the drivers of violent extremism may very well be context-specific, what makes communities resilient to these influences is likely to be applicable under a variety of circumstances (Douglass/Rondeaux 2017).

So far, the response to countering and preventing VE phenomena in the four selected Western Balkans countries has consisted of passing new legislation that mainly addresses the financing of terrorist activity and amending the criminal codes to make it illegal to participate in foreign wars. These steps were taken in the aftermath of the adoption of UN Resolution 2178 and as further incentives in the EU and NATO accession processes. In Albania, the government has amended the penal code to allow for more flexible interpretation of terrorist activities and impose harsher penalties on perpetrators. The government has also approved the National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism and a follow-up Action Plan (Penal Code of the Republic of Albania 1995, Council of Ministers 2015). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the national strategy recognises the issue of radicalisation leading to violent extremism but it remains without 'teeth' because the action plan that derives from it has not been implemented. In Kosovo, the government has taken a few steps in countering and preventing VE since 2014 with the drafting of the National Strategy on Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism, which was approved in 2015. The Strategy was followed by an Action Plan. In Macedonia, the government's adoption of the National Strategy and Action Plan to counter and prevent VE has been lagging behind in comparison to the other three countries. The National Strategy was not adopted and a C/PVE coordinator appointed until February 2018. (National approaches to C/PVE are discussed in more detail in Section 5.)

This brief review of existing policies and action plans in the Western Balkans shows that little attention had been paid so far to the long-term and community-driven prevention of violent extremism. This research was premised on the need to develop sound and empirically-based preventive approaches, and aimed to contribute to this endeavour by analysing and proposing community-based approaches to PVE from a peacebuilding rather than a security perspective.

Research focus: vulnerable and resilient communities

Based on the identified scholarly and policy developments in the field of PVE in the Western Balkans, the research teams jointly developed and refined the overall project focus and research questions, in order to ensure that the project would not replicate research already conducted by the project partners or other research institutions in the region. After a thorough examination of the existing research gaps, we agreed that:

- 1) current PVE discussions still predominantly focus on executive and judicial powers, while a focus on community perspectives or input into bottom-up initiatives is generally lacking;
- 2) many studies on PVE are still preoccupied with either individual profiling and risk assessments or structural macro-level explanations, whereas a meso-level social analysis focusing on community

and kinship or network factors is mostly absent;⁵

- 3) most empirical research in the Western Balkans has focused on the vulnerable ‘hotspots’ of violent extremism, while there is still very little attempt to understand what might explain why certain communities appear to be resilient to the appeal of violent extremism although they may appear to be a ‘breeding ground’ for recruiters and violence entrepreneurs given their socio-economic makeup.

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used: a **vulnerable community** is “*incapable or unable to anticipate, cope with, resist or recover from extremism*” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 35). It can be further defined by the “*community’s reluctance or lack of mobilisation to intervene or engage pro-actively in addressing violent extremism. This could be a function of the lack of mechanisms necessary for mobilisation, the lack of incentives to work together, or of tensions between stakeholders that prevent them from addressing comprehensively the challenges a community may face*” (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 9). For its part, a community becomes **resilient** “*following the community’s intervention or active engagement of various stakeholders of the community vested with some authority to either prevent or counter violent extremism. Therefore, resilience assumes awareness of the problem by various stakeholders in a community and their aggregated action against a certain phenomenon. It also includes the community’s attitude toward such a phenomenon and their reaction in the wake of the emergence of the violent extremism activity, or events perceived as leading up to its appearance*” (ibid.).

Based on the overall definitions of violent extremism, PVE, community vulnerability and resilience, which have just been described, the main research questions were formulated as follows:

Main research questions that have guided the project

1. What are the key factors of community resilience or vulnerability to individuals and groups developing violent extremist beliefs and joining violent extremist foreign groups?
2. What actors influence community vulnerability or resilience to violent extremism, and how do they shape such dynamics?
3. What is the relevance of existing PVE programmes in the Western Balkans in addressing the current factors of community vulnerability or resilience to violent extremism?
4. What linkages can be identified between PVE activities and peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans?
5. What are key entry points for improved PVE programming and responses in the Western Balkans?

⁵ A recent stocktaking exercise, for example, lists among its main findings: “*Multiple and different conceptual frameworks and analytic models are used to understand VE and to design interventions and strategies that prevent or counter violent extremism. These tools can be sorted into two general categories, or levels, of analysis: micro-level tools that primarily focus on individuals and macro-level tools that focus on VE groups and contexts.*” (Holmer/Baumann 2018, 4.) In the same text, the authors state: “*Despite the significant influence of group dynamics, social relationships, and networks on radicalization, there are few analytic tools that assist policymakers and program designers in assessing, mapping, or evaluating the social ties and relationships that influence individuals and groups toward or away from VE activity and violent extremist organizations*” (ibid., 5).

1.2 Methodology

As described above, the study's main analytical focus is on communities (understood in a social and administrative sense) which are affected by the tangible phenomenon of violent extremism to different degrees. Its stance is exploratory, because as of now, little work has been done that explicitly includes the perceptions and experiences of the local community. Its approach is participatory, in that it was conducted in close collaboration with local researchers, and qualitative in nature, as it relies predominantly on semi-structured interviews and focus group analysis.

The methodological approach of the overall project comprised four components, namely to:

- (1) conduct an in-depth case study and comparative research in order to investigate the reasons why in a specific locality and social community, people, especially youths, become radicalised and as a consequence embrace violent extremism (or why they do not do so);
- (2) support cross-country and cross-regional peer-advice exchange on how to best address violent extremism through PVE programming;
- (3) formulate, present and disseminate policy/practical recommendations for relevant local, national and regional actors on how to design programmes that will address the different actors and factors of violent extremism in the Western Balkans while also contributing to regional reconciliation efforts; and
- (4) test these recommendations through four local pilot dialogues between state institutions, religious institutions, youth representatives and relevant civil society organisations, as well as through outreach activities to the highly influential international community.

Operationalising the research questions

In order to define, select and operationalise the communities and research objectives, the researchers identified common criteria among the four research teams in order to ensure data comparability while at the same time paying particular attention to the specific context of each country and community studied.

With the main purpose of this research being to identify and understand what makes communities resilient to VE, the researchers set out to analyse the communities' characteristics in a given socio-economic, ideological and political context. **Community**, in its broad sense, is understood as the “*women, men, social groups, and institutions based in the same geographical area and/or on shared interests*” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 27). The main unit of analysis was the **municipality**,⁶ because in our understanding municipalities provide a good representation of a socio-economic and socio-political ‘community’ since they serve as a meeting point for local communities, state institutions and other interested agencies (youth groups, local religious leaders, police services, city councils, etc.). Municipalities as units of analysis thus provide an appropriate frame to capture geographic or administrative community where relevant state and local institutions interact with the cultural community.

The researchers furthermore agreed to distinguish between **affected and unaffected communities**. This terminology was chosen in order not to presuppose that communities that display symptoms of violent extremism are automatically deemed to be vulnerable, or that communities that do not display any (outward) symptoms of violent extremism are automatically declared to be resilient. An affected community is therefore understood as one “*that has been disrupted by human, material, economic, or environmental losses; in this case, a community that has been impacted by radicalization*” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 27). The understanding of an affected community throughout this study is a community that has

⁶ An exception is the country case study of Bosnia Herzegovina, which focuses on cantons instead. The researchers (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 3) argue “*It should be noted that these case studies include entire cantons, for three reasons. First, there are no municipalities, except isolated places like Gornja Maoča in Tuzla Canton or Ošve in ZDC, that could be singled out based on the criteria used to define affected communities. Second, Salafists, especially those who departed to Syria and Iraq, are highly mobile and frequently visit parajaamats in different cantons. Third, many Salafists do not adhere to the Law on Residence, meaning that they are registered in one municipality but live in another*” (see Azinović /Jusić, 2016, 36).

been influenced by ideological and/or physical forms of violent extremism such as: pervasive radical ideology, ideologically motivated acts of violence, the incidence of foreign fighters originating from the community, and presence of actors that cultivate vulnerability towards violent extremism (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018). In some affected municipalities, the subjective perception of the threat differed considerably, with some community members perceiving their municipalities as being unaffected by the threat of VE which in the long run could have a negative effect in their lives. (Section 3 will further explain this paradox.)

By contrast, an unaffected community is understood as one that does not display visible signs of radicalisation or violent extremism. As the researchers in this project aimed to explore and identify what makes a certain community stand out in its ability (by chance or choice) to prevent or resist the threats of VE, they found out that some of these municipalities share the same ‘breeding ground’ as affected municipalities. (This paradox is further described in Section 4 by looking into the particular set of factors and actors that play a crucial role in contributing to this unaffectedness.)

Several criteria were employed when selecting the specific municipalities studied:

Primary indicator:

- ≡ Number of foreign fighters (individual departures to Syria and Iraq from the community) per capita (high/low for affected/unaffected communities, respectively)

Additional indicators:⁷

- ≡ Number of recruiters and preachers prosecuted (high or low)
- ≡ Religiously-motivated extremist actions such as hate crimes and other incidents (high or low)
- ≡ Number of parajamaats (Salafi-dominated non-formal/parallel congregations which are not part of the official Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina) (present or not).

In selecting the research sites, the researchers aimed to focus on communities that had not been heavily studied before in order to minimise effects of research fatigue among the local interlocutors. Based on these criteria, 11 municipalities were selected across the four countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia.

Table 1: Selected Affected and Unaffected Communities by Country

Country	Affected Communities	Unaffected Communities
Albania	Tirana (three neighbourhoods)	Kavaja (“relatively unaffected”) Korça (“relatively unaffected”; with higher risk potential)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Zenica-Doboj Canton (ZDC) Sarajevo Canton (SC)	Bosnian Podrinje Canton (BPC)
Kosovo	Hani I Elezit Mitrovica (not studied in depth)	Deçan
Macedonia	Cair (Skopje)	Struga (“relatively affected”) Gostivar (“moderately affected”)

⁷ The initial list of indicators was jointly developed at a Researcher Meeting in Tirana in October 2017 (minutes on file with the authors). Several additional indicators which were proposed ended up not being used because the data-gathering to establish their direction proved too difficult. Among them were indicators of ‘non-violent extremism’, such as donations from external Salafi or Wahhabi groups (existing or not) and the spread of online radicalisation/hate speech frequency (high or low).

Based on a literature review and research partners' previous studies coupled with group discussions, a set of known **factors and actors** which are thought to influence communities' levels of affectedness or unaffectedness were identified. These factors and actors were listed as follows:

Table 2: Reference List of Factors and Actors

List of Factors and Actors as originally agreed in Tirana (October 2017)			
<p>Common factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Trust towards political institutions -Trust towards formal religious institutions -Transparency, responsiveness, accessibility of local institutions and public services -Social cohesion: Lack (or presence) of strong community ties, trust in neighbours, and a sense of belonging to the community/country -(Lack of) identity -International presence (INGOs, embassy projects, etc.) -Social media activity when citizens seek answers to theological questions -Ideas of femininity and masculinity/gender roles -Historical context -Local context 	<p>Country-specific factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Reciprocal (religious vs. national/ethnic) extremism (Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia) -Social impact of post-traumatic stress disorder and war legacy (Bosnia, Kosovo) -Cooperation (or lack of it) with the police (Macedonia) 	<p>Local actors assumed to have a negative role in influencing affected communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Certain Salafi/Wahhabi preachers, especially "Youtube preachers" -Salafi charities and NGOs active in the community (Bosnia, Kosovo) 	<p>Local actors assumed to have a positive role in unaffected communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Moderate/traditional preachers who are vocally active (in mosques and on social media) against VE -Islamic communities finding common language to take common action against violent extremism -Local administration/government -Primary and secondary public school teachers/system (especially in Bosnia where religion is taught in schools)- Youth groups and local youth councils -Parents (e.g. local mechanisms in school system for parent councils) -CSOs and grassroots organisations providing extra-curricular activities and civic engagement initiatives -Local media offering counter-narrative to extremist preachers -Referral mechanisms (e.g. piloting in Kosovo)

The operationalisation of research questions 3 and 4 was also discussed jointly by the teams. Concerning PVE initiatives, it was felt that assessing their objective effectiveness would be particularly challenging, while the project design lent itself well to assessing these programmes' relevance by asking questions such as: Do PVE programmes match the identified factors and actors of (un)affectedness? To what extent are communities aware of national CVE strategies and the various PVE initiatives that are funded by international agencies? Do these initiatives reach the communities studied? Do they consult local actors in the design, implementation and evaluation of activities?

The challenges met when designing fieldwork plans to address research question 4 will be explained in Section 5. Finally, the last research question will be addressed through the recommendations for sound PVE programming designs delineated in Section 7, which were formulated by the research teams in close consultation with the communities studied (by discussing them during pilot dialogue workshops held in one of the researched municipalities).

Data collection methods

As part of their research design responsibilities, each country team was in charge of selecting the most suitable methods to measure and analyse the factors and actors of (un)affectedness in the municipalities studied. At the outset of each country study, secondary sources were examined through literature reviews (building on the partners' previous research on the topic) and consultations of statistical databases and surveys. Primary data collection followed, starting with archival research (e.g. court transcripts), individual semi-structured interviews (an average 10-20 key informant interviews per municipality), two to four focus group interviews per municipality, participatory and non-participatory observation⁸ and expert interviews where needed to test hypotheses or deepen understanding.

The methods used for data analysis included mappings, narrative and discourse/content analysis. Trends and commonalities were identified and grouped from the interview transcripts and aggregated for frequently mentioned factors of resilience and vulnerability. Findings were then compared to research trends and expert views in selected cases, and exposed to peer review and discussion with the researched communities.

Finally, the individual country findings were critically discussed and refined in regular meetings between the four research partners' teams, the Berlin-based Berghof Foundation team and selected peer reviewers. The present comparative analysis rests on the country findings, drawing on commonalities and differences as they emerge from the contextualised findings of the qualitative research by our local partners.

1.3 Structure of the report

In the following, Section 2 of this report presents a short overview of the regional context of the Western Balkans and its shared historical grievances. Section 3 will delve into factors and actors that were found to shape an affected community, while Section 4 reviews the characteristics that emerge in unaffected communities. Section 5 reviews the current state of PVE programming and its (tenuous) linkages to peacebuilding and reconciliation. Section 6 offers up reflections on the findings, in particular our insights into the issue of resilience, and identifies areas for further research. The report concludes with recommendations for better entry points and improved PVE programmes in the future.

⁸ *"This included attending eight public lectures by (male) Salafist preachers and several lectures by female preachers. Further, one researcher regularly visited private lectures by the same Salafi preacher from a single parajamaat over the course of three months, with the intent of tracking the group dynamic and assessing the interest of members in religious questions, their attitudes towards their leaders, and their behaviour towards outsiders. This researcher participated in post-lecture gatherings to discuss current events and religious issues with some group members"* (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 6).

2 Regional context and shared historical grievances

This section aims to situate the phenomenon of violent extremism in the four Western Balkan countries which are the focus of the study within the local and regional contexts. After a brief regional outlook, it will review the historical background that led to the rise of extremism ideologies and the foreign fighter phenomenon in all four countries, and map their current demographic and socio-economic features.

Regional context

Although the Western Balkans share many ‘push and pull factors’ of violent extremism with other regions such as MENA or Western Europe, what stands out is the failure of nationhood and state-building since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, in particular in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and the difficulties that all four fragile societies experience.

The four countries scrutinised in this study share many commonalities rooted in shared historical grievances, but also linked to underperforming economies, bad governance and administrative dysfunctionality, national and ethnic tensions and unresolved identity issues. These countries also share the presence of significant indigenous Muslim populations that in recent years have been exposed to different interpretations of Islam as well as the influence of some Middle East charities in their proselytisation and recruitment efforts (Becirevic et al. 2017).

Before the wars of the 1990s, there were hardly any fundamentalist movements inspired by Islam. With the collapse of communism and the disintegration of the Federation of Yugoslavia, during which many ex-republics-turned-states suffered conflict combined with political instability and economic dysfunctions, the space opened for religious revival. During the era of a functioning Yugoslav Federation, the official Islamic Community was centrally organised and followed one school of thought only, that of the Hanafi school. The Islamic Community of Yugoslavia had one unified understanding and practising of Islam, unlike at present when many schools of thought can be identified to have taken root through either parajamaats or other forms of interpretations and proselytising.

The Western Balkans region has been marred by cases of foreign fighters joining violent groups outside of their countries since 2011. In total, about 920 foreign fighters have left from the countries of the Western Balkans; most are from Kosovo, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Albania (Azinovic 2018).

It is still unknown what are the exact root causes and drivers of this phenomenon in a region with such close proximity to Europe, not only geographically but also in terms of the European Union accession process. Albania is a candidate country for EU membership on the path to negotiating its accession to the EU. Macedonia has been a candidate country since 2005, and in June 2018 the country received the recommendation to start negotiations for accession to the EU. As a result of the name change agreement with Greece and the Parliament’s ratification of the Prespa Agreement, Macedonia will most likely become a NATO member during the course of 2019.⁹ Geographic proximity to Europe, membership of major security organisations such as NATO and the ongoing process of EU integration for all WB countries do not insulate the region from the phenomenon of violent extremism. On the contrary, the uncertain EU accession process creates a crisis of identity and belonging and a sense of uncertainty (especially for young people) about the future.

⁹ In this report, for ease of reading, we use Macedonia to refer to the country previously called FYROM and now North Macedonia.

National contexts

Bosnia and Herzegovina's population is estimated at 3.8 million, with 50.7 percent belonging to the Muslim religion, 30.7 percent to the Orthodox Church and 15.2 percent being Roman Catholics. Youth unemployment in Bosnia is the highest in the region at 63 percent. Living standards in the region are considerably lower than in Europe, with GDP per capita being approximately half that of the EU member states in Eastern Europe (Becirevic et al. 2017).

In contrast to other countries studied, in Bosnia and Herzegovina the terms radicalisation and violent extremism are closely associated with Salafism. The historical causes and social drivers of today's religious radicalism can be traced back to the 1990s, and the phenomenon is largely exogenous to Bosnian society (Azinovic/Jusic 2015, 2016). Although the first departures of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq were registered in 2013, the Salafi movement and its proselytising have existed since the war which broke out in 1992. Although the war in Bosnia ended in 1995 following a deal brokered and signed in Dayton (USA) by the political representatives of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia, Bosnian society is still deeply affected by the scale and scope of the conflict, and the country remains highly polarised along ethnic lines, and marred with bad practices in politics and governance. The fragility of Bosnian society has enabled the rise and the presence of radicalised groups and individuals. The mujahideen unit initially based in Zenica-Doboj Canton with the 'mission' to spread the 'true meaning' of Islam was able to operate 'undisturbed' and combine its activities with those of various Salafist humanitarian organisations. The enabling environment for the Salafi movement and humanitarian organisations to take root and prosper was further made possible by the structural and financial weakness of the official Islamic Community in Bosnia and by the support these groups received in various forms from individuals and organisations based in Gulf countries. Salafists have managed to establish illegal congregations, known as *parajaamats*, outside the framework of the official Islamic Community where they practise and preach Islam "*characterised by rigidity and reductionism*", a form not known to Bosnian Muslims previously (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 2).

Kosovo, a small country of around two million inhabitants, has been the source of the highest number of foreign fighters per capita in the region: to date, 400 Kosovo citizens have travelled to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq (Jakupi/Kraja 2018). Almost 90 percent of the population are Muslim believers following the Hanafi school of Islam. The exact root causes of the recent radicalisation process are not known although several push and pull factors have been identified as contributing to the emergence of the phenomenon of VE since the late 1990s. Kosovo, like other countries in this study, suffers from insufficient economic development, a lack of trust towards both local and central institutions, a lack of a proper education system, poor governance practices and a lack of political accountability. In contrast to other countries, and in addition to already evident problems, Kosovo struggles from its lack of international legitimacy since its unilateral declaration of independence in 2008.¹⁰ Kosovo is also the only country in the Balkans that does not enjoy visa-free travel to Europe and to most countries in the world. Kosovo and its people do not only feel isolated, but they also live under a contested statehood with disputed territorial integrity – the north of Kosovo is home to 50,000 Kosovo Serbs who refuse to accept Pristina's authority and instead look for guidance from Belgrade. Furthermore, Kosovo is home to the youngest population in Europe, with youth unemployment estimated at 52.7 percent (Kosovo Agency for Statistics¹¹).

Kosovo's institutions have responded to the threats of violent extremism in various ways, but mainly by amending the legislation and investigating and bringing charges against many individuals suspected to have links to violent extremism. Islamic community representatives are of the opinion that Kosovo's institutions have not acted in time to curb the phenomenon. In the words of one of their officials, "*part of the blame lies with Kosovo's government for not acting against such external religious influence that swept the country*

¹⁰ To date, about 120 countries have recognised Kosovo as an independent state. Those that have not recognised the new state include five EU member states and two UN Security Council members who question the legitimacy and sustainability of the entity.

¹¹ <http://ask.rks-gov.net/en/kosovo-agency-of-statistics>, retrieved 12 April 2019.

immediately after the 1998-1999 war with Serbia, in the early days of the establishment of the UN protectorate over Kosovo and the following years as local institutions began to take shape" (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 9).

Macedonia, according to the most recent census, conducted in 2002, has a population of around two million, with 65 percent ethnic Macedonians the largest ethnic group, 25.17 percent ethnic Albanians and Turks at 3.85 percent, as well as other small ethnic groups. "*Religious persuasion is predominantly divided along ethnic lines, with most ethnic Macedonians practicing Eastern Orthodoxy, and ethnic Albanians practicing Islam*" (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 3). Notably different ethnic and religious groups have always been part of the societal fabric of Macedonia, which gained its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. Although at the time tensions were high, Macedonia managed to escape the ethnic wars that were taking place during the 1990s in the region. Nonetheless, societal polarisation along ethnic and political lines has been present at different intensities to this day. Ethnic tensions between Macedonians and Albanians culminated in 2001 with armed clashes between Albanian rebels and Macedonian security forces. A peace was brokered shortly afterwards, under the auspices of the international community. The resulting Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) increased the rights of Albanians in Macedonia and included power-sharing provisions. Nonetheless, grievance narratives persist to this day, with Albanians claiming to be politically, socially and economically excluded from Macedonian civic life, and Macedonians fearing territorial loss as well as the loss of their majority status (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018). Different groups have exploited these grievances in order to incite radicalisation leading to violent extremism. Like other countries studied, Macedonia also suffers from youth unemployment, lack of prospects, poor governance, and a lack of development, rule of law and political accountability. This, coupled with the lack of authority of the official body of the Islamic Community, has resulted in the enabling environment for various (illegal) religious groups to spring up and organise parajamaats through which they spread their interpretation of Islam. In contrast to Bosnia, violent extremism in Macedonia is perceived to be a homegrown phenomenon. The first cases of foreign fighters from Macedonia were registered in 2013, and the overwhelming majority have been ethnic Albanian Muslims.

Albania, in contrast to other countries selected for this study, was not part of the former Yugoslavia and did not suffer the wars of the 1990s. Nonetheless, after almost 50 years of communist rule, in March 1992 the first democratic elections routed the communists and the Democratic Party won the majority of seats in Parliament, in a context of economic collapse and social unrest. Yet after more than 25 years of pluralist and democratic governance, Albania is still a country in transition, suffering from many socio-economic and political challenges. The lack of development, good governance and rule of law, coupled with high levels of corruption and insufficient political accountability, have hindered and slowed Albania's advancement towards the EU accession process, although the country gained NATO membership in 2009. Albania has a population of 2.8 million and the four largest religious communities are Muslim (57 percent), Catholics (10 percent), Orthodox (7 percent) and the Bektashi (2 percent) (Albanian Institute of Statistics 2011).¹²

Under the communist regime, Albanians were not at liberty to practise religion in public, and places and centres of worship were either destroyed or closed down. In 1967, Albania was officially declared the only atheist country in the world. Nowadays, religion does not play a significant role in the lives of most Albanians, and national identity prevails as the strongest trait bonding citizens to one another. This positively affects religious tolerance, with over 80 percent of Albanians believing that "*national feelings nourish religious tolerance*" (Vurmo et al. 2018, 25). Like Kosovo and Macedonia and in contrast to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the roots of religious radicalisation leading to violent extremism and the foreign fighters phenomenon in Albania do not lie in the mujahideen movement. One might argue that the increasing freedom of religion opened a space for varying interpretations of religion, which differed from the traditional practices of Islam, as well as the rise of Salafism in the country (Becirevic et al. 2017).

¹² However, according to Qirjazi and Shehu (2018), the estimates of religious association in Albania differ; the Pew Research in Mapping Global Population (2012) estimates the Albanian Muslims at 80 percent of the country's population, while the US Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook identifies only 60 percent of the population as belonging to the Muslim religion.

In combination with other socio-political and socio-economic factors, this also provided an opening for radical preachers. The various interpretations of Islam and the enabling environment that hosted different groups are also reflected in the 2005 statute of the Muslim Community of Albania (MCA), which stipulates as a main objective “[to] awaken and strengthen the Islamic faith among Muslim believers and to inculcate love for the homeland”, whereas previously the statute of the MCA had a simple objective to “inculcate love for the homeland” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018).

Following this brief outline of the national context in the four Western Balkans countries, the next two sections will analyse the phenomenon of violent extremism through the prism of selected cases of affected or unaffected municipalities.

3 Affected communities: Factors and actors enabling the rise of violent extremism

This section explores the scope and range of factors and actors influencing community vulnerability to the threat of violent extremism. It will subsequently operationalise the concept of vulnerability by outlining indicators chosen to define and select certain municipalities as affected by violent extremism (3.1); map out the main factors identified through the research as contributing to the rise of VE (3.2); and highlight the range of actors driving or fuelling VE in these communities, or allowing extremism to take root by failing to act preventively or reactively to the phenomenon (3.3).

3.1 Mapping affected communities: indicators and selection criteria

For the purpose of this study, an affected community should be understood as one which has been influenced by ideological and/or physical forms of violent extremism such as: pervasive radical ideology, ideologically motivated acts of violence, the incidence of foreign fighters originating from the community, and presence of actors that cultivate vulnerability towards violent extremism (Vurmo et al. 2018). As outlined in Section 1, the main quantitative indicator used by the four country cases to assess whether a community is affected or unaffected was the number of individuals stemming from that community who left as foreign fighters for Syria and Iraq. Additional indicators were used by single country studies to refine the measurement of affectedness, such as the number of parajamaats (Salafist congregations that operate outside the purview of the official IC) existing in the community (Bosnia); and the number of recruiters and radical preachers prosecuted from the area (Kosovo). Researchers also made use of their previous experience and knowledge of the topic to confirm their assessment. They also found during their fieldwork that objective measurement and subjective perceptions of the threat might differ considerably: community members may define their municipality as being unaffected, or consider violent extremism as a marginal phenomenon in comparison to more pressing basic needs and grievances, while being objectively affected by the foreign fighter phenomenon. This paradox might be partly explained by the fact that some municipalities were selected as objects of study because they had not been studied before and hence could lead to innovative and unbiased findings; but this also meant that local stakeholders were not yet familiarised with the concept of violent extremism, and hence may lack self-reflectiveness about its impact on their lives.

In **Albania**, three municipalities were chosen as fieldwork sites, with Tirana (or more specifically three of its neighbourhoods) being defined as the most affected community, both in terms of the aforementioned quantitative indicators, and its potential to harbour future VE ideology and actions. Furthermore, the municipality of Korça was assessed as moderately affected, so its field data will be mentioned both in this and the subsequent section.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, researchers conducted field research in three cantons, with Zenica-Doboj Canton (ZDC) being defined as the affected community. The reasons why the Bosnian research team decided to use cantons rather than municipalities as units of analysis were the following: i) there are no municipalities in the country, except for isolated places such as Gornja Maoca in Tuzla Canton or Osve in ZDC, that could be singled out based on the criteria used to define affected communities; ii) Salafists,

especially those who left for Syria and Iraq, are highly mobile and frequently visit parajamaats in different cantons; and iii) many Salafists do not adhere to the Law on Residence, meaning that they are registered in one municipality but live in another.

In **Kosovo**, the research team selected Hani i Elezit as the affected municipality to be studied. With 11 registered foreign fighters, it has the highest number of FF per capita in Kosovo. Geographically, Hani i Elezit is situated in the eastern part of Kosovo bordering Macedonia. The Kosovo study also looked at the municipality of Mitrovica as an exploratory case to investigate the relationship between ethno-political and religiously-motivated violent extremism, rather than a fully-fledged case study, due to the researchers' security concerns. Based on limited existing data, it can be assumed that Mitrovica falls into the affected communities category.

In **Macedonia**, three municipalities were studied, with Cair being identified as highly affected whilst Gostivar was assessed as a moderately affected municipality. All three municipalities are predominantly ethnic Albanian urban areas and similar in size and population. Cair is one of the ten municipalities that forms the Macedonian capital of Skopje and has approximately 65,000 inhabitants.

3.2 Factors conducive to a breeding ground for violent extremism

For many years, the prevailing narrative on the 'push' factor of radicalisation pointed to the lack of economic opportunities or the search for financial gains. Today, this is dismissed as the main driver of recruitment by violent extremist organisations. Other factors such as insufficient political inclusion, weak representation and a lack of channels for political engagement, combined with institutional anomie (the state's lack of ability to influence people's lives) are considered to be more important factors for turning to violent extremism, especially for young people. A sense of disenchantment with the state and/or democracy as well as discrimination on a cultural, social, gender or faith basis are further trends identified as push factors by a number of experts and researchers working on the topic (as reviewed in Section 1).

In the four case study reports, the most common themes across the different communities are the following: a deep polarisation along identity, religious and ethno-political lines, and the absence – or capacity gap – of state institutions. These two factors combined appear to have led to a feeling, which may or may not reflect reality, in some community groups that they are either stigmatised and discriminated against, or that they are a minority and/or marginalised group within their own community. This also leads to a milieu where issues of identity can be exploited by violent extremist propaganda and recruiters. In addition, poor socio-economic conditions and political deadlocks lead to a feeling in some communities (or parts of some communities) that the future is uncertain, or that the future holds few or no opportunities and prospects. These enabling factors stem from the modern history of the region and the countries scrutinised in this study, as examined in Section 2.

Table 3: Factors identified by partners in their assessment of affected communities

Factors conducive to violent extremism	
Bosnia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ideological, educational - Socio-political (institutional anomie, uncertainty, unemployment)
Albania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ideological (identity, lack of education, religious disinformation) - Socio-economic (alienation, marginalisation, economic deprivation, enabling factors) - Structural (perception of poor governance, intra-faith tensions)

Kosovo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presence (or lack) of state institutions (responsiveness, political representation, trust) - Religious institutions (relationship between various layers of BIK and local authorities) - Community ties (presence of civil society) - Identity and identification - Incidents
Macedonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enabling environment and support structures (institutional apathy and the lack of public trust towards state institutions; the media; the IRC); educational factors (poor religious education; lack of critical thinking; lack of educational support; gender-based educational vulnerabilities) - Extreme ideologies, networks and interpersonal ties (ideological influence and ideological proximity, lack of familial cohesion) - Collective and personal grievances (isolation, alienation and marginalisation; economic grievances)

3.2.1 Societal polarisation and disconnect

As discussed in the previous section, each of the four countries studied are undergoing their own transitions from socialism, communism (Albania) and war to pluralist, liberal, market-economy states. Arguably, the wars in the former Yugoslav arena have long concluded; the same applies to the collapse of the one-party political system. Nonetheless, due to the unfinished process of state-building, Western Balkan countries remain fragile, with conflict-affected societies that have lost the ability to manage governance and provide key services for all citizens.

The legacy of wars/armed conflict has made citizens and societies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia especially vulnerable to ethno-nationalism, political radicalism and ideological extremism. Albania, although not directly affected by an armed conflict in the recent past, is also suffering from political radicalism and ideological extremism. Deep-rooted systemic inadequacies and inequalities are contributory factors to the recent trends of foreign fighter departures to foreign wars.

The research reports offer a sobering assessment of widespread structural socio-economic deprivation, high levels of corruption at the state level, institutions ‘hijacked’ and tightly controlled by incompetent political elites, who jump at the first opportunity to manipulate collective grievances for the purposes of promoting ‘otherism’, combined with the feeling of defeatism among citizens resulting from social injustice (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 2). In this context, various extreme religious non-state actors and humanitarian organisations from the Gulf countries have been able to operate and realise their missions among certain sections of society, doing so in a variety of ways (ibid.). This situation makes it difficult for individuals to stay connected with their societies as the organised collective that attends to their needs. The disconnect that people feel with their government is further strengthened by a lack of opportunities and loss of hope (ibid.; Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018; Qirjazi/Shehu 2018).

Ideology and religion

Albania, the first self-proclaimed atheist country in the world under communist rule (1945-1991), is a country where most inhabitants have little knowledge of religion and adhere to their national identity before their religious one. Religious diversity (more details on the religious makeup of Albania are given

in Section 2) is an explanatory factor as to why Albanians lead a secular life and give little consideration to religion when shaping and organising their lives (Vurmo et al. 2018).

In 1991 the new Constitution of Albania established freedom of religion and the separation of religion from the state. In the following years, mosques and churches were built and the influence of religion began to grow in the country. The Muslim Community of Albania (MCA) was established and initially followed the same line as the Renaissance (*Rilindja*) thinkers of Albania, who regardless of their religious background favoured national over religious identity. Such sentiments were also reflected in the post-communist MCA statute, which aspired to ‘inculcate love for the homeland’. In 2005 the MCA statute was amended slightly to ‘awaken and strengthen the Islamic faith among Muslim believers and to inculcate love for the homeland’. It is not entirely clear when the external non-traditional ideological influences penetrated Albania apart from the fact that in 1992, in an attempt to attract foreign investment, the Albanian government joined the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and as a result investment from specific Wahhabi and Salafi groups together with a certain form of radical ideology started pouring in. The amendment of the MCA statute, although it may not seem drastic, could be perceived as another sign that the tolerant and harmonious façade of Islam in Albania is slowly shifting. It was in 2011 that the first Albanian foreign fighters left for Syria. Most of these fighters came from underdeveloped and underprivileged rural areas that were subject to frequent visits by unofficial imams who may have engaged in radical preaching. These dynamics are well captured by the following quote:

“The lack of coordination between the Albanian government, local communities, and the MCA reduced state-level monitoring over religious activity and expanded opportunities for radical religious ideologies to enter the country. In 1992, in an attempt to attract foreign investment, the Albanian government joined the Organization of Islamic Conference; however, soon afterwards this decision brought investments from specific Wahhabi and Salafi groups which imported a form of radical ideology into the country (BIRN, 2014). Simultaneously, weak and less competent leadership within the MCA created the first rifts within the community, as many imams who had practiced Islam in the Middle East began to challenge the traditional views of the older generation of imams who often lacked some qualifications after years of religious deprivation under the communist regime (Zoto, 2013, 50-51). As a result, six major NGOs linked to terrorism set up camp in Albania between 1991 and 2005 without much notice from the government (Kullolli, 2009, 42-47)” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 4).

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, matters of ideology and religion are different from Albania, since more than half the population in Bosnia are practising Muslims. Islam has been part of the lives of Bosniaks for centuries. However, during the 1992-1995 war, the El-Mujahid unit¹³ used the city of Zenica as its stronghold for military activities and for proselytising. One of the preconditions for Bosnian volunteers to join the unit was to undergo 40 days of training at an Islamic school organised and taught by Imam al Misri¹⁴ who was later convicted of terrorism. Many locals joined the unit and abandoned their traditional understanding of Islam – worth noting that just as in Kosovo and other Western Balkan countries, the traditional understanding of Islam is related to the Hanafi school of thought, and is said to be rather more open and flexible. The main introductory literature used for the proselytising, written by al Misri, was a pamphlet titled ‘Conceptions we need to correct’. By the time the war ended, Salafism had taken root in Zenica and in other parts of the country.

¹³ The El-Mujahid unit gathered foreign fighters who came to fight in BiH on behalf of Bosniaks. Most unit members “were persistent and successful in persuading Bosnian Muslims who joined the Unit to abandon their traditional understanding of Islam”. The mujahideen considered many of the practices of Bosnian Muslims as having introduced novelties into Islam, and encouraged them “to return to ‘uncompromised sources of the faith’ ” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 7).

¹⁴ Imam al Misri is an Egyptian cleric deported from the country in 2001, later convicted of terrorism charges and sentenced to eight years imprisonment. The missionary work of foreign mujahideens in Bosnia was mainly guided by a pamphlet entitled “Conceptions that we need to correct”, written by al Misri and published in 1993 with funding from a Kuwaiti organisation. The pamphlet served as core, introductory literature for the proselytisation undertaken by members of the El-Mujahid unit in Bosnia (Turcalo/Veljan 2018).

Since then, the Islamic Community has been faced with Salafi (and takfiri) parajamaats who built upon the wartime proselytising and propaganda of a radical and intolerant form of Islam. The remains of the EL-Mujahid unit, who were of Bosnian origin, established a humanitarian organisation, Active Islamic Youth, which acted as the focal point for Salafis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The organisation received funding from Gulf countries and managed to establish branches in every canton in the Federation of BiH. The main goal of Salafi preachers in BiH is to change the matrix of traditional Bosnian Islam by promoting a ‘pure’ reinvention of Islam and shape the religious understanding that would in the process help erase any of the localised traditional forms of Bosnian Islam. *“This has opened the way for Salafists to acquire a new supranational identity as part of the global Ummah, supplanting their national identity”* (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 11).

In **Macedonia**, religious affiliation is divided along ethnic lines, with ethnic Macedonians being Orthodox Slavs and ethnic Albanians Muslim – worth noting that the Albanian community in Macedonia has traditionally been religiously conservative and under the influence of parallel religious structures that operated unhindered by the authorities (Qehaja/Perteshi 2018). For many periods in time, the various ethnic and religious groups have coexisted relatively peacefully, but after the breakup of Yugoslavia, the ethnic tensions in Macedonia culminated in armed conflict in 2001. The grievance narrative on the Albanian side leading up to the conflict centred mainly around the perceived and actual exclusion of ethnic Albanians economically, socially and politically from Macedonian civic life. For ethnic Macedonians, the grievance narrative consisted of fears of territorial encroachment and loss of majority status (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018). Although inter-ethnic relations are not a subject of this comparative report and have been exhaustively covered elsewhere (Reka 2011; Qejaha/Petershi 2018), it is important to note the background to the problem and how legacies of the conflict have paved the way for ideological extremism to take hold and the subsequent lack of institutional capacities to deal with the problem, not only in Macedonia but in the neighbouring countries as well. As Turcalo and Veljan (2018, 24) note for Bosnia-Herzegovina: *“[T]his societal polarisation, along with real and perceived inequalities and the inability of institutions to address these issues, has led to institutional anomie – which in this case refers to the tendency of institutions to reproduce existing inequalities instead of acting as a factor of social cohesion, resulting in a loss of trust in institutions generally and in the entire system as such.”*

The Islamic Religious Community (IRC) is heavily criticised by stakeholders for lacking public trust, having very little authority over rogue mosques and for ignoring the issue of parajamaats. The IRC’s inaction has allowed the enabling environment for the proliferation of extremism to take hold in Macedonia. Furthermore, the IRC’s lack of control had serious ramifications in the municipality of Cair where there is a known presence of parajamaats in high numbers, which have helped radicalise followers to a significant extent (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018).

For **Kosovo**, prior to the introduction of a pluralist system, religion was mainly an activity practised in the private sphere. Although the majority of the population in Kosovo (almost 90 percent) is Kosovar Albanian and Muslim, the presence of extreme ideological influences and actors that pushed their agendas by taking advantage of free speech, freedom of association and guarantees of religious freedom only became problematic after the conflict of 1999. Furthermore, Jakupi and Kraja (2018) point out that the phenomenon of violent extremism in Kosovo is not homegrown but externally driven and primarily stems from specific networks and cross-border cooperation of imams from Macedonia with strong ties to certain imams from Kosovo who share the same alumni networks originating in Middle East and Gulf countries. The example of Hani i Elezit (a municipality located near the border with Macedonia) as an affected community testifies to the increased religiosity and its impact on identity.

According to Jakupi and Kraja (2018), in their contextualising of the Islamic Association of Kosovo (BIK), the clash of Islamic ideologies in Kosovo became evident and open in 2008 when BIK was undergoing a deep crisis of legitimacy. The crisis derives mainly from the clash of two schools of thought: the Hanafi school, which had been practising its own theology (legacy of the Ottoman Empire) for the past five centuries, and a second school that believes that Kosovo’s Islamic community should be part of the

global Islamic community, unconstrained by the boundaries of nation-states and open to various external influences. BIK senior officials blame the government for not acting on the warning of ‘infiltration’ by various radical imams (some of whom came from Macedonia) who found an open field and would preach in Kosovo mosques as well as fund other ‘atypical’ mosques that nowadays can be seen scattered all over the country.

Ethno-politics

In **Macedonia**, ethnic Albanians are the second largest ethnic group. Tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians have always been present, albeit at different intensity at different times. The tensions culminated in a violent armed conflict in 2001. The signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement eased the tensions to an extent by increasing the rights of ethnic Albanians living in Macedonia and by establishing the rules for power-sharing between the two main communities. Although relations have improved since 2001, they remain fragile to this day, not least due to the exploitation of national narratives by all sides (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018). Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski point out that the relations between the two sides have suffered smaller-scale episodes of ethnic violence, in particular under the previous government, resulting in a brief armed conflict in the city of Kumanovo. During this period of nationalist rule (2006-2015), Albanians felt discriminated against and often marginalised, which may have driven many individuals to seek alternatives (Qehaja/Perteshi 2018).

Nationalist politics, continued inter-ethnic tensions and the nurturing of an ‘us versus them’ mentality – which is also a narrative exploited by extremism ideologists and recruiters – may have contributed to allowing the space for more radical lines to spring up and encouraged the subsequent participation of some individuals in radical and violent groups. Divisions within society driven by the desire for political gains and the tension between the two sides, as argued by the authors of the Macedonia report, “*have the potential to make narratives of violent extremism more attractive to either side, and leave space for the potentiality of radicalization*”. Considering the inter-ethnic dynamics in the Macedonian context and its political structure at the state and societal level, “*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*” (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 3).

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the legacy of the interethnic conflicts of the 1990s and the current ethno-nationalist and political radicalism have contributed to societal divisions and made society more vulnerable to various forms of radicalism and ideological extremism. As Turcalo and Veljan have explained, the current constitutional arrangement that is based on the Dayton Peace Agreement “*has also been a factor in weakening the resilience of Bosnians to radicalisation, by creating a constitutional reality that perpetuates the political extremism of the war*”. The authors further affirm that Bosnian post-war society found it extremely hard to develop new forms of resistance to radicalism, which may have contributed to the creation of a breeding ground for other forms of extremism to take root, “*especially when combined with gloomy prospects at the structural level – such as continued political radicalisation, institutional anomie, and socioeconomic instability*” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 41-42).

Polarising ethno-nationalistic narratives continue to this day to burden post-conflict society in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These narratives by and large are promoted by political elites and become more pronounced during election periods, fostering further divisions within society for political gains. Ethno-nationalist narratives have shifted their focus from top-down political radicalism to the Salafist recruitment networks and the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Election periods are seen as critical moments that nurture the sense of alienation, leading to certain members of the communities becoming more susceptible to extremist messages (Turcalo/Veljan 2018; Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018).

In **Kosovo**, inter-ethnic tensions still exist, albeit at a lower density; the link between religiously-based violent extremism and ethnicity-based political extremism is not visible. Communities on both sides of the spectrum have mainly blamed poor socio-economic conditions and lack of prospects, coupled

with lack of effectiveness on the part of Kosovo's institutions, for the emergence of radicalism and violent extremism (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 33).

3.2.2 Dysfunctional institutions

Lack of trust in governance/state institutions

Across all four countries researched, the lack of trust in institutions, seen as failing to provide for the needs of citizens, was echoed loud and clear. In **Macedonia**, public trust in institutions varies in different communities and institutional levels: for instance, 54 percent of ethnic Macedonians have trust in national government while only 35 percent of ethnic Albanians share the same trust in the central level. The level of trust changes vis-à-vis local-level institutions, with only a 5 percent gap between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians. Furthermore, a focus group in Struga (with participants in the 25-45 age range) reported hesitancy in approaching local institutions to seek information on countering and preventing violent extremism (even if a VE committee existed) due to a general lack of trust towards the institutions (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018). In Gostivar, the municipal council established initially to deal with issues related to extremism no longer exists due to 'institutional mistrust'. In Cair, the lack of institutional support has enabled an environment where the parajamaat phenomenon has taken root and therefore created the space for extremist narratives to take hold (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018). In Macedonia, the high rate of unemployment resulting from the poor economic conditions currently stands at 22 percent and reaches 55 percent for youth unemployment.¹⁵ As in other countries, financial incentives are not a main factor pushing individuals to VE, but unemployment is a contributory factor and an addendum to the other, more prevalent factors towards violent extremism.

In **Kosovo**, according to Public Pulse 2018, a yearly publication by UNDP in Kosovo, only 32.5 percent of those surveyed said they were satisfied with Kosovo's key institutions, as compared to 36 percent in October 2017. Furthermore, only 30 percent of Kosovars were satisfied with the work of central institutions, as opposed to 32 percent in October 2017. Notably, Kosovars appear to have increased trust in local institutions, with 50 percent believing that their local municipal government performs according to citizens' priorities (Public Pulse XIV 2018). Although Jakupi and Kraja (2018) found no direct links between political and religious extremism, they noted that continuous political extremism has eroded the trust in institutions and in the process has affected their authority in combating and preventing violent extremism.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the annual public surveys (2013-2015) have clearly shown a decrease in citizens' trust in institutions with political parties scoring the lowest levels followed by the government at all levels.¹⁶ According to Turcalo and Veljan, this "*lack of trust in institutions is closely connected to a generally low level of interpersonal trust in Bosnian society*". Salafi adherents have even lower levels of trust in institutions, whereas the Islamic Community enjoys the highest level of trust among respondents (Puhalo 2018, cited in Turcalo/Veljan 2018).

Similarly, in **Albania** the failure of state institutions to provide basic services such as security, healthcare, rule of law and education is a major cause of discontent, leading to exacerbated grievances and a further disconnect of individuals from the state (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018).

Eroding trust in religious institutions

The decrease in trust in religious institutions has been reported by research partners in their country studies. This stems mainly from the fact that religious institutions have suffered diminished authority in

¹⁵ CEIC 2018; European Training Foundation 2013, 8; see Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 21.

¹⁶ Survey Results, analitika.ba December 2015 [accessed 20 April 2018]; see Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 13.

recent years and are not in control of many ‘illegal’ and parallel mosques, thus contributing to the enabling environment for violent extremism to take hold.

In **Macedonia**, many interviewers across all three municipalities said that the IRC has lost the public’s trust. This sentiment is further strengthened by secondary sources such as the findings of the Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation indicating that public trust in the IRC declined between 2008 and 2016 from 77 percent to 50 percent.¹⁷ This is also the period during which Macedonia was affected by the foreign fighter phenomenon and the proliferation of illegal mosques or parajamaats. Focus group participants both in Gostivar and in Cair expressed the same view that IRC has lost credibility and integrity, has failed as a religious institution and does not have the trust of the faithful (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018). The IRC is the institutional body meant to control, regulate and manage all mosques across Macedonia. Arguably, it has lost its grip on control and oversight, as a result of which extremist preachers have found fertile ground to advance their interpretation of Islam and engage in other recruitment activities within their congregations, who gave them the same amount of authority and respect.

The Islamic Association of **Kosovo** (referred to as BIK in this study, i.e. Bashkesia Islame e Kosoves) does not fare any better in terms of public trust. Like the IRC in Macedonia, BIK is tasked with overseeing local mosques, selecting the clergy and ordering the theme for sermons, usually held during Friday prayers, throughout Kosovo. As such, BIK was the authority in charge of religious affairs of Muslim believers in Kosovo. However, in 2008, a crisis of legitimacy was reported to have taken place due to the clash of Islamic ideologies within the BIK community. This crisis diminished the BIK’s authority and created divisions in senior ranks. Furthermore, the crisis was reflected in the communities due to a lack of a common front against radical influences and also divided local communities and weakened the authority of local imams. This created the vulnerable space for various ideologies to take root in Kosovo since then (Jakupi and Kraja 2018). Nonetheless, the lack of public trust in BIK is not only due to external threats incited by different ideological streams; as Jakupi and Kraja (2018, 15) note, in Hani i Elezit, there was a strained relationship *“between BIK’s local head imam and the organisation’s local head that was exploited by those challenging the organisation’s authority and its ability to organise the religious life in the municipality. This mostly manifested itself through the creation of alternative spaces for prayer in private houses and youth camps that were outside traditional mosques and strayed away from BIK’s instruction of prayer”*.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and **Albania** the official Islamic Communities do not suffer the same lack of public trust as in Kosovo and Macedonia. While parajamaats and illegal mosques are present in both countries, moderate and traditional Muslim believers still maintain a considerable level of respect for the official Muslim community representatives. The rifts between the Salafists and IC in BiH have been evident for some time, and although IC has kept its doors open for parajamaats to sign the protocol with IC and join in the community, the practice and officials of the IC remain the primary ideological targets for Salafists. Nonetheless, IC still enjoys a significant level of trust among traditional Muslim believers in BiH. This trust can be best measured by looking at the level of *zakat* (a form of obligatory tax for those who meet certain wealth criteria) collected by IC. The data shows an increase in the amount collected each year during the period 2012-2016 (Turcalo/Veljan 2018).

Poor quality of education

Although levels of education or lack of it do not seem to be the major factor leading to individuals radicalising and joining violent groups, the quality of education or the lack of quality religious education was seen as detrimental to the prevention of VE. In his report, ‘All jihad is local’, Nate Rosenblatt explains that the level of schooling of the average ISIS fighter is not low, with only five percent of the fighters reported to have had little to no education, while 15 percent reported basic elementary school education, 32 percent reported a high-school degree or rough equivalent (i.e. basic technical or religious training), 10 percent reported

17 Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation 2016; see Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 14.

partially completed university studies, and 13 percent reported completing university studies or advanced degrees (Rosenblatt 2016). Adrian Shtuni in his study ‘Dynamics of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Kosovo’ also found that the vast majority of Kosovo FF have moderate formal education, with 82 percent with secondary education and 10 percent with tertiary education and only three percent with completed elementary education. In comparative terms, according to Shtuni, this rate appears to be superior to the reported national rate which according to the official 2011 census is about 6.7 percent (Shtuni 2016).

In **Bosnia**, according to Turcalo and Veljan, there seems to be conflicting data on the correlation between education level and support for (or adherence to) Salafism. A survey conducted in 2006 found that only 12.9 percent supported more conservative interpretations of Islam and that this group of respondents had lower levels of education. Azinovic and Jusic (2016) found that the majority of FF from Bosnia who went to Syria and Iraq had only primary school education. Nonetheless, in a recent study of the Salafi community in BiH conducted by Edina Becirovic (2016), 52 percent of the Salafi interviewees had a university degree and all were high school graduates. In BiH, it was the humanitarian organisations and their prominent presence in the post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina social landscape which, in order to attract Bosnians to more radical religious norms, offered financial aid and scholarships in return for recipients attending mini-madrassas. These humanitarian organisations also provided funding for young Bosnian Muslims to attend Islamic universities in the Middle East (mainly in Saudi Arabia and Jordan). The scholarships primarily targeted young people who accepted Salafism (Turcalo/Veljan 2018).

In **Macedonia**, it is the lack of quality religious education and lack of information and critical thinking ability in general that increases community vulnerability to VE. The lack of quality religious education was the most frequently mentioned issue related to education among respondents and was described as poor quality of religious education or an inability to access religious education. *“Secondary sources are also demonstrative of this finding and suggest 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”* (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 15).

Arguably, lack of proper religious education creates an enabling space for extremist narratives to emerge and flourish, according to Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski: *“[M]oreover, 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”* (ibid.). Furthermore, according to the country report, the teachers are inadequately prepared for the task of educating students on the potential dangers posed by violent extremism narratives and groups. The topic of violent extremism is rarely discussed at staff level and the attitude of avoidance seems to have prevailed.

Critical thinking is what has been reported to have been missing in the education systems across the countries. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the education system is still based on a narrow approach where students are not encouraged to question what they are taught. As cited in an interview: *“It starts in primary school, where pupils are robbed of their creativity and free thinking, and it continues through the university level. At the end of the day you get someone who acquiesces to everything”* (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 17). In **Macedonia**, respondents criticised the quality of education, which tends to leave the individuals with an inability to engage critically with information presented to them (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018). Critical thinking is even lower in rural areas, where women in particular self-reported experiencing a lack of access to education, resulting in underdeveloped critical thinking abilities.¹⁸

Similarly, in **Albania**, more efforts are needed so that the education sector addresses the problem of VE. Although there have been effective awareness campaigns in Kavaja, more efforts and attention

18 All-female focus group in Struga; see Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 22-23.

should be placed on targeting youth education. Teachers have raised the problem with their students but say that a more institutional approach is needed.¹⁹ Religious leaders have also reported raising the issue of VE within their congregations. Overall, Qirjazi and Shehu (2018) identified the introduction of religious education in schools by trained religious experts “*as a mechanism for curbing misinformation and reducing youth’s vulnerability to religious extremism*”.

3.2.3 Feeling of Marginalisation

Based on identity

In **Kosovo**, across all three municipalities, the feeling of marginalisation, isolation and alienation was interpreted as an incentive for vulnerable individuals to seek to belong to a higher purpose or group. These grievances are seen in opposition to broader society as “*responsible for a vulnerable individual’s feeling of isolation, alienation or marginalisation*”. Lack of development and lack of prospects, coupled with negligence by the government, have exacerbated the problem. In Hani i Elezit, for instance, one interviewee claimed that although the Mayor’s style of governance was modest and has attracted a lot of support for him, his political (Mayor Suma is independent) lack the power to make the municipality and its constituency relevant to the central government, with the result that the central government has been unresponsive to the needs of the municipality’s population. Related to this, it was claimed that lack of development and an initial lack of proactive funds to tackle the problem of religious extremism in most affected municipalities have added to the problem. Lack of development is thus seen as closely linked to a lack of prospects, caused by government inaction. Nonetheless, in recent years, especially since the phenomenon of violent extremism has surfaced, many donors, albeit uncoordinated, have shown an increased interest in initiatives that would lead to preventing violent extremism.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the most affected canton of Zenica-Doboj is riven with a constant feeling of uncertainty that affects individuals on a personal level more than any other threat. The feeling of pervasive uncertainty shared by many focus group participants derives from the sense that their futures are insecure and lacking prospects. The younger and unmarried ones suffer the most from this perceived lack of opportunity, future prospects and reliable social welfare to support a family. This feeling of uncertainty about the future is closely linked to the lack of trust in institutions across all communities researched. “*The weakening of pro-social institutions tends to lead to a sense of uncertainty that very often generates anxiety and defeatism*” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 14).

In **Albania**, in contrast, the feeling of marginalisation, discrimination and alienation seems to differ across the communities researched. In Kavaja, for instance, social cohesion is much stronger than in other communities, but instances of discrimination occur, although not at alarming rates. For instance, a practising Muslim woman and a teacher stated that at most, “*we get asked loaded questions about the wearing of the hijab, but such a thing has stopped bothering us*” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 18). In the moderately-affected municipality of Korça, however, participants expressed contrasting views: a female participant, a practising Muslim, shared her experience of being asked many direct and harsh questions by other community members regarding her way of dressing.

Isolation of communities

In **Macedonia**, perceived and actual discrimination and isolation of the Albanian community by the Macedonian community are experienced and reported by many respondents. The Macedonian community has, on the other hand, experienced a perceived loss of significance and status. Clearly, these tensions,

¹⁹ Focus group in Kavaja; see Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 17.

according to researchers on the ground, make the narrative of violent extremism more attractive to either side and leave space for the potentiality of radicalisation. The municipality of Cair, for instance, due to its positioning – a minority community located within a larger city – experiences other realities than the municipalities of Gostivar and Struga (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018).

In **Albania**, isolated communities lacking functional institutions, ridden by corruption and lack of transparency in government, coupled with unemployment and economic challenges, are most prone to radicalisation. These communities mainly consist of individuals between the ages of 19 and 29. In the words of one civil society representative, this isolation was expressed in the following manner: “*when you don’t have enough money to feed your family, you can’t really hold your head up high*” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 18). Nonetheless, in Albania, various forms of discrimination were also reported, such as discrimination based on belief. Although this does not seem to be overly visible since the majority of Albanians remain tolerant of other religious groups, some practitioners said that they sensed minor and mild forms of discrimination. Focus group participants in Kavaja also shared a similar feeling, with a practising Muslim respondent saying, “*it’s difficult to not feel isolated when you are being judged for your personal belief; you just don’t want to be confrontational; on the surface everyone says they respect your choice but in reality there is a bit of a stigma against your belief*” (ibid.).

In **Kosovo**, increased community vulnerability in Hani i Elezit could be partly explained by the fact that the municipality was underrepresented at the central level and as such suffered from the lack of development benefits and attention of international donors – this could be seen by observing the poor infrastructure of the municipality, which has no cultural centre or any focal point for community activities or gatherings of civil society organisations (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 27). Although socio-political and living conditions have improved in the last two decades, chronic vulnerabilities such as unemployment have persisted and have contributed to the enabling environment for violent extremism.

Finally, the study on **Bosnia and Herzegovina** provides some hints that in certain cases, isolation might in fact result from some small communities (such as Gornja Maoca and Osve) cordoning themselves off whenever community leaders feel that they do not want or need the state and wider society any longer. Of course, this might not reflect the majority view within these municipalities, as fieldwork respondents perceived that the dynamics of VE within the community often originate in communities smaller than the municipality (Turcalo/Veljan 2018).

3.3 Actors in affected communities: opportunity seekers, enablers, gatekeepers, targets

The set of factors illustrated in the previous section certainly plays a role in creating (or enabling) affectedness in certain communities. At the same time, they can be seen as a metaphor for a “gap” or “void” in social organisation and social identity. This space, which opens when societies are marked by polarisation, weak (state and/or religious) institutions and lack of future prospects and opportunities, may be exploited by certain organisations (or individuals) that offer new and/or alternative interpretations and (religious) ideology through networks, politicians and religious actors – in the absence of resolve or resistance by others. These actors can have a significant influence on community exposure to VE as they can either help reduce vulnerability or fuel grievances and enforce vulnerability.

This section will focus on the role these various actors play in inciting violent extremism. Particular emphasis will be placed on the threefold influence that religious non-state actors in particular have on the vulnerable and poorly functioning communities through *community creation*, *service provision* in the absence of a functioning state and religious institutions and *grievance uptake* in the face of a strong sense of both personal and global injustice.

3.3.1 Religious non-state actors and exogenous influences

Religious non-state actors in the Western Balkan countries studied in this report are in large part exogenous to the communities. They are mobile and transnational and their main aim is to instrumentalise vulnerable individuals and communities in order to promote an alternative. This is mainly done through foreign NGOs and mobile recruiters whose main objective is to offer a different interpretation of the religion of Islam and a new worldview.

Salafi NGOs

In **Kosovo**, violent extremism is mainly an externally driven phenomenon and is directly associated with a handful of preachers and influencers who raised recruits for IS from their immediate local networks. Non-governmental organisations have served as fronts for ideological indoctrination and recruitment for some years, in particular out of the capital Pristina since the end of the conflict in the 1990s. Jakupi and Kraja have established that the top recruiters in Kosovo worked through non-governmental organisations such as ‘Rinia Islame’ and ‘Nektar’ and were the first ones to challenge the authority of BIK. Due to the close geographical proximity, these recruiters and NGOs maintained strong ties to preachers in Macedonia. These preachers/recruiters were supported by NGOs in delivering lectures in mosques and gatherings outside of the formal framework of religious authority. They also facilitated the departure of a number of men from their area of operation in eastern parts of Kosovo (mainly in and around the municipalities of Hani i Elezit, Kacanik and Gjilan) to join extremist groups such as IS by handing them instructions as well as money. The ability of these individuals (preachers and recruiters) to act and operate with the support of local NGOs that enabled them to exert influence through informal gatherings and ties is seen as one of the main reasons why there are higher levels of radicalisation in the eastern parts of Kosovo. BIK authorities have complained about the fact that this influence exerted by individuals through various NGOs has gone unchallenged by the state authorities both at the local and central level and has allowed unauthorised imams who are external to the communities, including from Macedonia, to extend their reach beyond the official and traditional framework of BIK.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the weaknesses, both structural and institutional, of the official Islamic Community have been taken advantage of, mainly by various individuals and organisations (some even based in the diaspora) which received support from Gulf countries. Salafists in BiH started establishing and organising parallel congregations (or parajamaats) as alternative religious gatherings to the existing mosques of the Islamic Community. In the Bosnian context, Salafi groups and missionaries have played a crucial role in the radicalisation of individuals and communities. It was in Zenica-Doboj Canton during the years 1992-1995 where the groups of mujahideen settled and started spreading their Salafi ideology. For Salafi mujahideen, Zenica was a ‘fertile ground’ for recruiting, particularly since Bosnian Muslims felt abandoned by the West during the war. By the time the war ended, Salafism had taken hold among a small number of people in the area and in other parts of the country. The post-war period, which was characterised by poor economic conditions, opened the door to humanitarian organisations from Gulf countries that further promoted Salafism and Wahhabism. Arguably, foreign mujahideen were crucial to spreading Salafism in Bosnia. The most affected communities are those which hosted the proliferation of parajamaats and were subsequently affected by the FTF phenomenon.

In some of these places, new members, particularly young people, were most attracted by the establishment and the ongoing presence of parajamaats, mainly because they received payment beforehand to attend the Friday prayers (Turcalo/Veljan 2018). Primary school children were also a target of various Salafi humanitarian organisations. They organised mini-madrassas, awarded scholarships and provided dormitory accommodation for students in need at a very low cost. The main target groups of these humanitarian organisations were particularly vulnerable families and individuals such as single

mothers and children with disabilities. This form of outreach gave some community members the sense of belonging. In these ways, the pool of adherence started expanding and enlarging in some vulnerable post-war Bosnian communities, which endorsed alternative interpretations of religion as they were getting basic services provided.

Diaspora and foreign donations

The diaspora was identified as another actor that has played a significant role in the radicalisation process, especially of the most isolated communities and parajamaats. According to interviews with security officials and experts, in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the diaspora was instrumental in establishing the community in Gornja Maoca (a village in Tuzla Canton, bordering Brčko District). They would regularly attend parajamaats in Zenica – later on, some of these individuals from Austria in particular were accused of financing terrorism regularly. In addition, economics and lack of development have played a crucial role in preparing the ground for various non-state actors to fill the institutional vacuum. For instance, the area of Zenica-Doboj Canton had a buzzing industrial sector and had hosted a steel factory that employed around 25,000 people across the canton. Its closure and a lengthy privatisation process caused a severe economic downturn. This meant that radical individuals with money at their disposal and ‘other’ ideas at hand found a way to attract people to a new interpretation of Islam and a completely new worldview from the one they were previously accustomed to.²⁰

Foreign donations (mainly uncontrolled) have played a crucial role in the creation of parallel religious communities. In the context of **Albania**, in Korça for instance, funding from various donors enabled the development of diverse support structures that contributed to the consolidation of divisions within the same group within society. As a consequence, the fractures among clerics and practitioners led to local mosques holding different prayer gatherings during which groups of practitioners prayed only with the imams whom they supported. In addition, weak institutions, corruption and impunity have played a role in creating the space for individuals to look for alternative ‘service providers’. The failure of institutions to tackle the risks of VE in their communities has created opportunities for radical individuals to step in and operate. Coupled with the lack of basic services such as security, health, education and rule of law, this leads to exacerbated grievances and the distancing of individuals from the state.

Illegal congregations

Finally, illegal congregations have featured in all country cases, mainly for similar reasons and causes – they offer a gathering space for the like-minded and are closely linked to religious non-state actors, discussed in the previous section.

In **Macedonia**, due to the weakening of the authority and credibility of the official Islamic Community, illegal mosques or parajamaats proliferated across the country. These parallel congregations were held outside of the framework of the Islamic Community and operated alongside legitimate religious establishments. This proliferation has made possible a simultaneous and in some cases very strong increase in the extremist narrative that they preach. Illegal congregations have managed to disrupt and dilute the moderate narratives propagated by IRC-controlled mosques in Macedonia.

Similarly, in **Kosovo**, due to the breakdown of BIK’s authority and social standing, illegal mosques and independent preachers who ignored the authority of BIK appeared in various parts in the country, using diverse means such as an online presence and youth gatherings (e.g. summer camps) to attract young followers. Researchers found that these preachers would come from as far away as Pakistan and from countries as close as Macedonia and would spend time and address the curious crowds who would attend mosques more frequently than before the 1999 conflict. Illegal congregations and preachers

²⁰ For more detail, see Becirevic 2016, 37-44.

who run these gatherings, who were often closely associated with the key recruiters from the affected communities, seem to have directly influenced the levels of radicalisation in certain communities as well as their response to violent extremism. As in Albania, local institutions lacked any proactive engagement with those who displayed sympathy for alternative ideologies and instead ignored them as outliers.

3.3.2 Social Networks infusing grievances and the new creed

Although it was not examined in detail by researchers, the role of social networks and social media in the spread of literature dealing with specific interpretations of religious texts should be mentioned here, as it appears to be playing a crucial role in the radicalisation of groups and individuals.

In **Macedonia**, in all three municipalities respondents reported the wide availability of extremist materials on the internet, mainly on social media, which are seen to have been aiding the process of radicalisation and recruitment by extremist groups. Nonetheless, ideological proximity does not only manifest itself in online platforms; the proximity to extremist lectures, preachers and mosques had the effect of ‘proliferating’ non-physical material, including the dissemination of radical ideas. This was particularly common in the affected municipality of Cair in the mosques that are outside of the official framework of the IRC.

In the Macedonian context, it is relatively easy to find a way to exploit the different nuances of the grievance narratives, especially since Macedonia is still in many ways a post-conflict context. The grievances of the Albanian population in Macedonia are very easy for the extremists to utilise within their recruitment narratives of victimhood. *“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”* (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 19). In addition, the influence of master narratives about the world frame the personal and collective grievances into broader political critiques of the status quo. Social networks, both online and offline, offer opportunities for socialisation with radicals and the likeminded, creating the right milieus for searching for meaningful relationships and 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”* (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 11).

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, master narratives about the world have been exploited by Salafi preachers operating through parajamaats. Through these narratives, Salafists have acquired a new supranational identity as part of the global Ummah, not least by propagating the message that national identity is not necessary. Salafi leaders, online or offline, have also propagated and promoted a reinvention of ‘pure’ Islam that would shape the religious understanding among their followers and would subsequently erase localised social and cultural traditions of Bosnian Muslims. As cited by Turcalo and Veljan (2018, 15), Azinović and Jusić found that the need for external guidance and rules had motivated many Bosnian Salafists to join ISIL, noting that *“this guidance may enable them to deal with the uncertainties of everyday life without constantly questioning whether their actions or desires are permitted by God. The ISIL narrative, and its inference that a brutal force of justice is righting all the wrongs carried out against Muslims, has led some young Bosnians to believe that, by belonging to ISIL, their righteousness and eternal life are guaranteed”* (Azinović/Jusić 2016, 73). The Bosnian country report highlights the role of social media in propagating such narratives: *“The omnipresence of Salafi preachers in online spaces means that some religious seekers are led to the easily accessible lectures of leading da’is, posted on websites and shared across social media platforms”* (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 18).

In **Albania**, online media have played a role in radicalisation by making material available and providing easy access to it. Some of the imams interviewed pointed to the fact that most extremist information is received not from the religious authorities but from individuals themselves who become

easily convinced by what they read. Religious leaders have emphasised on many occasions that there is much disinformation about religion which damages the image of Islam. In Albania, all three municipalities have been exposed to online disinformation coupled with potential contact with radical preachers or practitioners. Tirana has mainly been affected by the presence of extremist preachers who tended to exploit the isolation of particular communities in which they preached. In Yzberisht, for instance, where the level of radicalisation is the highest in the country, social networks have been fundamental in maintaining a consistent attachment to extremist ideology due to dependency on the provision of services such as food, clothing and money. In addition, in Korça the only extremist group identified by researchers seems to have exploited the lack of unity (and the breakdown in authority) within the traditional Islamic groups and used it to preach other forms of Islam (as they know it).

3.3.3 Community Leadership

On the part of both local government and religious authorities, the importance of (appointed and self-appointed) leadership stands out, explicitly or implicitly, in all of the case studies. The same holds true for the proponents of new or different readings of religion (and politics), i.e. what we refer to as the “capturers” or, less dramatically, the opportunity-seekers.²¹

For **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the case study authors highlight that “[t]he importance of a leader who frames the intellectual and theological messages that promote and justify radical ideas or actions is clear in the affected communities studied. Besides this, a charismatic leader helps attract new followers. The small group of Salafists in BPC has no such leader and is therefore unlikely to grow” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 19, from a focus group discussion). Where such charismatic leaders exist, they appear to find an eager following: “A common feature of both non-violent and violent extremist groups in the affected communities studied is the unambiguous role of leadership and fellowship within group dynamics. The decisions of leaders are undisputed and followers are unquestionably guided by them. And these followers are constantly seeking further guidance in every conceivable sphere of their lives, from who to marry, to how one engages in religiously-condoned sexual intercourse, to whether a job is halal (permitted by Islamic law).” In the authors’ view, this “demonstrates the willingness of Salafists to allow every microdetail of their life to be regulated by religious leaders” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 17). The observation is not systematically linked to a low degree of education and critical thinking, the researchers note, although this might be true in some cases.

The leadership aspect also emerges in the **Albania** country case study, albeit in relation to its absence or weakness rather than its strength, as highlighted above in Section 3.2.1. State institutions are also depicted as inactive and impotent in the face of ‘illegal’ organisations that provide religious and economic assistance to their communities. The state’s presence was seen by many of the focus groups respondents as critical to the prevention or protection of individuals from recruitment by radical and violent groups. Furthermore, “[a]ccording to the police chief in Tirana, one of the most relevant elements in encouraging FF was the ‘apparent disinterest of state institutions to react to the situation’ [referring to the time when the FF phenomenon appeared]” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 21). Moreover, inefficient institutions – municipalities that are open to cooperate with others in the matters of PVE but do not seem to be taking proactive steps themselves to reduce the risk to VE – are perceived to be the enabling factor that creates the opportunities for radicalism and VE to manifest in the community. A lesser problem, but a problem nonetheless that the Albanian case study highlights, is that among many political and religious leaders, there is a reluctance to acknowledge the presence of VE in their communities so they put the topic rather low on their agenda.

²¹ In the context of this study, we use the term “capturers” to refer to actors (individuals and groups) that occupy a socio-political void, but do not necessarily replace the state. They may occupy this void left by institutional absence or negligence by providing services, by creating socio-economic communities or by offering cultural alternatives, for example. They may do so in mild forms, in parallel to the state or legitimised public and religious institutions, or in strong forms, replacing the state or legitimised public and religious institutions.

However, “[t]he lack of interest in the issue creates opportunities for radicalism and VE to fester within the community” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 22). With respect to the leadership of the overarching religious authority, i.e. the Muslim Community of Albania (MCA), they report “[i]t is worth noting that throughout all interviews, religious community leaders emphasized the importance of the MCA having more control and influence as a mechanism for preventing similar ‘rogue’ operations and further radicalization in the future.” (ibid., 23.)

A similar picture emerges from the **Kosovo** country case study, where the authors attest that the space for violent extremist views widened due to the crisis of leadership in the Islamic Community (BIK): “The breakdown in the authority, the crisis of legitimacy and divisions in the senior ranks of Kosovo’s Islamic Association created room for various ideologies to infiltrate parts of Kosovo. The lack of a common front against radical influences divided the community and weakened the authority of traditional imams.” (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 26.) With a view to the future, the restoration of agency is underlined: “[T]he trajectories and experiences that these communities will ultimately have with radicalisation will be profoundly shaped by restoring agency to leaders and community influencers who currently lack mechanisms or incentives to react in the face of such challenges” (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 1).

Finally, for **Macedonia**, the authors highlight similar weaknesses: “If the IRC is meant to be the institutional body which regulates and manages all mosques across Macedonia, its lack of control is easily exploitable by extremist preachers ...” (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 14/15). “[P]arallel 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” (ibid., 14). On a more regional and political level, the authors also argue, with Majda Ruge (2017), 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” (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 12).

Overall, an understanding of the importance of political and religious leadership emerges across the board. Leadership is effective in three ways – and its absence in benevolent, constructive forces or its capture by malevolent, destructive forces arguably leads to more susceptibility to violent extremism (among other polarisations) and affect communities to a greater degree: First, leadership is effective as *control*, with a lack of control in the area of authority being problematic. Second, leadership is effective as *power*, with power struggles within and across institutions being problematic. Third, leadership is effective as *foresight and attention*, with a lack of perceptiveness regarding VE (its origins, the threat it poses, etc.) being problematic.

3.3.4 Further Actors with enabling or gatekeeping functions

While religious and local government institutions are of foremost importance, it is useful to highlight further actors whose actions (more than their group identity per se) are instrumental in whether violent extremism can take hold in a community. The most influential are young people, women, parents, educators and social workers. They may be regarded as the predominant “targets” of recruitment (youth) on the one hand, or as the “gatekeepers” against destructively radicalising influences on the other. If their actions are weak or indecisive, they may become enablers of affectedness by violent extremism.

A recent study published by the OSCE points to these actors, among others, as well: “Youth, women and community leaders are key civil society actors in P/CVERLT²² efforts because of their influence and ability to foster social change. Other stakeholders such as the media, law enforcement, educators, researchers and the private sector can also make significant contributions ...”. However, the study also highlights significant

22 This, in OSCE terminology, refers to Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalisation that Lead to Terrorism.

challenges in realising this potential, which in actual fact often lead to inaction or inefficacy. Among the challenges named are “*navigating political and legal restrictions; ensuring participation in government-level policy and strategy development; securing adequate and sustainable funding; building internal capacity; ensuring personal safety; and establishing effective partnerships with government actors*” (OSCE 2018, 10). The four country case studies offer some preliminary insights on these actor groups, although more specific data will have to be collected through further research.

Youth

With respect to youth, there is a sense across the participants in the country research that this group often lacks awareness and/or critical thinking skills. Furthermore, it is afforded few opportunities to develop these skills by the (secular and religious) education systems. There is also a shared sense that young people are particularly susceptible to being radicalised into VE (more on this below). The **Bosnia** case study highlights youth as addressee of scholarship opportunities by Salafist groups, which, against the backdrop of extremely high unemployment, may be an attractive option. The authors argue: “*BiH features the highest unemployment rate among youth between 15 and 24 (60.9 percent) in the world (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2016), and dissatisfaction among youth who have limited or no opportunities for social and economic advancement makes them receptive to new doctrines, especially those that offer abstract, utopian solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Indeed, this lack of opportunity could even be regarded as a type of trauma for young people in BiH, who face sometimes interminable odds just to enjoy a ‘normal’ life. In trying to overcome this, they may seek a guide or life coach and are often prepared to embrace any way out from underneath the burdens they face*” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 18). The **Albania** country case study points to the impact of ineffective local coordination (specifically of local authorities and community police) on youth in terms of failing to reduce family violence and school absenteeism. By extension, it is implied that the greater the distance between young people and their social guardians, the more easily they will be radicalised: “*It was evident during the fieldwork and desk research process that such partnerships, in the selected case studies were dysfunctional; in particular in Tirana and Korça, where local representatives and community police had very little cooperation in the area of C/PVE*” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 23). The **Kosovo** case study hints at a correlation where the degree to which an (increasing) demand by young people for participation remains ignored or unmet has an influence on the affectedness of a community (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 15, 19). Young people in Kosovo are also reported to experience a great deal of pressure from their communities and families about their behaviour (for example becoming more religious, sporting a beard), which may make them feel more isolated and alienated than is useful (ibid., 16). However, this sort of teenager alienation must also be considered as part of growing up and as developmentally normal ‘radicalisation’ of youth in this process.

Some proportionality in assessment, however, is essential. It is important to remember that “*the vast majority of young people are in fact not involved in violence or in extremist groups... and, despite the hazards and hurdles, many are actively contributing to peace and the prevention of violence*”. This debunks one of the persistent ‘policy myths’ which presumes that “*all young people are potential recruits of violent extremist groups*” (Simpson/Altiok 2019).

Families, teachers and social workers

What emerges from the case studies on the roles of families (fathers, mothers, parents...), schools and teachers, social workers and the wider community often tends to focus on the normative realm (the “need to” or “should”) rather than observable realities. What does emerge from the country case studies are structural obstacles and systemic shortcomings, which easily overload the actors’ individual and collective capacities.

The **Macedonia** report points to a lack of critical dialogue between parents and their children, where the parents are unwilling or unable to engage their children in discussion about their religious

choices (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 18). This goes hand in hand with a lack of awareness on the part of parents of what is going on in their offspring's lives (ibid., 5). The report also highlights teachers' lack of preparedness and their poor skills: "[T]eachers 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." (ibid., 16).

The **Bosnia** case study reminds us of the importance of parents in guiding their children amid often attractive (scholarship) offers in the post-war society. There is a strong need for guidance among young people, who often feel abandoned by the mainstream institutions and role models (see above). At the same time, the social landscape is marred by too few social workers to deal with baseline post-traumatic stress symptoms or early warning signs of susceptibility to radicalisation (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 14).

The **Albania** report points out that "*parents are not monitoring their children's social media exposure and that when coupled with isolation and social alienation, radicalisation can occur undetected*" (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 17).

The **Kosovo** study presents some evidence of the potential role of families and teachers in widening the net of recruitment into violent extremism. One of the main recruitment paths in Hani i Elezit, for example, went through a local teacher (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 11).²³ The report also points out how many foreign fighter recruits are actually part of close kinship and family networks (ibid., 25).

In sum, the roles and needs of young people and the social community guiding them are varied. While there are factors which make these actors more vulnerable to radicalisation (a heightened sense of needing guidance, general despair about their living conditions within their community and country, exposure to social media messaging and social networking, a sense of being overwhelmed and cut off), radicalisation is by no means automatic.

3.4 Concluding reflections

In this section, the factors and actors shaping (relatively) affected communities in Albania (neighbourhoods of Tirana and to a lesser extent Korça), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Zenica-Doboj Canton), Kosovo (Hani i Elezit, and – although not studied in depth – Mitrovica) and Macedonia (Cair and to a lesser extent Gostivar) have been discussed thoroughly. At the end of this discussion, several shared factors and characteristics of actors stand out across the cases.

The main factor that cuts across all studied cases of affected communities was deep societal polarisation, whether on social, political, ethno-political or religious, grounds followed by a considerable degree of mistrust in both political and religious institutions, which are mainly seen to be unresponsive, ineffective and biased. With respect to these two dimensions, Albania proves to be something of an outlier, as the standing of the religious authorities and the ethno-political cleavages are historically less marked. Not surprisingly, socio-economic conditions were not found to be decisive factor in and of themselves, although they do play a role in creating a more conducive environment in some cases. Further, the lack of quality of religious education and the strengthening of critical thinking are highlighted in all four country cases as areas in urgent need of improvement. Finally, the country studies point to the important influence that a pronounced feeling of marginalisation (be it on the basis of belonging to a minority identity or belonging to a politically/economically neglected constituency) has on the likelihood of a community becoming prone to recruitment, radicalisation and affectedness by violent extremism.

In terms of characteristic groups of actors, or, even more important, characteristic actions by these

²³ This teacher was in turn recruited by Zeqirja Qazimi (top recruiter/preacher and leader of the El-Kuddus mosque in Gjilan).

actors, we can draw the significant conclusion that in the affected communities, there was a general sense that no proactive and unified alliance of actors (local government and/or religious institutions) existed. Instead, there was an unoccupied and unguarded space into which – mostly exogenous – recruiters could enter and in which they could establish unregulated places of preaching and proselytising. The gatekeepers in such communities – school teachers, parents, etc. – were often described as either largely unaware of the problem or uninterested (in some cases, the parents may also have been condoning the actions of their youngsters, sometimes unaware of the consequences).

However, it also becomes clear that no black and white delineations exist. The Albania case study summarises this well: “[A]ffectedness is not so much determined by the mere presence of factors and actors conducive to vulnerability towards VE, but rather by the level, dynamics and compounding of factors and actors within a given community” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 1). Affected communities should thus be seen as without a clear continuum (i.e. without linearity, meaning that there are no clear lines or starting points). Rather, we are looking at a blurred and complex system, which can be exploited more successfully by certain actors when the conditions are right. The Macedonia study points this out as well: “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 overarching environment conducive to the proliferation of extremism and violent extremism” (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 1).

This observation means that great care must be taken in assessing communities’ innate vulnerability (or resilience), as they might fluctuate and change rather quickly – a relationship which we aim to disentangle in Section 6. Before turning to that, the next section will focus on an analysis of the factors and actors at play in the (more) unaffected communities of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia.

4 Unaffected communities: Factors and actors preventing the rise of violent extremism

This section turns to the analysis of the factors and actors contributing to certain communities' limited exposure to the phenomenon of violent extremism. In contrast to the preceding section, some municipalities in the four case study countries seem to have been relatively unaffected by the indicators of radicalisation and violent extremism examined earlier. Our project aimed to understand what might explain this 'unaffectedness', what makes certain communities stand out in their ability (by intent or by 'chance') to prevent or resist the VE phenomenon, whether they share some of the same 'breeding ground' as affected communities, and which particular set of factors and actors seems to be playing a distinct role in contributing to this unaffectedness.

The mapping of the selected unaffected communities within the four countries initially shows some paradoxical findings. Indeed, we will see that based on their socio-economic status, these communities could be considered a 'fertile ground' for the rise of violent extremism (4.1). However, a set of historical and social factors seems to account for their unaffectedness, coupled with the positive role played by specific local actors in working towards a more cohesive and tolerant community and reducing the potential risk of violent extremism spreading within the community (4.2).

4.1 Mapping unaffected communities

As explained in the introduction, and as with the study of affected communities, the research teams opted for municipalities as the most suitable unit of analysis to explore the various factors and actors at play in unaffected communities. Based on a common set of indicators to assess the level of affectedness within the four countries (as described in Section 3), each research team selected as its 'object of study' one or two municipalities identified as unaffected, based on the low number (or absence) of individual departures to Syria and Iraq (as foreign fighters within IS or Al Qaida-associated groups), as well as the low number (or absence) of parajamaats in these municipalities. An additional criterion that played a role in the case selection was the teams' interest in analysing municipalities which share a number of commonalities with affected communities, especially with regard to socio-economic indicators identified in Section 3 as preconditions or a breeding ground for VE, but which have remained unaffected in spite of these factors of vulnerability. Finally, another selection criterion was the relative lack of research conducted in these municipalities, in order to avoid the 'research fatigue' associated with many field sites in the four countries.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosnian Podrinje Canton (BPC) – mainly consisting of the city of Goražde – has not experienced any cases of violent extremist behaviour and does not have any active parajamaats, despite the fact that it shares some of the features of vulnerability observed in affected communities. Indeed, the researchers argue that given the socio-demographic data in the canton (e.g. unemployment rate and education

levels),²⁴ the low level of trust in institutions, and the violence experienced there during the 1992-1995 war, this predominantly Bosnian Muslim community “*could have been a perfect target for Salafi recruiters*”; nevertheless, “*it has demonstrated a resilience to both non-violent and violent radicalisation*” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 4).

Macedonia

In Macedonia, the three selected municipalities are categorised as highly affected (Cair), relatively affected (Struga) and moderately affected (Gostivar) by violent extremism, based on the same indicators applied in the other country cases. Gostivar and Struga will be both analysed in this section and contrasted with Cair. In terms of social and economic structure, all three communities show similarities. As a result of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, local governments gained more responsibilities through a decentralisation process, meaning that they play a more meaningful role in citizens’ everyday lives. According to the 2002 census, the number of inhabitants is as follows: 63,000 in Struga, 65,000 in Cair and 81,000 in the municipality of Gostivar. In all three municipalities, Albanians are the biggest ethnic group, comprising 56.8 percent, 57 percent and 66.7 percent of the population, respectively. Macedonians constitute the second largest ethnic group in these communities, with 32 percent, 24.1 percent and 19.6 percent, respectively; however, as Cair is one of the City of Skopje’s ten municipalities, Macedonians are the largest ethnic group, with Albanians making up over 20 percent of the city’s population. In all three municipalities, the unemployment rate is above 20 percent. In the youth population, the unemployment rate is over 40 percent.

Kosovo

In Kosovo, the municipality of Deçan was selected as an example of an unaffected community because it also portrays an interesting paradox when it comes to the root causes and potentially fertile ground for violent extremism. Indeed, the socio-economic situation in Deçan is assessed as worse than in Hani i Elezit (the affected municipality examined in Section 3), but it does not exhibit any indicators of violent extremism. As argued by the researchers, based on the commonly-known push factors of violent extremism, one “*should have observed a presence of foreign fighters in Deçan municipality due to a higher unemployment rate, as well as a broader lack of economic prospects and higher rate of religiosity than in Hani i Elezit*” (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 14). Moreover, the municipality was one of the areas most affected by the 1998-1999 war in Kosovo. However, the municipality of Deçan stands out as an administrative unit with no recorded case of any foreign fighter going to join the Islamic State or other Salafi-jihadi organisations operating in Syria and Iraq. Only one incident of hate crime – graffiti with the IS slogan written on the walls of a 14th-century Serbian Orthodox monastery – has been identified.

Albania

The two Albanian municipalities identified as (relatively) unaffected, Kavaja and Korça, exhibit the same paradox, in that they have worse socio-economic indicators than the affected community (Tirana). For instance, the unemployment rates in Kavaja, Korça and Tirana are 29.5 percent (with 55.2 percent youth unemployment), 27.2 percent (55.3 percent youth unemployment), and 24.3 percent (48 percent youth unemployment), respectively.²⁵ The level of education is also higher in Tirana than in the two other municipalities. In Tirana, 31.4 percent of people have only a primary school qualification, 65.9 percent

²⁴ Socio-economic circumstances that prevailed in BPC from the end of the war until 2012 began to change in 2013. As noted in Turcalo/Veljan (2018), BPC currently has the lowest rate of youth unemployment in Bosnia. The illiteracy rate, compared to other communities studied, is still highest in BPC (3.74 percent), and it has a slightly lower percentage of high school graduates (50.7 percent) than Zenica-Doboj (52.7 percent) and Sarajevo Canton (54 percent).

²⁵ Albania 2011 Census, the last official data provided by the Institute of Statistics in Albania, <http://instatgis.gov.al/#!/prefectures/population/prefpop1>, retrieved 12 April 2019.

have at least a high school qualification and 25.3 percent have a university or post-university qualification. In comparison, in Korça and Kavaja the figures are worse: 58.8 percent and 49.2 percent, respectively, have only a primary school qualification, 35.4 percent and 46.2 percent have at least a high school qualification, and seven percent and 13.8 percent have a university or post-university qualification.

Community members in both municipalities reported instances of perceived discrimination, which was also identified as a factor of violent extremism in Section 3. While both Kavaja and Korça are identified as unaffected communities despite the presence of such conducive factors, Korça is assessed by the researchers as having a higher potential risk of harbouring a future violent extremist ideology and related actions. Incidents of religiously motivated (inter- and intra-faith) violence have occurred there, and additional factors reviewed in Section 3 are present in the municipality, such as foreign donations and preachers, and a perceived lack of cooperation and coordination with public institutions (security, local government, education, etc.). Finally, researchers also point to signs of ‘concealed radicalism’ within both communities, which were pervasive during interviews and focus group discussions, and which one should take into account to get a more comprehensive picture of the rising forms of violent extremism within all studied communities. However, both Kavaja and Korça appear to have no recorded cases of foreign fighters²⁶ and can thus be fully understood and analysed as unaffected according to the main indicator of VE used for this research.

4.2 Factors and actors conducive to the prevention of violent extremism

Following this brief depiction of the six (relatively) unaffected communities across the four case study countries (BPC in BiH, Struga and Gostivar in Macedonia, Deçan in Kosovo, Kavaja and Korça in Albania), this section will review the range of factors and actors which were found to have a strong influence on the prevention (or lack) of violent extremism in these municipalities. We will analyse factors linked to the social fabric, history and geography of the (relatively) unaffected municipalities, in addition to the role of community-based engagement against violence extremism by specific local actors.

4.2.1 Social cohesion and multiculturalism

The high level of social cohesion between the different religious, national or ethnic communities seems to be a common trait in most unaffected municipalities. As argued by the researchers in **Macedonia**, the focus groups conducted in Struga showed that minority groups seem to be only periodically affected by perceived alienation, isolation or marginalisation, in contrast to the affected community. In **Albania**, interview respondents in Korça and Kavaja described a sense of religious harmony and respect for diversity. These ideas were prevalent among focus groups composed of mixed religions, genders and age groups.²⁷ In Kavaja, interpersonal harmony was emphasised by almost all key informants as a historical characteristic

²⁶ “As per the official statistics, there is no reporting on the city of origin of the FF who left to fight in Syria and Iraq. We had to rely on a collection of media reports and interviews with experts, NGOs and community actors to confirm whether or not cases of FF were reported in their cities. Hence there might still be a possibility that our sources were not fully aware of the real situation and perhaps these cities might have had FF leaving for Syria and/or Iraq – although it would be VERY unlikely since these communities are very small and such phenomenon would have been observed and easily pointed out.” (Clarification by case study authors Redion Qirjazi and Romario Shehu, email 26 February 2019).

²⁷ One should add a note of caution, since it was also reported that despite the claims of religious harmony in unaffected communities, there were also signs of religious intolerance, or at least claimed superiority of one’s belief. For example, several focus group participants in Korça repeated that “*the Bektashi [religious community in Albania] are not real Muslims*” while another practitioner went unchallenged when she stated “*many years from now, we believe people will come to their senses and come closer to Islam. They will understand the truth*” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 22).

of the municipality. The tradition of cultural ‘connection to one another’ is allegedly exhibited through the celebration of other faiths’ religious festivities as a sign of solidarity, and through traditional visits to mark various social occasions, inter-faith marriages and friendliness. In the words of a local imam, *“everyone [there] knows everyone and they go in and out of each other’s houses (Imam in Kavaja, 2018), implying strong interpersonal connections. Similar views were expressed by a female practitioner who had converted to Islam, stating that she felt more accepted in Kavaja than she did in her hometown of Kukës (Muslim practitioners in Kavaja, 2018)”* (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 18). The country reports showed that nurturing civic values or respect for diversity and religious tolerance can serve as a crucial mechanism for preventing discrimination, alienation and extremist violent ideologies. During a dialogue workshop held in Kavaja in November 2018 to present and discuss the research results with community representatives, religious leaders present (head mufti and the Orthodox priest) emphasised that the situation is not all that rosy in their municipality, but because different community groups coexist in harmony and interact regularly on common issues, this has prevented the outbreak of the VE phenomenon in their midst. A similar situation was observed in Korça, although research participants there tended to refer to their intercultural context as a neutral state of coexistence rather than as a situation in which the community actively seeks bonding and connections. Thus the more interconnected a municipality is, the greater the possibility of building cohesion not just among its members but also vertically towards the state, by strengthening trust in public institutions.

4.2.2 Civil engagement through a vibrant civil society

A second factor fostering the perceptions of social cohesion and harmony building resilience to violent extremism is the space offered for civil society to express itself, act and engage within the community.

In **Kosovo**, there has been greater and more effective investment in social and civic infrastructures in the unaffected community studied. Deçan benefits from a cultural centre and half a dozen active local civil society organisations (CSOs), which foster and strengthen acceptance and mutual understanding through political debates, religious education, etc. By contrast, Hani i Elezit has virtually no active clubs and CSOs.

In **Macedonia**, the case study report details the role of civil society in promoting coexistence and rejecting extremist ideologies. 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 the fostering of public awareness of the dangers posed by extremism helped individuals to engage in common anti-extremist narratives. In Struga, most notably, this was facilitated by a lecture and debate series among key stakeholders. For instance, an NGO organises trips for young people to a variety of locations so that they can learn from and interact with individuals outside of their ethno-religious background; young people in particular are targeted in this way as the NGO believes that they are most susceptible to extremist messaging and so uses these initiatives to help counteract this phenomenon (Turcalo/Veljan 2018). 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”* (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 22). With regard to the impact of such initiatives, respondents in Gostivar emphasised how community engagement in, and societal awareness of, the dangers posed by extremism have impacted positively upon the relative unaffectedness of their municipality. For example, one respondent within a youth 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”* (ibid., 23), gleaned from the high level of community engagement in Gostivar regarding the dangers posed by extremism.

4.2.3 A strong sense of binding (national) identity

The research findings also highlight the interplay between multiple overlapping identities (which is referred to by the Kosovo researchers as a ‘pecking order of identity’), suggesting that communities bound by a strong sense of national identity might be less vulnerable to the appeal of religious violent extremism. Although national identity can become a vector of extremism when expressed in exclusionary and xenophobic (‘us versus them’) terms, inclusive approaches to nationalism can also serve as a counterweight to religious or ethno-political violent extremism by binding citizens to one another through a common identity.

In the **Kosovo** municipality of Deçan, predominantly Albanian with small pockets of Serb, Roma and Turkish minorities, interview respondents expressed the strength of the Albanian identity, which is seen as a factor preventing the rise of religious violent extremism. *“The feelings of national identity are strong, as is the feeling of sacrifice for Kosovo’s freedom, US support, NATO’s intervention, the West and these are things we prize as valuable. Therefore, these (radical) currents run counter to this idea”* (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 19). Deçan is frequently involved in national celebrations and other rituals of remembrance, fostering a strong national identity; such rituals bind community members with one another, and lower perceptions of isolation or marginalisation, which could have been conducive to the socialisation of extremist ideology. When asked about their identity allegiances, both religious and non-religious members of the community primarily identified with their Albanian ethnicity rather than their religious identity. Similarly, the case study report on **Albania** showed that overall, *“[w]hile religion does not play a very significant role for most Albanians, societal, cultural, and national identity are prominent”* (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 3). In fact, according to a recent report, over 80 percent of Albanians believe that a strong national identity positively impacts religious tolerance (Vurmo et al. 2018).

These examples also seem to indicate that beyond ethnic or national identity, the existence of a strong feeling of fixed, solid and stable identity contributes positively to the prevention of violent extremism. This argument is also put forward by the French scholar Olivier Roy in his analysis of Islamic radicalism (Roy 2002; 2008). According to Roy, with the individualisation of faith due to acculturation, the individual becomes a target of preaching. Through the principle of deculturation,²⁸ Salafist doctrines are meant to erase any relationship with Western culture, political history, national identity etc., to find the foundations of ancient pious Islam. Neo-fundamentalism thus attracts the victims of anomic acculturation by providing them with a renewed sense of identity. In the unaffected communities depicted in this section, the deculturation evoked by Roy did not take root since the feeling of belonging to a national history, tradition and culture surpasses any other cultural or religious identity and is therefore a direct response to possible extremist threat and voices.

One should stress, however, that religious identity in itself is not necessarily a predictor of extremist thought or action: in **Albania**, the sense of religious identity appeared to be stronger in Kavaja, the least affected municipality. In **Kosovo**, the researchers also underlined that respondents in both affected and unaffected municipalities reported increased religiosity since the end of the war (also confirmed by the growing number of mosques established in these municipalities) and an increasing demand from young people to participate in religious affairs. Religious identity can thus play a positive preventive role when it is managed in a way that does not promote extremism, but rather promotes non-violence and tolerance. This brings us to the fundamental role of religious education.

²⁸ Olivier Roy relies on the concept of deculturation (while also using the word ‘acculturation’) in his analysis of the evolutions of religions. According to Roy, religions have been breaking their ties with the culture they had been embedded in (Christianity with Hellenism and Islam with Arabic identity) to turn into ‘pure’ religions (evangelism or Salafism). Those religions are the ones that attract the most converts, partly because they are not rooted in a particular culture (Roy 2008; Maurot 2008).

4.2.4 Quality of religious education

Although the research did not provide any conclusive evidence on the influence of (levels and quality of) general education on the propensity of communities to be affected by violent extremism, stronger linkages seem to be identified when it comes to religious education. Many respondents argued that if education is very important in terms of equipping individuals to critically assess the ideas they encounter, this is all the more essential for the religious curriculum. By equipping students with critical thinking, historical knowledge, the ability to debate about facts and ideas, etc., high-quality religious education helps to prevent community members from falling into violent extremism. The general idea revealed by the communities involved in the research is that an increased level of religious education and knowledge makes it more difficult for potential recruiters to sell a warmongering version of Islam as the only true reading of religion. On the other hand, religious education as a process of learning about religion is often accompanied by a sense of openness, tolerance, acceptance and debate about the religious text and its application within society. This can avoid an overly rigorous and literal version of the religious text, which is often used by extremist preachers and indoctrinators.

In **Macedonia**, research findings reveal significant differences between the three examined municipalities in relation to this dimension. In Cair, the affected community, there seems to be no religious education whatsoever offered to young people. A local NGO representative asserted: “*There is no debate happening. They do not want to accept reality; we do not want to talk about the bad habits in [Islam]*” (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 16). By contrast, the positive impact of adequate religious education can be illustrated by Gostivar’s example. There, discussions from the youth focus group highlighted that the publication of Albanian translations of Islamic religious texts has exposed young people to traditional rather than extreme interpretations of Islam, enabling them to acquire self-education on the religious aspects most interesting and relevant to them. An intriguing finding emerging from the fieldwork in Struga and Gostivar is that unaffected communities tend to be more aware of the need for higher-quality religious education than the affected communities. In Gostivar, despite the aforementioned positive initiative, respondents noted that religious education is ineffective, while in Struga, religious education was described as present and effective, but in need of diversification. Participants in a Struga focus group further highlighted the importance of streamlining educational programmes across the municipality, so that teachers who deviate from the established narrative and seek to spread extremist views can be reported to education authorities. A high school teacher stressed the importance of banning religious propaganda in schools, and the need for teachers to “*compile a general strategy regarding the issue of extremist thought*” (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 25). This higher level of awareness could be seen as a first step towards an effective ability to prevent extremist and violent narratives taking root in the community. These findings also support the assumption that the propagation of moderate Islamic principles within broader society and access to a wide spectrum of theological interpretations might equip individuals to understand both their own religious traditions, and where these fit into the broader spectrum of religious traditions.

In **Albania**, two high-level civil servants (municipality administrator and chief of community policing) in Kajava also stressed the effectiveness of education campaigns in their small community. What stood out from focus groups in both Kajava and Korça was the effort of school teachers to address the phenomenon of VE in their classes. High school teachers in both municipalities confirmed that they have raised the issue, but highlighted the need for a more structured institutional approach. Another important component which came up repeatedly during the field research and was mentioned by all religious leaders was the importance of introducing religious education in schools by trained religious experts, as a mechanism for curbing misinformation and reducing youth vulnerability to religious extremism.

Finally, parents were seen to play an important role in the religious and civic education of their children and hence in the prevention of radicalisation by counteracting the influence of exogenous agents of violent extremism, as illustrated by this interview in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**:

“After my father was killed in a battle, we were offered help, and a scholarship for me, by an Arab humanitarian organisation. They only requested that I attend maktab [Islamic school] every weekend. I went there regularly, and we learned about Islam, and how to practise it. I wasn’t aware of the differences between what we learned back then and Bosnian Islam. But simultaneously, I took part in folklore. When, one weekend, I had to travel with my folklore group abroad, and I said so in maktab, the teacher tried to convince me that belief in folklore was a sin, and particularly, for a girl to go abroad without accompaniment by a mahram. It was the first time I’d heard that word. As he saw that I was not giving up on travelling with my folklore group, he kept trying to persuade me, and even visited my mother to tell her what a sin I was committing if I continued with folklore and went with the group abroad. If my mother hadn’t been so firm in her stance that I was free to choose what to do – even deciding not to continue sending me to the maktab – who knows who or what I would have become in the meantime” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 16).

4.2.5 Leadership and coordination among local religious authorities and state officials

As already mentioned above in the context of religious education, local community leaders play a crucial role in either pre-empting or reacting to early signs of radicalisation fuelled by recruiters, preachers and other violence entrepreneurs described in Section 3.3. Community leaders are defined here as officials within public and religious institutions at the municipal level who are vested with a degree of local authority and are engaged with the community on a daily basis. The four studies particularly emphasise the responsibility shared by local state officials (such as mayors or police officers) and religious authorities (including key figures such as imams and Muftis) in reducing the risk of the community members becoming involved in violent extremism.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, research findings in the municipality of BPC indicate that when religious leaders are aware of the threat that foreign discourses and foreign influence can provoke, and take a proactive stance to prevent or curb these external influence, they positively shape the institutional agenda and preserve the community from exposure to violent extremism. As remarked by a local politician, *“if there is no tacit approval of the local IC, then it is difficult [for Salafists] to gain ground, and in Goražde they have faced only rejection.... A few times, imams learned that some of the few local Salafists had tried to persuade other believers to change some of their practices, and they publicly criticised this” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 12).*

Similar findings are reported in the **Kosovo** municipality of Deçan, where local imams and officials from the Islamic Association of Kosovo (BIK) have collaborated early on with municipal authorities to root out any challenges to their control over religious affairs. They have also engaged actively on the ground in order to develop close ties with the population to understand their problems and needs and come up with localised answers. BIK authorities claimed to have acted jointly with elected representatives to stamp out at the outset the voices that questioned their authority, perceived as the first sign of external influence on matters of religion. Where younger generations of followers wanted different preachers, local imams acted in unison and in full coordination with local municipal authorities to ban any lecturer who was not certified by BIK and to prevent them from having access to the community of believers. Therefore, the imams and the mayor *“frequently met with the community, including town hall meetings but also less formal gatherings such as weddings and funeral wakes, to warn of the danger posed by uncertified preachers” (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 15).* Similarly, as argued by a BIK official, *“we’ve worked a lot with the young generation. We received threats and insults, everything until we convinced them that this is not the way. We spent days and nights with the young, in the streets and everywhere in Deçan because this is a small community [...]. Undoubtedly, we have been touched by this, but these are isolated cases and the hand of the state has had an impact” (ibid., 16).* Given their closeness to the community of believers, the mayor and

the BIK officials could understand the population's feelings and react if necessary. The former mayor of Deçan confirmed that *“there were individuals who may have harboured more extreme ideas than others, but under the community's pressure they left Deçan because they were viewed differently by the public”* (ibid.). Moreover, to prevent any malicious influence, local authorities conducted information-gathering to monitor the building of new mosques and weighed in to stop the construction of a mosque where sources of funding appeared suspicious.

Besides pre-empting or refuting external influences, local imams in Deçan also sought to promote a counter-narrative on the illegitimacy of violent extremism. While imams in other places in Kosovo lured their followers with preaching on the value of jihad, Deçan's religious preachers were explicit in denying that the war conducted by IS in Syria and Iraq was in any way a holy war. Overall, through their devotion and local investment, representatives of the religious authorities have allowed the local population to develop their own opinion and beliefs, a kind of resilience to hate speeches.

Among the three municipalities examined in **Albania**, Kavaja seems to be the only one where the local population has not had any direct contact with radical individuals. All respondents stressed the positive role played by religious leaders in both reporting and addressing issues of radicalism. For instance, they undertook efforts to educate the population about the risks of VE. According to the Mufti of Kavaja, many citizens were *“conscious of and very sensitive to the persecution, human fatalities and total injustice occurring in Syria... and that injustices cannot be solved individually, so we ensured to transmit that message successfully”* (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 14). Such efforts were reported to have been initiated ever since the early beginnings of the foreign fighter phenomenon in Albania. The Mufti of Kavaja stated that as soon as he realised the phenomenon might cause problems in their community, he *“held a meeting with the imams to ensure that we deliver explicit messages”* against radical ideologies. This statement was confirmed by practitioners in a focus group who mentioned *“the positive work of imams from the beginning”* as a contributory factor to the resilience of the city (ibid., 15). Another example of proactive initiative in Kavaja was the introduction of a control mechanism to monitor all donations, which had to receive the approval of the Mufti. This has helped maintain a balanced distribution of charity funds, prevented perceptions of favouritism, and targeted the funds to wherever the religious community deems most appropriate. What stands out in the case of Kavaja is the proactive nature of the engagement and the coordination between the central leadership of the Islamic authorities and the imams working on the ground.

While religious authorities in Kavaja managed to show a united front by taking common action to prevent violent extremism, the only extremist group identified in Korça seems to have exploited the lack of unity within the mainstream Islamic groups in the city, and used it to preach *“a distorted version of Islam”*. For a long time, this group's actions went uncriticised, which allowed its exploitation of Islamist ideology. Nonetheless, as the chief of community policing attests, the formal religious structures began to cooperate with the police force to put an end to its activities (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018). In that regard, Kavaja has begun implementing a programme on community policing where various institutions cooperate in enhancing the security and wellbeing of the community. The positive role of community policing in preventing violent extremism has been documented by various studies (e.g. OSCE/ODIHR 2014), which argue that *“close, trust-based co-operation between law enforcement and the communities they serve will result in reduced tensions and discontent, and an improved ability to intervene earlier in the cycle of terrorist radicalization, lower threats to public safety and foster more resilient communities”* (OSCE 2018, 33).

In **Macedonia**, lastly, although local religious authorities are generally seen as ineffective across the three municipalities studied due to citizens' high level of distrust towards their institutions, the researchers noted that at the very least, such bodies exist in the two unaffected communities, whereas in the affected community there is no leadership in place that could be activated to prevent violent extremism. As for the municipal authorities, their role was more positively assessed in Struga, where the successive mayors were described as key figures engaging with their community. This was confirmed by a respondent who argued that political officials 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” (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 26). When considering the Macedonian context, in which ethnic divisions are often exploited for political gain, the election of such public figures is critical as they have the potential to play a key agency role in fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration and openness toward diversity at the governmental level. While it must be noted that this opinion comes from an interviewee within the Mayor’s Office, it nonetheless reflects an important observation that has tangible implications at the grassroots level.

While the four cases studies showed some clear examples where local community actors and positive influencers are able to prevent or react to avoid a spread of violent extremism within their community, further research is needed and should focus more on the action taken and on these actors’ capacities and limitations in building more resilient attitudes within a community.

4.2.6 Unaffected ‘by chance’? Local specificities and historical legacy

Finally, this section would not be complete without mentioning the geographical and historical specificities of certain municipalities which contribute to the lack of resonance of extremist ideas and behaviour among community members. In both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the legacy of armed conflict represents an interesting paradox: on the one hand, the two communities that have particularly suffered during the war could have become easy ‘prey’ for recruiters and extremist preachers; but on the other hand, the war legacy itself played a role in preventing religious expressions of violent extremism from taking root in these communities.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the absence of ‘pull’ factors of violent extremism in BPC is largely explained by the physical isolation of the municipality resulting from the Bosnian conflict in the early 1990s. During the war, BPC was in a small enclave controlled by the Bosnian army but accessible only via dangerous paths controlled by Serb forces, and hence cut off from the rest of the territory administered by the legal government. As a result, *“the seeds of Salafism were not sown during or immediately after the war”* (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 12). As noted earlier, Bosnian Muslims in BPC suffered mass atrocities during the war, and this traumatic experience could have made them highly susceptible to narratives that instrumentalised their victimisation. However, it appears that having never encountered the messenger, citizens in BPC largely eluded the message of Salafism and the canton was spared from Salafi proselytism and propaganda. The analysis in Section 3 highlighted the importance of charismatic leaders framing the intellectual and theological messages that promote and justify extremist ideas or actions and help to attract new followers. The small group of Salafists in BPC has no such leader and is therefore unlikely to grow. According to interviewees, Salafi preachers do not feel comfortable or safe travelling through the Republika Srpska, and are afraid of attracting the attention of law enforcement and intelligence agencies by visiting Gorazde regularly. In a focus group discussion, one of these preachers told researchers: *“I had an invitation to hold a lecture in Podrinje, but I refused... I weighed the reasons for and against, since I have never been in a Serb-dominated area. This is why I decided not to go... I felt uncomfortable and thought about the possibility of being stopped by their police and having to answer questions about my beard”* (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 23). Wartime isolation has thus prevented the community’s exposure to Salafism, which is reflected in a very small number of Salafists having established themselves in BPC, the absence of parajamaats, and the lack of any departures to Syria and Iraq. Rather than by choice (through proactive action and preventive measures, as emphasised below), the community could be considered as being unaffected ‘by chance’ due to its unique wartime and post-war position on the map of Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁹

Historical legacy also plays a significant role in the **Kosovo** municipality of Deçan. Like much of Western Kosovo, Deçan takes particular pride in the active contribution of its local figures to Kosovo’s

²⁹ In BPC canton, an official of the Islamic Community also pointed to another historical factor, noting that the unaffectedness of the community might be partially explained by the long history of Sufi Islam in the Bosnian Podrinje canton.

independence movement since the early 1980s. Its regional significance rose further during Kosovo's 1998-1999 war when the area became a stronghold of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the guerrilla force that mounted resistance to Serbia's counter-insurgency in Kosovo. Consequently, the municipality is strewn with memorials that commemorate the area's contribution to the independence movement, including a vast cemetery dedicated to the KLA fighters that acts as a meeting point for the community to commemorate historically significant dates. The municipality has a rich calendar of public holidays built around the national narrative and is on the map of Kosovo's top politicians as they pay tribute to the armed resistance that laid the foundation for the independent state, and various public gatherings are held so that people can pay their respects to war heroes, martyrs and civilian casualties. Local officials call upon this long tradition of resistance in Deçan to explain the lack of appeal of extremist religious beliefs and actions among community members. This counter-narrative fostered the idea that: *"Many people were killed, we have many martyrs and many heroes. For example, an imam here has a brother who is a hero and he would never allow such (extremist) currents to penetrate here"* (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 19).

Moreover, researchers also noted the limited impact of external influences from the Arab world in both unaffected municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. In BPC, humanitarian organisations from Gulf countries that offered scholarships to the children of soldiers killed during the war did not have the same impact as in affected communities. A CSO activist explained that as in other cantons, those scholarships came with conditions attached, including the acceptance of literature that promoted Salafism, *"but for some reason, they were not as aggressive in their campaign [here] as in some other places"* (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 11). Similarly, in Deçan, a senior local official argued that *"prior to extremism, they come in to install these (religious) currents, their network and then they raise recruits. But when these currents don't manage to spread, recruitment becomes impossible"* (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 12).

A last geographic factor linked to administrative boundaries is worth highlighting: in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the relatively small size of the municipality of Gorazde is described as a factor preventing ideological and behavioural radicalisation. One local CSO activist explained that people there feel a sense of community and thus pay more attention to not *"crossing the red line"* – in comparison to larger cities such as Sarajevo where the crime rate is much higher, for example (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 19). In such a context, it is easier for local actors to intervene against perceived threats to their community – which brings us back to the role of community agents in preventing or curbing violent extremism.

4.3 Concluding reflections

This section sought to map the social distinctiveness of some municipalities in the Western Balkans which are seemingly unaffected by violent extremism in spite of providing 'fertile ground', in terms of the prevailing socio-economic conditions, which could have made them easy prey for recruiters and other radicalised 'capturers'. We did so by analysing both the structural conditions (social makeup, sense of identity, geography and history) and the proactive engagement by local leaders, which together help explain why and how these communities have been able to prevent, limit or push back emerging signs of violent extremism. One continuous topic of discussion among the country teams over the course of the research project was the question "are these municipalities unaffected by chance or by choice?" Based on the empirical findings, one can conclude that these six communities benefited both from a favourable context enhancing their social resilience against external threats, and from the leadership capacity exhibited by state, religious and civil society actors.

Some of the key factors identified as favourable conditions for unaffectedness include the role of social harmony and multiculturalism, the inclusive sense of national identity binding citizens and overriding the appeal of neo-fundamentalist ideologies (such as Salafism), and the specific history and geography. This section also demonstrated that agency does matter a great deal, from the role of educators and teachers equipping young people with critical thinking, self-confidence and theological knowledge,

to CSOs fostering civic engagement among community members, and finally the coordinated and cohesive actions taken by local religious and institutional authorities. Unaffected communities are led by imams and mayors who keep a close eye on their constituency in order to monitor the ‘pulse’ of the community; who take a stance to encourage tolerance and progressive interpretations of religious texts in order to prevent the development of extremist discourses; who take proactive measures to regulate the spread of extremist ideas by preventing hostile exogenous influences from taking root in the community, or by pushing back on hate speeches that would have increased the communities’ vulnerability.

Based on this range of conducive factors and actors, can one designate these unaffected communities as being fully or strongly resilient to the threat of violent extremism? The concluding section of this paper (Section 6) will seek to relate this discussion to the concept of resilience, in order to assess whether unaffected communities are indeed resilient to violent extremism, or might at least offer some clues as to what might be factors of community resilience. Before conducting this final analysis of the main concepts underpinning this study, we first turn to an assessment of the relevance of PVE programming and interventions by actors, agencies and institutions external to the communities studied.

5 PVE Programming: Relevance of programmes and linkages to peacebuilding

In the previous section, we highlighted preventive initiatives by community leaders and local civil society actors in the researched municipalities. This section turns to initiatives originating from external intervention with an explicit mandate or implicit relevance for PVE (by the state and its national authorities, by international organisations, or by international or national NGOs external to the local community and municipality). In particular, the first subsection (5.1) reports community members' perceptions of these external inputs and initiatives: in general, are they seen as relevant and supportive, as irrelevant, or as negative and interfering? The research question we set out to explore was: what is the relevance of existing PVE programmes in the Western Balkans in addressing the current factors of community vulnerability or resilience to violent extremism? In the next subsection (5.2), we expand the question to ask what linkages can be identified between PVE activities and peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans.

5.1 PVE programming and its perceived relevance

Globally, regionally and nationally, violent extremism and responses to it have been receiving increasing attention over the past years. In the Balkans, the so-called Foreign Fighter phenomenon has made the topic particularly prominent from about 2012 onwards, embedded firmly in international worries on the part of these countries' foreign allies and donors.

The international concern with the rise of and response to violent extremism, especially the surge of ISIS, is prominently reflected in the UN Action Plan 2015: *“Each Member State should consider developing a national plan of action to prevent violent extremism which sets national priorities for addressing the local drivers of violent extremism and complements national counter-terrorism strategies where they already exist.”* (UN 2015, 11-12). The programmes, the Action Plan further sets out, should be multidisciplinary (and connect local and national analysis), should fortify the social compact, address the issue of foreign fighters, block terror groups' ability to trade, link up with the SDGs and mobilise funding. They should also monitor and evaluate.

The programmes addressing violent extremism that we have reviewed in this study are taking up the call to address the issue of foreign fighters, and mobilise funding; however, the link to local needs and the well-informed focus on strengthening the social compact are rather underdeveloped. Due to the short timeframes in which fully labelled C/PVE programmes have been implemented, monitoring and evaluation are still in their infancy.

5.1.1 Mapping of existing PVE initiatives

National C/PVE strategies

The governments of all four countries studied have adopted National Strategies and Action Plans. Among the first were Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In **Kosovo**, a national strategy was adopted in 2015.³⁰ The authors of our country case study (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 22) note that “[w]hile both the National Strategy and the National Action Plan aim to address the root causes of violent extremism in Kosovo and therefore propose various activities [...], there are various concerns”. Among others, the authors name a lack of local involvement in formulating the Strategy and Action Plan, a lack of donor coordination, and a lack of cooperation, coordination and awareness at local level and in interaction with state-level and donor institutions. Overall, the perception the authors relay is one of a “one size fits all” approach, rather than one that takes its lead from the concerns and needs of the community.

2015 was also the year in which a national strategy was adopted in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**.³¹ The authors of the BiH case study assess that “[it] improves on earlier strategies on security and terrorism by recognising the issue of radicalisation leading to violent extremism, but it remains without ‘teeth’ because the action plans derived from it have not been implemented, despite the fact that implementation was supposed to begin in 2016” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 20). Furthermore, as the authors highlight, there is a notable absence of definitions of core terms relating to C/PVE at the state level, hindering confident implementation of coherent PVE programming at all levels.

The third country to adopt a national strategy in 2015 was **Albania**.³² Among the four countries, it appears to be the one with most institutional investment in countering and preventing violent extremism. As well as adopting a national action plan, Albania established a Centre for Countering Violent Extremism in 2017, and is planning to host the NATO Centre of Excellence for the Study of the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 24). Despite these efforts at the national level and in international cooperation, the authors of the country case study point out that “little has been done to engage various actors, such as state officials, academics, the media and technology companies, civil society, religious communities and social workers. Awareness about the strategy and the risks of VE is thus very low” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 25).

The last of the four countries studied to adopt a National Strategy, in 2018, was **Macedonia**.³³ The authors of the country case study point out that “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” (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 5).

It is worth noting that in all countries, changes have been swiftly made to the penal codes and laws to allow prosecution of foreign fighters upon their return (see Introduction). Grey areas persist in the treatment of women and children who have travelled to Syria or Iraq without the intent or opportunity to take up weapons. The penal repertoire seems to have provided a considerable deterrent for outright extremist violent activity abroad (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 25; Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 4; Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 7³⁴; see also Azinovic 2018, 11). However, there is continuing debate about the management of

³⁰ Kosovo National Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism (2015-2010), www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_-_ENG.pdf, retrieved 13 September 2018.

³¹ Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism (2015-2020), http://msb.gov.ba/PDF/STRATEGIJA_ZA_BORBU_PROTIV_TERORIZMA_ENG.pdf, retrieved 21 September 2018.

³² Albanian National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism, <https://www.rcc.int/p-cve/download/docs/Albanian%20National%20Strategy%20on%20Countering%20Violent%20Extremism.pdf/eca873b0e6bd733938a73f957471a75c.pdf>, retrieved 21 September 2018.

³³ National Counterterrorism Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia (2018-2022), http://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/ct_national_strategy_eng_translation_sbu.pdf, retrieved 21 September 2018.

³⁴ Rudine Jakupi and Garentina Kraja write (2018, 5) “Kosovo’s law enforcement has responded to the threat of violent extremism and the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Around 63 individuals are currently being held in custody, two are in house arrest, 83 are under ongoing investigations and around 168 are fugitives of the law on charges related to violent extremism in Kosovo. In line with these actions, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) revoked the ‘working permit’ of 16 NGOs in Kosovo in 2014, which according to the MOI were suspected of funding terrorist activities in the country, resulting in their closure. Because of these actions, the number of foreign fighters from Kosovo declined significantly. In 2016 and 2017 there were no reported attempts of Kosovo citizens joining terrorist organisations as foreign fighters.”

returnees in prisons (highlighting potential further radicalisation in prison; see Köhler 2016 and Jones/Narag 2018) and the failure of prosecution to deal with non-violent forms of extremism and radicalisation, which remain un(der)-addressed and may fester into subversion of multi-ethnic, democratic societies.

Beyond government agencies, two further sets of actors are active in implementing PVE activities: international actors and donors (especially foreign embassies and international organisations), and civil society organisations (both national and international).

International actors and donors

In all four countries studied, international actors and donors have had considerable impact, both on the PVE debates and on the institutionalisation of counter-measures. The fact that all four countries are (prospective) candidates for accession to the European Union brings with it a particular Western orientation among the countries' elites, as well as a particular focus of the Western powers on this 'neighbourhood'. International support and influence extend both to the national governmental responses and to civil society activities, which are covered in the next section.

For **Albania**, the case study authors assess that “[m]ost C/PVE initiatives have been implemented by civil society organisations (CSOs) with the help of foreign donations and sponsoring” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 23). The US State Department, USAID and the US Embassy in Tirana, but also the EU and the OSCE are particularly active, along with a number of other bilateral donors. As in other countries, international donors have been instrumental in supporting the adoption of national strategies and action plans (see above). Thematically, the main focus of project work has been on women, youth, Roma communities, online radicalisation, and media training and awareness-raising. Youth, as an age group widely seen as most at risk of radicalisation and recruitment, receives most attention. The case study authors describe the objectives of these initiatives as “*build[ing] capacities, empower[ing] local partners, establish[ing] the role of schools as community centres and promot[ing] religious tolerance*” (ibid., 26). A majority of initiatives appears focused in the region of Elbasan. In the researched communities, Korça is the site of two EU-funded projects (“Education of young people with the culture of tolerance and understanding for building friendly society” and “Violent Extremism Prevention Network”). No explicit PVE projects have been implemented or supported in Kavaja. In Tirana, there were six projects at the time of writing, four of which are specifically aimed at young people. The projects provide information, raise awareness and build (individual and institutional) capacity and resilience.

In **Macedonia**, the authors note that “*international institutions have given significant support to the [national CVE] 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 organising roundtable discussions with community representatives*” (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 5). Along with the late completion of a national strategy and action plan (see above), the authors attest that in the country, “*C/PVE efforts have traditionally been quite thin on the ground*” (ibid.). Among the projects implemented, our case study authors highlight the Educate2Prevent programme³⁵ carried out by Nexus Civil Concept and its partners and funded by the EU through Hedayah. Both projects focus on awareness-raising and confidence- and capacity-building among important dis/enablers of recruitment into violent extremism, namely parents, especially mothers, and school workers.

Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina have seen very active international engagement, by nature of their histories – as an international protectorate after the 1999 war in the case of Kosovo, and as a heavily aided federal state in the aftermath of the 1992-1995 wars in the case of Bosnia. In **Kosovo**, the US Embassy is highlighted as particularly active (together with the US Department of State and USAID), supporting research and drafting of key documents such as the national strategy, and more recently also implementation

³⁵ <http://nexus.org.mk/educate2prevent-strengthening-front-line-school-workers-parents-build-youth-resilience-violent-extremism/>, retrieved 12 April 2019.

and outreach activities (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 23). UNDP, OSCE and IOM are also active, alongside GCERF and European embassies. Considerable support has been given to capacity-building and strengthening local institutions in the area of research and implementation. Furthermore, activities are clustered in the area of awareness-raising and education; however, the case study authors deplore a lack of coordination between donor priorities and activities foreseen by the national strategy and action plan. Some focal areas, such as youth, remain ambitiously present in donor agendas, yet ill-coordinated and lacking coherence in implementation on the ground (this applies to the full range of activities, from fostering critical thinking to vocational training). Other areas emphasised include work supporting social cohesion and media outreach. Finally, UNDP has piloted a referral mechanism in the municipality of Gjilan.³⁶

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, many of the same agencies as in the other Western Balkan countries studied fund governmental and non-governmental work in the area of PVE, including the OSCE, EU, IOM and foreign embassies. The internationally supported national strategy and action plan identifies legislation, institutional capacity-building, education, prevention, protection, investigation and response to terrorism as main activity areas. The internationally funded projects cover the full spectrum: institutional capacity-building (including for the Islamic Community), women and youth empowerment, reintegration measures for returnees, awareness and capacity-building for educators, and more. However, the country case study authors also deplore the lack of awareness of these projects at the local level, even in cases where they were implemented in the same city or neighbourhood. Where respondents were aware, they were supportive of the importance of awareness-raising, although in some unaffected communities, participants in the study pointed out that they would rather not be the recipients of projects for fear of being stereotyped as a group (“all Muslims are...”) (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 20-21).

National and international civil society organisations

On the one hand, civil society has been the first to point out the seriousness of societal developments that gave increasing space to radicalisation and extremism in the Western Balkans when both governmental and religious institutions claimed that there was no cause for concern. On the other hand, many of the civil society activities taking place today rely on external (foreign) funding, which is driven by its own interests and priorities. By 2018, major civil society initiatives had been established in all countries, some of which were carried out in conjunction with the activities of international donors detailed in the previous section. For example, in Macedonia, the renowned Mother School project is carried out by the Austria-based organisation Women Without Borders.³⁷ All four research partner organisations in this study are part of an emerging circle of expert organisations which have done pathfinding work in the issue area of VE in the Western Balkans.³⁸ Much civil society engagement began with studies on the drivers, push and pull factors of the phenomenon (both nationally and regionally) and has since moved into the implementation of practical programmes as well. “Scholar-practitioner” organisations such as the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies and Democracy Lab in Macedonia, for example, are active in researching the current state of violent extremism and its prevention as well as engaged in outreach and education in order to strengthen debate and critical thinking and advocate for smart areas of project implementation.

³⁶ Referral mechanisms have been used in various policy areas, for example human trafficking. Within C/PVE, they are designed to “provide support to individuals at risk of being drawn into violent extremism by incorporating collaborations between local authorities, the police, statutory partners (such as the education sector, social services, children’s and youth services, and offender management services), and the local community” (Köhler 2016, 243, with the UK’s Channel programme as one example). The referral mechanism piloted in the Municipality of Gjilan since 2016 is Kosovo’s first mechanism to offer support to vulnerable individuals at risk of radicalisation. It is implemented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, supported by UNDP Kosovo. It is an “*inter-institutional mechanism, which aims to early identification of individuals at risk or vulnerable for radicalization and violent extremism, while preventing this way further radicalization of individuals in our society. Referral Mechanism members are mainly representatives of the local level who have contacts with the community. All members will contribute and act based on their legal responsibilities. The mechanism is still in its infancy and its results will be seen in the coming years.*” (Qehaja et al. 2017, 7 [sic].)

³⁷ <https://www.women-without-borders.org/>, retrieved 12 April 2019.

³⁸ See the seminal reports by Kursani 2015, Azinovic 2016, Vurmo et al. 2015 and Selimi/Stojkovski 2016.

Overall, national civil society organisations are often dependent on the funding priorities of international and national donors. The same applies to international civil society organisations, which are less visible in our country case studies, but are also increasingly active in the area of PVE due to well-endowed funding lines becoming available (Sherriff et al. 2018, 27; personal conversations). Their activities often stay close to their original theory of change and set of priorities, applying them to address root causes of violent extremism (Schirch 2018, 24-26).

5.1.2 Assessing the relevance of PVE initiatives

Local assessment by community respondents

At the local grassroots level, the picture that emerges across the region is one of disconnect. On the one hand, there is little confidence in national-level state institutions' way of handling the issue. At the same time, there is very little awareness about the various policy documents and initiatives, unless municipalities were directly affected. This lack of awareness has two sources: on the one hand, it is caused by the absence of an active engagement strategy on the part of the government. For example, in neither country have governments involved local stakeholders in the drafting of strategic plans or in the prioritising of action areas for local initiatives. On the other hand, this 'awareness deficit' is also due to a diverging assessment of the gravity of the VE phenomenon for the communities in question. This is coupled, in some instances, with a reluctance to engage in the debate or the initiatives for fear of being stigmatised ("they are a problem"). It can also point to the critical rejection of a public discussion that points the finger almost exclusively at religiously motivated Islamic/Islamist extremism and overlooks the political and ethno-political extremisms of the region which are in a dynamic relationship and often fuel each other (Austin et al. 2018, 75). All but one of our country case study reports highlight such 'cumulative' or 'reciprocal' extremism as a crucial factor (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 20ff; Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 20 & 30; Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 24).

Assessing the (mis)match between the driving factors of violent extremism and common sectors of intervention

The overall assessment emerging from our country case studies is that more often than not, a kind of 'copy and paste' approach to PVE programming is being followed. The authors of the Albania case study note that "a 'one size fits all' national-level policy to prevent VE has been shown to be too generic and not tailored to the unique characteristics of each community" (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 6; Vurmo et al. 2015, 15). A recent study of push and pull factors of violent extremism funded by the British Council reports of the responses and initiatives in-country that "*they almost sounded like rehearsed*" (Becirevic 2018, 27). The authors of the Macedonia case study bemoan in their conclusions the fact that policy remains reactive rather than proactive in the issue area of preventing violent extremism (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 31-32). The Bosnia case study summarises the national and the regional picture well: "*What is noticeable [...] is the lack of truly locally-owned C/PVE programming in BiH or plans for community-specific PVE projects in the affected communities studied. All programming is currently initiated and directed at the state or entity levels*" (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 21). In addition, many approaches are still showing a strong security focus over a society-based focus (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 5).

A data-based assessment of programme effectiveness is impossible at the time of writing, due to their recentness and a certain fuzziness regarding their theories of change. However, the critiques emerging from the country case studies – of little engagement across societies' levels and sectors, of poor coordination between donors, of a strong externally-driven push for strategies of countering or preventing violent extremism, a lack of capacities nationally and locally to engage with the topic in a long-term,

strategic fashion – indicate that PVE programming in the region, despite being increasingly well-funded, most likely continues to miss the mark (see also Azinovic 2018). For Kosovo, the country research study also highlights a sectoral blind spot: *“the programmes that are currently being implemented with the aim of PVE do little to address the factors that contribute to resilience that this research has identified, as such programmes and projects focused largely on increasing employment prospects in Kosovo”* – a factor found to be only indirectly influential in radicalisation processes and recruitment into violent extremist groups (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 24).

Many similarities stand out between the municipalities studied: the PVE agendas in all four countries have been, and continue to be, heavily influenced by the priorities of international donors and the international community. The national strategies and action plans – thanks in part to the help given in formulating them – display considerable similarities, not always accounting for significant historical differences between countries (for example, between the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the state of Albania). None of the countries have seen involvement of local actors in setting the agenda, formulating the strategies and setting the priorities.

At the same time, differences in the history and development trajectory of the countries (and municipalities) need to be kept in mind when designing and assessing preventive approaches to violent extremism. There simply cannot be a “one size fits all” between, for example, Albania, formerly a declared atheist state without a recent war experience and its relatively bright prospects as an EU accession candidate, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its legacy of a brutal, ethno-political war and its institutional fragility. Historical differences also materialise in local traditions and the local social fabric, which are currently overlooked by the run-of-the-mill PVE programming but would be better addressed by locally informed, bottom-up planning processes, which would likely also ameliorate current fears that a community might be stigmatised if it participated in the debate on the concrete risks of violent extremism.

The assessments made so far can be mapped in relation to two general dimensions: a horizontal dimension looking at different sectoral interventions (e.g. youth/education sector, religious sector, socio-economic sector), and a vertical dimension looking at the level, depth and focus of engagement (e.g. cross-regional, national, municipal, neighbourhood). In the **vertical dimension**, echoing the above, we note that most programming originates at the national level, with little to no proactive involvement of local actors who are arguably most knowledgeable and most affected. This absence of local actors from agenda-setting, planning and implementation is squandering relevance and effectiveness of PVE programmes across the region. In the **horizontal dimension**, we find that most initiatives are attempting to do a mix of youth education and youth employment. Some steps are also undertaken in the area of working with the religious institutions, as well as support to women’s organisations. However, there is a notable mismatch between the perfectly pitched rhetoric of project planning and the perception of potential recipients “on the ground”, who are often unaware of the programmes being rolled out. Also, there is a notable mismatch between the actors and factors found to be most influential in curbing violent extremism locally (strong local institutions and leadership, cross-community collaboration, youth activism, empowered educators and parents) and those actors and factors invested in (youth employment, for example, in Kosovo) and neglected (the social work sector, for example, in Bosnia). Third, there is little cross-engagement of the groups (i.e. women and youth, religious and state institutions).

Overall, the statement of an eminent Western Balkan scholar would do well to guide future programming, moving it away from “policy panic”:³⁹ *“with the shape and direction of ISIS unclear and the threat of violence from returned fighters viewed as minimal by many Western Balkans officials, it is important that the problem posed by the foreign fighter phenomenon and related activities is rightsized. In other words, authorities must not become overly focused on addressing outdated theoretical threats that distract them from very real and very worrying developments in other risk areas”* (Azinovic 2018, 16).

³⁹ A term used to describe policy-making in the area of C/PVE by Graeme Simpson, lead author of the 2018 UN Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security (presentation at Geneva Peace Week 2018).

5.2 PVE programming linkages to peacebuilding, reconciliation and social cohesion

All contextual and local differentiation aside, it is our understanding that the phenomenon of violent extremism is often fuelled by political grievances over inclusion, justice and fair representation (see Schwoebel 2017, 7; UNDP 2017; Schirch 2018). Therefore, we turned our attention in the context of this research to the influence that peacebuilding or reconciliation programming might have (had) in the countries studied, both on the emergence of violent extremism and on effective strategies to address it. The research question was: what linkages can be identified between PVE activities and peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans?

Several of the countries studied here present a specific context: they are, albeit to different degrees, countries that have emerged, in the recent past, from war and violent conflict. As modern post-war countries, some of them have experienced decades of investment in peacebuilding and reconciliation work.⁴⁰ Violent extremism is emerging in the Western Balkans in the aftermath of considerable local and international investment in the rebuilding of the war-torn societies. Does this investment matter for PVE? Framed slightly differently, if social harmony and cohesion are important factors contributing to the unaffectedness or even resilience of communities vis-à-vis radicalisation and recruitment (see Section 5; see also Ellis/Abdi 2017), can it be shown that peacebuilding and reconciliation projects, which arguably strengthen social cohesion, have a (positive) influence on preventing violent extremism?

Many peacebuilders are rather uncomfortable with the overwhelming policy prioritisation which C/PVE strategies are currently experiencing. However, the peacebuilding community recognises that it has many strengths to offer both in the debate and in the strategic approaches to violent extremism. Georgia Holmer highlights “*the peacebuilding community and its related methods and practices can help develop a more expansive understanding of violent extremism and its causes and a more localized, inclusive, and sustainable approach to countering it*” (Holmer 2013, 1). She continues: “[t]he peacebuilding community already contributes in many ways to the prevention of extremist violence and the CVE agenda through programmes designed to prevent conflict, strengthen rule of law, and promote peace, tolerance, and resilience.”

What can we glean from the four country case studies about the contribution actually made or potentially to be made by peacebuilding programmes? First, it is useful to clarify what we subsume under the term ‘peacebuilding’. In the course of our participatory research journey, we discussed three different ways in which to understand the link between PVE programmes and peacebuilding/reconciliation programmes.

- 1) In a given municipality, are any programmes implemented for PVE and for peacebuilding/reconciliation at the same time? If so, are the programme implementers aware of each other and how would they intersect? (We found no evidence of such programmes.)
- 2) In a given country and/or municipality, what influence do the histories of peace agreements (Ohrid Agreement, Dayton Agreement, Ahtisaari Plan), the history of peacemaking/peacebuilding/reconciliation and the history of state-building processes (and their perceived failure) have on the perceptions of/the emergence of violent extremism?
- 3) In contexts not exposed to specific peacebuilding/reconciliation (programmes), have there been efforts at enhancing social cohesion and harmony (initiatives for multiculturalism, inter-religious and inter-ethnic harmony, civic values, human rights, women’s rights, etc.)? If so, how do they intersect with more current programming in the area of PVE?

At its most basic, we understood peacebuilding (and the ‘peacebuilding link’ of PVE activities) as relating

⁴⁰ See for example Fischer/Petrovic-Ziemer (2016) and Moore (2013) for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mazrreku et al. (2018) and Visoka (2017) for Kosovo and Odendaal (2010) for Macedonia.

to initiatives of intergroup or inter-ethnic/inter-faith dialogue in order to manage conflict peacefully. This is the minimum criterion, although the country research teams were free to provide a bigger picture analysis (for example highlighting the possible effect of the ‘failure of decades of peacebuilding’ in public perception in Bosnia).

Starting from a regional vantage point, some experts argue 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*”⁴¹ (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 12). This assessment reverberates in the analysis presented, especially in the Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia country case studies. Albania, due to its different history, is set apart in terms of its ‘peacebuilding’ experience.

The country case study researchers in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** take a highly critical approach: “*in the immediate post-war period, peacebuilding work in BiH was mainly focused on reconciliation and on the technical dimensions of state-building, with no recognition that these aims were impossible to achieve in the absence of a common idea of the state*” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 21).

The report attests that the overall spirit of the Dayton Peace Agreement allowed ethno-political elites to continue to foster division over national unity. Furthermore: “*efforts, mainly donor driven, have often been organised without any political buy-in or, when financed by powerful international organisations or actors, have received only formal political consent. A lack of real consent by political elites to reconciliation initiatives and various other peacebuilding projects has made it more difficult for these projects to have any real impact*” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 21).

The study finds grave insufficiencies in post-war trauma healing in BiH as well as an additional burden of “*institutional anomie*” which thwarts people’s life ambitions and leaves them with cynical distrust of the country’s institutional capacity to provide for its citizens’ needs. Both ‘lacks’ create a fertile breeding ground for radicalisation. In such a context, while peacebuilding and transitional justice/reconciliation efforts could play a useful role (if they are concentrated on trauma healing, for example), they have not done so in the past. Nor do they do so to a sufficient degree in the present (visible, the authors of the Bosnia case study argue, in the dearth of social workers, for example).

On the other hand, Sead Turcalo and Nejra Veljan assess that a genuine peacebuilding approach (which is local and community-oriented) could be a welcome counterweight to current securitisation tendencies in PVE programming. Also, “[*t]he many programmes already in place to address transitional justice issues and battle genocide denial in certain communities may thus provide a platform on which to build programming that aims to counter radicalisation and violent extremism*” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 21-22). However, in current practice, such ‘building upon’ does not happen systematically or often.

In **Macedonia**, the case study authors find that “[*g]iven 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*” (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 6). The implementation of the OFA, according to the authors, has still allowed further political exploitation of inter-ethnic (Albanian-Macedonian) grievance narratives. While the OFA resulted in more rights for ethnic Albanians and power-sharing arrangements, a perception of disadvantage on the Albanian and of deprivation on the Macedonian side is strong. Such perceptions, our case study authors write, are readily kindled by political parties on both sides with a view to exploiting tensions as part of their election strategies (ibid., 3). Smaller-scale violence continues to flare up around election time, manifesting another counter-productive, radicalising effect of international peacemaking efforts.

41 Dr Majda Ruge in her testimony to the United State Senate Committee on Foreign Relations’ Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation (2017).

In **Kosovo**, the researchers of our case study underline the strong local rejection of such initiatives, resulting from the heavy external influence on peacebuilding programming. *“As the discussion between participants in the focus groups revealed, these meetings remain highly unpopular as they are perceived as caving in to pressure from international donors and often are seen as hurting the credibility of the actors that take part in them. Broadly, because these meetings are not a grass-root driven initiative but are largely seen as an external intervention, they did not attract the local attention and take off as a sustainable initiative.”* (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 26). This aside, they note: *“While there have been numerous projects and programmes aimed at ‘reconciliation’ and ‘inter-faith’ dialogue in the municipalities of Deçan and Mitrovica, through desk review and interviews with local leaders, particularly in the municipality of Deçan, no direct links could be established between peacebuilding and resilience. However, indirectly the mark that various internationally driven peacebuilding programmes seem to have imprinted in Kosovo is in mobilising municipal authorities to react quickly to various concerns and incidents that take place in the municipality”* (ibid., 25).

Albania’s research team contextualises the country’s peacebuilding environment as follows: *“It is important to note that proper programmes on reconciliation have never been implemented in Albania in the context of conflict resolution and/or peacebuilding. Unlike in most neighbouring countries, internal conflicts in Albania can be attributed almost exclusively to political tensions rather than to religious or ethnic divides. This is also the reason why reconciliation, dialogue and mediation have always been treated as part of the political landscape rather than programmes to be implemented at the societal level. As a result, the extent to which current PVE efforts can be linked to peacebuilding is through programmes of inter-faith dialogue, awareness raising and promotion of civic values through education”* (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 27). Some space for a peacebuilding approach may be gleaned when the research team concludes that *“it is essential that PVE efforts in Albania continue to adjust to the local context by streamlining PVE-sensitive measures”* (ibid., 28). In this, PVE efforts may also build on the significance of ‘religious tolerance’ (also ‘religious harmony’) and the emphasis placed on this as a civic value of inter-religious and inter-ethnic bridge-building (ibid., 3, citing Vurmo et al. 2018).

In sum, not all normative expectations (for example, that peacebuilding will address the holistic picture of structural and individual root causes) have been realised ‘on the ground’ in the Western Balkans. In several cases, peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives have been subject to political exploitation and manipulation (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 21; Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 12). Consequently, the populations often view them with a large measure of cynicism and pessimism.

However, the ‘essence’ of peacebuilding (inter-ethnic encounter, inter-faith dialogue, religious tolerance and multiculturalism, active bonds and links in a community across group identities, the fostering of inclusive and multidimensional identities) stands out as one important factor contributing to resilience. As the case study authors from Macedonia point out: *“In Gostivar and Struga ... 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”* (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 27).

Future PVE programming and peacebuilding programmes should focus attention on these building blocks locally, rather than on lofty policy declarations only. Section 7 will expand on this call with policy/practical recommendations.

6 Community resilience: Final reflections and areas for further research

Given the richness of the data which this report aimed to capture, but also the complexity of the subject-matter which it sought to address, this concluding section will not attempt to summarise the main findings emerging from the research. Instead, it will delve into the yet unresolved question of ‘what makes a community resilient to the threat of violent extremism?’ From its inception, this exploratory research into factors and actors of community resilience and vulnerability in the Western Balkans was treading a fine line between observing whether a given community was (visibly) unaffected by violent extremism (as per our chosen indicators of the departure of foreign fighters from that community) or whether it was indeed resilient to it. Before being able to discuss this question with the necessary nuance, it is important to locate our approach and understanding in the general discussion of resilience in the social sciences and political realm. This section will therefore first define the concept of community resilience, and the challenges of applying it to the study of violent extremism (6.1) before synthesising our main findings and outlining some open questions for further research (6.2).

6.1 Community resilience: making sense of a fuzzy concept

Generic definitions

In the past few years, in part inspired by development studies, the concept of resilience has gained traction within the peacebuilding community, but it remains ill-defined and imprecise, and subject to controversies. Its conceptual origin is located in the material sciences – as the capacity of a material to absorb large amounts of energy quickly and release them again without breaking. When applied to political science, it could be described as the ability of political systems and (in)formal governance arrangements to adjust to changing political and social conditions while keeping their structures intact (Carpenter 2008, 6). In other words, “*resilient states are able to maintain order and stability, keep societal expectations and capacity in equilibrium, and survive and ameliorate the negative effects of external and internal shocks*” (McLoughlin 2012, 9). However, it should be noted that resilience per se is not inherently normatively good, as repressive governments and corruption may also prove to be resilient systems. As Diane Coutu noted: “*...resilience is neither ethically good nor bad. It is merely the skill and capacity to be robust under conditions of enormous stress and change*” (Coutu 2002).

International agencies started to use the concept of community resilience in the area of disaster preparedness, and later also in humanitarian aid and development work, largely to assist communities affected by climate change, by aligning programmes and funding strategies to resilience-building objectives (World Bank 2013; UNDP 2014). In this context, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) defined resilience as “*the ability of people, households, communities, countries and systems to mitigate, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth*” (USAID 2013, 3). Following in the footsteps of the peacebuilding field (e.g. Interpeace 2016; Menkhaus 2013),

the PVE research community has also recently embraced the concept of resilience (e.g. Van Metre 2016; Holmes 2017; Bowen 2017; Ellis/Abdi 2017), although not always in a self-reflective manner (e.g. Daou 2015). The OSCE defines its PVE programming in terms of the two objectives of reducing the appeal of violent extremism and building “*resilience to its influence and spread*” (2018, 7). Programmes falling under that objective include school curricula, public information campaigns, community debates, intra- and inter-faith dialogues, capacity-building for teachers and community leaders, and media counter-narrative campaigns (ibid.).

While the popularity of resilience programmes is rising, there are also many critics of the concept as it is applied to the social sciences and the study of political and social community (e.g. Olsson et al. 2015). Two points of criticism weigh particularly heavy. First, the concept of resilience is perceived as lacking agency on behalf of communities, as it may evoke passive recipients of aid who appear to be eternally on the brink of risk and disaster. Also, it has been pointed out that resilience as it is now commonly used focuses heavily on individual and community capacities, at the expense of underlying structural issues for which agents outside of the individual or community are responsible. As summarised by Olsson et al. (2015, 9), “*...resilience can become a powerful depoliticizing and naturalizing scientific concept and metaphor when used by political actors*”.

While being aware of these perceived limitations of the term resilience, we decided to use it nonetheless, for several reasons. Firstly, given its wide use and preponderance in contemporary debates around PVE, we wished to contribute to that debate through our empirical findings. Secondly, the concept of resilience lends itself well to a systemic understanding of the complex nature of social phenomena – as adopted for instance, by USAID in its 2013 “*Framework for Analyzing Resilience in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States*”. As cited by Van Metre (2016, 8), “*rather than focusing on the individual and group levels of analysis, the study took a systems approach, hypothesizing that five types of external shocks – economic, environmental, security, political, and social – interact with one another and with three bases of community resilience – institutions, resources, and adaptive facilitators – to produce systemic outcomes. This framework helps bridge the levels of analysis problem and illuminates the complexity of resilience*”. Moreover, resilience can be understood as encompassing both structural and agency-centred dimensions of communities’ capacity to react to the threat of violent extremism. In this sense, resilience is both “*a noun and a verb*” (ibid., 10). This is echoed by Oxfam’s approach to resilient development, rooted in three types of resilience capacity: absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacity. “*These three capacities need to be enhanced to achieve (...) the realisation of rights and wellbeing in spite of shocks, stresses and uncertainty. The development sector as a whole uses the term ‘capacity’. In Oxfam, we more naturally think in terms of agency, empowerment and choice*” (Jeans et al. 2017). Finally, community resilience in the face of adversity is also associated in the literature with the role of social connections, social bridging and belonging (as described by Ellis and Abdi 2017), which strongly echoes the findings identified by our case study research teams. The next subsection explains the way in which our project refined the definition of resilience and made it useful to the research undertaken.

Approach adopted for this research

For the purposes of this research project, the following definition of resilience was commonly agreed and applied by the four country teams: “*a municipality is resilient following the community’s intervention or active engagement of various stakeholders of the community vested with some authority to either prevent or counter violent extremism. Therefore, resilience assumes awareness of the problem by various stakeholders in a community and their aggregated action to act against a certain phenomenon. It also includes the community’s attitude toward such a phenomenon and their reaction in the wake of the emergence of the violent extremist activity, or even perceived as leading up to its appearance*” (Jakupi/Kraja 2018, 5).

In spite of this commonly-agreed definition, the research teams did not fully reconcile their divergent views on the links and causality chain between resilience and vulnerability (i.e. are these two ends of a

spectrum or can they coexist within any given community?), or between resilience and (un)affectedness (i.e. does unaffectedness necessarily imply resilience? Does a community need to have been previously affected in order to be considered resilient?). Diane Coutu (2002) cites an interview partner from the business sector who claims that “*resilience is something you realise you have after the fact*”, resonating strongly with debates among the project researchers on whether resilience was only present if a community had actually been tested by attempted recruitment, and was not necessarily present if a community did not show any signs of contact with agents of violent extremism or violence entrepreneurs.

Some of the tentative conclusions that can be drawn from the four case studies and resulting discussions between the research teams are as follows:

- ≡ Key factors conducive to resilience have been identified, but the unaffected communities cannot be considered as being fully resilient;
- ≡ Resilience is a spectrum as there is no ‘perfect’ resilience but rather a compounding of factors and actions from actors which limit vulnerability in a community (or enhance resilience);
- ≡ In that regard, a community which has not been affected by VE might still present signs of vulnerability (‘breeding ground’);
- ≡ Resilience is systemic because it does not depend on one single factor of resilience but rather on the overall interconnection of factors and the way in which actors play a role in shaping those factors. Furthermore, due to the plethora of possibilities in which factors and actors interconnect in a given community, resilience to violent extremism is not necessarily deliberate, but often it can occur by chance.

As expressed in the Albania report: “*Factors of resilience and vulnerability are likely to be present at both affected and unaffected communities, but at different levels. Both factors conducive to and preventing VE are observable in both resilient and vulnerable communities, but there are additional intervening factors that ‘trigger’ vulnerability in some at-risk communities. Hence, affectedness is not so much determined by the mere presence of factors and actors which are conducive of vulnerability towards VE, but rather by the level, dynamics and compounding of factors and actors within a given community. Therefore, resilience is a spectrum and systemic (holistic), and radicalisation towards VE is a process, the scale of which depends largely (but not exclusively) on the level of resilience*” (Qirjazi/Shehu 2018, 1).

Despite these limitations, the research reports did highlight a number of characteristics which unaffected communities have in common, and offer us some clues as to what drivers of resilience might be.

6.2 Drivers of community resilience: synthesis of case study findings

Country-focused insights

In **Macedonia**, the findings show clearly that there are factors/elements of what could constitute, and contribute to, a resilient community, such as multiculturalism, community and societal awareness, quality of religious education, and institutional cooperation and engagement. Stakeholders identified *multiculturalism* and the importance of *diversity* as crucial, particularly in a multi-ethnic society. In different municipalities, however, there were diverging views on how multiculturalism was being nurtured. In Gostivar and Struga, attitudes towards multiculturalism and diversity are more positive. The Youth Council in Gostivar is a primary point for organising multi-ethnic events and festivals; as a result, community members have a more open attitude and respect for people from different ethno-religious communities. Also in Struga, NGOs are usually the ones that lead and support efforts to promote co-existence among different groups in society. Young people are the target of these initiatives, as they are deemed to be most

susceptible to extremist messaging. Nonetheless, these initiatives may be short-lived, if they do not receive the necessary support.

- ≡ *Community and societal awareness:* A serious lack of a debate within society on the dangers posed by violent extremism was evident throughout the communities researched. Therefore, almost all respondents see raising awareness of the problem of VE as critical. Community- and municipality-led initiatives, while not absent, are scarce and their potential impact is still unknown. In Cair (an affected municipality), there have been initiatives, launched mainly by the municipality, to introduce debates and lectures on the topic of extremism in three high schools. In this vein, in the municipality of Struga a community-led project brought together members of the community in order to develop public debates. It became clear that grassroots projects such as this could not be sustained without state funding.
- ≡ *Quality of religious education:* Although Macedonia is a secular state in terms of its constitutional order, many stakeholders said that there is a real need to improve the quality of religious education. They also said it would be useful to have access to an array of religious literature, focusing on what other religions stand for, in order to have a reference point and to understand both their own and others' religious traditions. Apart from the availability of and access to quality educational material, it is also crucial to look closely at who is teaching and/or disseminating this material. In Struga, an unaffected municipality had seen a radical imam appointed to one of their mosques who would not shy away from spreading a 'different' interpretation of Islam from the one already applied in Struga. The imam was removed from the position immediately after the local population reacted strongly and instinctively. The community action had a positive effect in this case, but in other similar scenarios the community action might not be as strong, and potentially extreme imams could occupy positions in the mosques for a considerable amount of time.
- ≡ *Institutional cooperation and engagement:* When it comes to preventing VE in Macedonia, institutional cooperation and engagement vary in each community but in general, they are perceived as insufficient. In Gostivar, it was noted that the space exists for much greater cooperation between government, religious institutions and the communities. Religious bodies in particular are seen as crucial for engaging with the communities since many people regard them as trusted institutions; they can thus act as a bridge between governmental institutions and communities. Institutional cooperation with NGOs and regular engagement were also deemed important, primarily because NGOs need sustainability that local institutions can provide, which in turn will make the engagement of the NGOs with community member systemic and productive.

In **Kosovo**, the unaffected community researched, Deçan, has many features of what a resilient community may look like. Nonetheless, it is not perfectly clear whether Deçan is vulnerable but unaffected or whether it is simply a resilient community.

- ≡ *Outreach and cooperation of local stakeholders (imams and municipal authorities):* In Deçan, there are currently 17 registered mosques and no reported parallel religious institutions or unauthorised imams are active. Islamic community representatives and municipal authorities claimed to have acted in unison and dealt with individuals who questioned the authority of the existing Islamic community structures in the municipality. As a result, all lectures that were not approved by the official Islamic community were banned, as was their dissemination within the religious community. Deçan is shielded, in part, due to the regular meetings, both formal and informal, that religious leaders and municipal leaders hold with the members of the wider community. Formal meetings are usually held in the town halls and informal meetings include gatherings at weddings or funerals. These spaces serve as platforms to discuss the dangers posed by external uncertified preachers. Social media have served as additional forums for posting sermons to counter the appeal of these preachers, who usually reach out to this particular target audience. Furthermore, municipal authorities have been very strict concerning the request to build new mosques; as a prerequisite, the source of the funding must be transparent.

- ≡ *Political representation – donor agenda:* Since the end of the conflict in 1999, Deçan has received an abundance of attention from the political and international community present in Kosovo. This can mainly be attributed to the fact that Deçan was not only one of the hotspots of battles during the 1999 conflict between Kosovo and Serbian armed forces but was also the place where different political ideologies clashed. The OSCE, USAID and EU have spent large amounts of funds to the benefit of the community. As a result, the civil society in Deçan differed in size and tonality in comparison to a community of comparable size elsewhere in Kosovo.
- ≡ *National narratives and local context:* Although Kosovo has seen an increase in religious practices after the conflict of 1999, the impact of this in some communities has not been as strong as to affect their previously shaped identities. In Deçan, ethnic identity has not been superseded by religious identity although there has been an increase of religiosity, especially among young people.

In **Albania**, the research analysed three clusters of factors and actors that could potentially lead to a resilient community: ideology; institutional performance and cooperation; and strong social connections.

- ≡ *Ideological factors:* According to the Albania country report, factors and actors conducive to resilience are: i) strong civic values; ii) religious education for the purpose of awareness- raising and iii) common culture. Participating in a community and not isolating oneself could lead to strong individual civic values, in contrast to radicalised groups which tend to isolate themselves; a notable case of this type of isolation was a group of non-traditional believers in Tirana who had isolated themselves from the rest of the civic community and practitioners of Islam. Similar to the case in Macedonia, in Albania there is a lack of ‘proper religious understanding’. Proper religious education taught by trained professionals will reduce young people’s vulnerability to religious and violent extremism. Culture and tradition were emphasised as a strong factor conducive to resilience as it will keep the community ‘tied together’ through joint celebrations of religious festivals, traditional visits on social occasions and inter-faith marriages.
- ≡ *Institutional performance and cooperation:* Institutional responses to violent extremism have been scarce in Albania. Respondents particularly emphasise the importance of strengthening cooperation between institutions and the Muslim Community. Local and religious institutions felt marginalised during law-making and other projects aimed at building strong and resilient communities in the face of adversity. Qirjazi and Shehu (2018, 31) point out that there “*is a correlation between the lack of negative actors and greater resilience, but, most importantly, there is a correlation between the inaction of positive actors and vulnerability. Hence, proactive engagement and action on the part of community actors is essential to strengthen resilience – more so than the mere absence of vulnerability factors*”.
- ≡ *Strong social connections – or social linking –* provide a sense of belonging and association to individuals and groups. Social cohesion can provide connections with people of different backgrounds but who are part of one community. In Albania, as the study shows, the community policing project not only enhanced the cooperation between institutions and the community but also improved security and wellbeing in the community. In Korça, the cooperation between institutions and their links to the community are strong as they not only cooperate on matters of concern but also tend to celebrate religious holidays together.

For **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the authors argue that the experience of war and post-war events has all but destroyed the resilience of the Bosnian people, although it is not very clear what were the features of pre-war community resilience in Bosnia. The most explicitly acknowledged factor for resilience is “*the role the leadership can play*” at the local level, in particular in BPC canton where “*local authorities had explicitly refused to accept foreign aid with strings attached*” (Turcalo/Veljan 2018, 23). Furthermore, in their recommendations, they speak of “*students’ engagement at community level, such as volunteering, being aware of their positive contribution to society and to encourage students to think critically about taboo themes*” as ways of building resilience (ibid.).

The three key ingredients: Awareness, Action, Attitude

In almost all communities researched for this project, it became clear that lack of *awareness* of the problem of violent extremism leads to increased vulnerability. All the communities studied expressed the common feeling that raising awareness of these subjects was critical, so that everyone understood the risks and dangers associated with allowing extremism to take hold within their municipalities, thus fostering another line of resilience against this phenomenon. None of the communities saw themselves as being fully resilient. However, as we mentioned earlier, factors and actors can explain the unaffectedness of the communities to violent extremism and the evidence of preliminary signs that could be conducive to what is being referred to as resilience.

Many examples were given in the country studies as to how awareness could be nurtured in the vulnerable communities. Access to digestible information is important, e.g. through translated literature, lectures, public debates and even through structured religious education in schools. Formal and informal gatherings of the different community groups could also serve as platforms for raising community awareness of the problem and for further discussions on how to deal with it. Country studies have demonstrated that town hall meetings with community members are already in place alongside informal gatherings. These formal and informal discussions should be nurtured and supported further by institutional representatives (municipal and religious) as well as by the donor community and policy- and decision-makers. Support to the various civil society groups, such as youth groups, faith-based organisations and women's associations, for the purpose of awareness-raising is another tool conducive to a resilient community.

Community-coordinated *action* is another important factor that could very well lead to a more resilient community, as illustrated by the example of resilient community behaviour in a Macedonian municipality, when they decided to expel the imam who exhibited signs of extremism in his discourse. The robust reaction of the community corresponds directly with the definition of resilience as used in the Albania study and which states that “*resilience can be defined as the quality of being able to return quickly to a previous good condition after problems, or as the ability to withstand, respond to and recover from a wide range of harmful and adverse events*”. Another example of a community-coordinated action is the cooperation of local municipal authorities with local religious representatives in Deçan when they realised that radical recruiters from outside had been at work in their communities. They acted in unison and pushed the recruiters out of Deçan. Had this happened in a community that lacked institutional coordination, extremist recruiters would have found what they usually are after – breeding grounds.

An open and tolerant attitude to community members from different ethnic and religious backgrounds will also strengthen the social identity of the community and will contribute towards social bonding. Young people from diverse backgrounds may perceive that their ethnic, cultural or religious identity does not fit well with the mainstream culture of the community where they live. As Ellis and Abdi (2017) suggest, strengthening social identity within one's ethnic or religious group may be an important means of building communities' resilience to violent extremism. Maintaining strong culture and tradition through joint celebrations of religious holidays and festivals and regular visits on social occasions will further nurture diversity and will lead to social cohesion, which will contribute to the prevention of any extreme phenomena. Social bridging through cooperation between communities and civil society will reduce marginalisation by enhancing connections to others who are different. The absence or weak social connections make individuals more vulnerable to violent extremism trajectories (ibid.).

Areas for further research

Clearly, more research is required on the root causes of the violent extremism phenomenon and the common understanding of it. It is important not only to conduct field research, but also to support the design of PVE

programming. The effectiveness of PVE policies is inextricably linked to the quality of research and analysis underpinning their development and guiding the implementation of programming efforts. Therefore, the integration of experienced researchers, think tanks and academic institutions in both PVE policy-making and programme implementation is of strategic importance (OSCE 2018).

For further research, we would therefore recommend investing particularly in participatory analysis conducted jointly with local stakeholders, for instance by involving youth organisations (also in less accessible areas) in mapping where there is proactive youth engagement in communities, and whether these actions are impactful – as piloted, for example, by the Gostivar Youth Council in Macedonia (Stojkovski/Kalajdziovski 2018, 22). Similar endeavours could be conducted with other concerned parties such as local Islamic Community representatives or diasporas. As this project has shown, there is also a need to invest in research to increase the understanding and applicability of the participatory research and community dialogue nexus in the area of violent extremism in order to engage all concerned parties in identifying best practices.

Applying a peacebuilding lens to PVE research also highlights the need to invest in systemic conflict analysis tools specifically tailored to transforming violent extremism. In order to draw substantive conclusions on peacebuilding linkages of PVE programming beyond the exploratory findings of this comparative report, it would be useful to engage in a separate and more detailed analysis of whether drivers of conflict and violence on the one hand, and drivers of VE and related fields of resilience on the other are the same or not the same (and if and how they are connected in specific contexts). Finally, we see it as crucial to increase understanding of the multiple, reciprocal extremisms in the region, in order to avoid stigmatisation of the Islamic communities and to shed light on the interplay of different forms of extremism.

The next and final section will turn to the policy implications of our findings, by suggesting several ways forward for external actors to strengthen and improve local communities' sources of resilience, so that they become insulated from recruiters and immune to extremist ideologies.

7 Recommendations: Entry points for better PVE programming

At the end of this comparative report on lessons learned about PVE from the perspective of diverse communities across four Western Balkan countries, we propose a set of recommendations for governments and national stakeholders in the region, for local institutions and for the international community. We are mindful that successful PVE programming requires contextualisation and cannot be rolled out by blueprint. The following recommendations therefore build on the recommendations of each of the four country case studies, without replacing their independent and situated assessments and suggestions. However, they highlight insights that emerged as highly relevant for a majority of the country case studies. We believe that these will need to be addressed – in a contextualised manner – in most settings aiming to prevent radicalisation towards violent extremism. The recommendations are clustered in two sections: strengthening factors and actors conducive to community resilience, and building strong and efficient PVE programmes.

Strengthening the factors and actors enhancing community resilience

Local institutions

- ≡ Strengthen and increase cooperation among community leaders and actors who can play a role on PVE. The municipality (or local administration) should take the lead in establishing community relations committees to offer the space for regular discussions involving different community groups. This would bring together different stakeholders (women, youth, representatives of ethnic groups, religious groups, etc.) in order to detect early signs of radicalisation or recruitment into violent extremist groups and allow scope for early action. Such an approach would help to create the space for exchange in order to learn from successful examples of local collaborative leadership, to share and discuss early warning signs, to devise solutions through collaboration and to foster community agency.
- ≡ Strengthen existing programmes fostering civic values and civic identity among all the community members. Introduce and implement programmes that increase social cohesion. This will raise awareness among the community members of both a shared identity and varied perceptions of social issues. The municipality or local administration in cooperation with educational institutions and representatives of teachers and parents associations could take the lead in designing the programmes, which must be tailored to the needs of the community.

Governments and national stakeholders

- ≡ Improve and strengthen institutional performance and collaborative policy-making (national/local, civil society, police, religious authorities, teachers, parents...) in the areas of education and youth and social affairs. There should be a commitment at the government level to additional investment in programmes that would directly tackle early warning signs. Collaborative and consultative policy-making will improve trust in the capacities of public institutions.
- ≡ Acknowledge religious institutions and religious leaders at the central and local level as influential actors with close ties to their communities. Ensure their engagement in assessing the dangers of,

and acting on, violent extremism from the beginning, rather than bringing them in at late stages in order to implement actions designed without their input. This will counteract a sense of being instrumentalised on the part of religious actors.

- ≡ Establish checks and balances to curb suspicious foreign donations and foreign interference that may foster radicalisation leading to violent extremism. This may be done by increasing public reporting and transparency, as well as by jointly developing criteria for accepting or declining such foreign donations and engagement. We would expect this to serve both as a means of curbing radicalisation trends as well as a way of improving trust through transparency.
- ≡ Involve cross-sections of local-level actors and community leaders in analysing the state of community vulnerability and resilience and in setting policy priorities. In this way, community perspectives can inform policy development from an early stage, as well as ensure awareness at the local level about policy measures at the national governmental level.

International community

- ≡ Invest in identifying and strengthening factors of community resilience and social cohesion (such as inclusive socio-economic development, inter-faith tolerance and civic education) as much as in measures of deterrence and punishment.
- ≡ Co-create and co-design new objectives and fine-tune existing objectives of interventions with local community representatives in order to strengthen institutional capacity and stakeholder cooperation (religious and government), both at the national policy-making and at community level, to improve communication, coordination and collaboration.
- ≡ Include youth as part of the creative solution rather than only as a vulnerable population. Programmes to invest in education and social work sectors to develop resilience in high school students and young adults should be implemented with high priority. Youth should be empowered in its positive role as an agent for change.
- ≡ The community angle at the meso level has been borne out to be both novel and relevant by researchers. We recommend adopting it, for example by focusing on the role of communities in the reintegration and rehabilitation of returnee foreign fighters and their families.

Building strong and efficient PVE programmes

Local institutions

- ≡ Share lessons learned and good practices with stakeholders. A first step may be to gather community actors together to discuss ways of addressing radicalisation leading to violent extremism and coming to a shared understanding of the phenomenon in relation to a given community. Such sharing of information may pave the way to increased joint assessments, awareness and action.
- ≡ Factor in the time that it takes to build trust and relationships especially with communities which experience themselves as 'stigmatised'. Sensitise both national and international agencies to this need as well.

Governments and national stakeholders

- ≡ Conduct locally led threat and needs assessments to inform programming by international and national donors and policy-makers. Complementing top-down with bottom-up approaches in such a manner will allow more nuanced programming and enhance local awareness and buy-in.
- ≡ Analyse and engage in affected and unaffected communities, recognising that the two categories are not neatly separable. Such side-by-side engagement may start with creating collaborative spaces for peer-to-peer learning, which would offer the added benefit of reducing perceived stigmatisation

by being in the focus of PVE programming. Community relations committees within municipalities could serve as safe spaces for these exchanges.

- ≡ Adapt the national PVE strategies to local practical, realistic and feasible plans of action. This could begin with organising further discussion forums at local level to present the PVE strategies and jointly review or develop such plans of action.
- ≡ Co-create PVE programmes with local institutions, identify and consult key community-level influencers.
- ≡ Provide (financial, temporal and human) guarantees for the effective implementation of action plans at local, national and international levels. Strengthening CVE coordinators' offices within the government could be the first step.
- ≡ Include forms of ethno-nationalist and right-wing extremism that are on the rise in the discourse, strategies and action plans on preventing and combating violent extremism. This will help address the counter-productive "Islamisation" of violent extremism and help ensure engagement by actors who might otherwise feel unjustly and singularly stigmatised.
- ≡ Develop a sustainable and collaborative multimedia platform aimed at combating all forms of radicalisation and violent extremism. The office of the PVE coordinator should establish and maintain the platform. Among other things, this platform should offer a virtual community of experts from various professional backgrounds (social workers, psychologists, criminologists, security experts, media professionals, etc.) who work on issues related to C/PVE.

International community

- ≡ Invest in long-term (5-10 year) programmes in order to address the phenomenon in its long-term dimension in a specific conflict context.
- ≡ Invest in programmes that are tailored and adapted to the specific needs of each locality. Programmes cannot be duplicated without community context-specific design. This design must involve local representatives with diverse perspectives.
- ≡ Ensure that new PVE/CVE programming is based on sound peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity principles and that lessons and learning from prior peacebuilding work feed into PVE/CVE programming.
- ≡ Provide (financial, temporal and human) guarantees for the effective implementation of action plans at local, national and international levels.
- ≡ Invest in baseline research and evaluation to guarantee a full understanding of the specificities of each locality. Share the specific lessons learned and evaluation of the programmes widely, both locally and within the international donor community.

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