



# ASSESSMENT OF MACEDONIA'S EFFORTS IN COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM, VIEW FROM CIVIL SOCIETY



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## **Frequently used abbreviations**

**CVE - Countering Violent Extremism**

**IRC - Islamic Religious Community**

**NB: Translated versions of this document are available  
in Albanian and Macedonian.**

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## Introduction

As the Syrian war was gaining in intensity and the number of foreign fighters (FF) from Europe was on the increase in the years 2012 to 2015, many scholars and practitioners warned about the possible blowbacks to social order when FFs would start returning home. Officials have even identified that several of the attackers in the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2015, and in Brussels on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016, were former foreign fighters<sup>1</sup>. In 2015, 687 suspects were arrested for religiously inspired terrorism in the EU.<sup>2</sup>

*Member States shall, consistent with international law, prevent the “recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning of, or participation in terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, and the financing of their travel and of their activities.*

*Resolution 2178, UN Security Council*

This is hardly a surprise when well established terrorism experts like Thomas Hegghammer have claimed that “Syria will prolong the problem of jihadist terrorism in Europe by 20 years,” warning that even if the blowback rate were low “the absolute number of attacks will be substantial”.<sup>3</sup>

To illustrate the global dimension of the problem of foreign fighters, the U.N has ranked combating this phenomenon as one of its top priorities. This is exhibited in the U.N Security Council’s adoption of Resolution 2178 (2014), wherein violent extremism is condemned and action measures are proposed in order to tackle it. It urges UN member states to ensure increased border security and to screen for or arrest FFs travelling to or

returning from conflict areas. Critically, it also urges states to counter violent extremism by taking preventive measures, such as engaging with communities at the local level to stop the spread of extremist ideologies<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>The New York Times. ‘Uncovering the links between the Brussels and Paris attackers’. April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Accessed on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/03/23/world/europe/how-the-brussels-and-paris-attackers-could-be-connected.html>

<sup>2</sup> Europol. “TE-SAT 2016. July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Accessed on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016.  
<https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2016>

<sup>3</sup> “Europe could feel the backlash from jihadist conflicts”. BBC. November 30, 2013. Accessed November 20, 2015  
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25155188>

<sup>4</sup> Security Council 7272nd meeting. “Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution Condemning Violent Extremism, Underscoring Need to Prevent Travel, Support for Foreign Terrorist

Acknowledging that the threat of terrorism on European soil has grown over the past several years, the European Commission (EC) on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, in wake of the Paris attacks, adopted a two-fold package to better address this threat<sup>5</sup>. According to an EC report, foreign fighters were involved in at least 6 terrorist attacks in the EU in 2015. According to the Commission, "The existing rules need to be aligned, taking into account the changing terrorist threat Europe is facing"<sup>6</sup>.

Extremist groups like ISIS, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, and others have used indiscriminate violence and violated human rights on many occasions. Despite their inhumane activities, these groups still manage to attract followers. This fact shows that one cannot combat these groups by countering their acts of terrorism alone, but one must also address and combat the ideologies of violent extremism that they spread.

It is crucial to comprehend the ideas behind the phenomenon of violent extremism and the reasons why people join these radical groups. Policymakers often do not necessarily fully understand the complexity of the phenomenon and therefore might inadvertently make policy decisions that are not necessarily the best choice or provide only a partial solution, and may have negative consequences.

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Fighters". September 24, 2014. Accessed December 24<sup>th</sup> 2015.  
<http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11580.doc.htm>

<sup>5</sup>European Commission "Proposal for a DIRECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA on combating terrorism" December 2, 2015. Accessed February 15, 2016. [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/legislative-documents/docs/20151202\\_directive\\_on\\_combatting\\_terrorism\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/legislative-documents/docs/20151202_directive_on_combatting_terrorism_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

## 1. Methodology and content

This policy study aims to provide a better understanding of Macedonia's specific situation when it comes to violent extremism. Moreover, it attempts to map the current trend of violent extremism (VE) in Macedonia and the Western Balkans region by underlining the driving forces for VE, while also looking at the institutional and legal response in the country in regards to VE. More specifically, it unveils what has so far been done institutionally to tackle this issue, while analysing the latest legal amendments and examining what effects they have produced on the ground, in order to be able to provide practical and policy-relevant recommendations to a number of relevant stakeholders that work directly on the topic of countering and preventing violent religious extremism. The policy study also looks into the process of de-radicalization and resocialization of returning foreign fighters.

This study provides recommendations on good practices when it comes to:

- Prevention of extremism, including the possible inclusion of local communities through cooperation with religious institutions;
- Law enforcement and legislation in connection to violent extremism and foreign fighters, as well as analysing what effect they have on discouraging people to join foreign wars;
- Regional countering violent extremism (CVE) cooperation, or how the cooperation of the security institutions of the region is exercised and encouraged, and whether information is shared effectively and in a timely way.

This policy analysis relies on information gained through open sources such as media articles about cases of radicalization and violent extremism, public debates on the topic, academic writings, and other literature. The researchers working on this project have also used public information available at institutions such as the Ministry of Interior (MoI), which is obtainable through the Act on the Freedom of Information, in regards to their current work on this question. Additionally Analytica's researchers have conducted interviews with relevant stakeholders, through whom we have received valuable information. Lastly, focus group meetings were held in the cities of Kumanovo, Skopje and Tetovo targeting young adults.

This paper consists of six chapters, each one dealing with a specific issue that is connected to CVE. The first chapter introduces the threat that violent extremism and the foreign fighters phenomenon pose to Macedonia and the region, while also underlying the local specifics. The second chapter examines the legal and institutional response to the violent extremism and foreign fighters phenomena. It looks into the legal interventions that have taken place as a result of the emergence of the phenomenon. The third

chapter looks at the regional dynamics of the issue of foreign fighters and violent extremism. It highlights the importance of regional cooperation by showing how interconnected the Western Balkans is when it comes to this threat. The next chapter highlights the importance of the process of resocialization and reintegration, and explains why it is so complex. It looks at measures undertaken by political and religious authorities to assist in the processes of resocialization and reintegration. Our researchers compare this with what we believe to be good practices, utilized throughout Europe. The following chapter shows findings from focus groups that have been held with young people from three major cities that have had several cases of foreign fighters who went to Iraq and Syria (Kumanovo, Skopje and Tetovo). In the last chapter we summarize our findings and point out the key aspects. We provide practical and policy-relevant recommendations based on the findings of our study.



## 2. Context

For people living in former Yugoslavia, terror and radicalization were foreign concepts; they were perceived as issues that simply did not happen in this region.<sup>7</sup>

From the early 1990s onwards, many foreign Muslim charities, mainly Arab-based, found their way into the region using the lack of political and economic stability resulting from the fall of socialism to spread extremist ideas. Their vast financial resources helped them reach the mainly poor communities, which were their targets<sup>8</sup>. Most of these organizations were benevolent and ***had no ideological intentions***. Unfortunately, some more radical organizations managed to hide behind this inflow to set up their presence in the Balkans and then tried to gain followers. For example, extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced a significant boost during the war in the country when several thousand Mujahedeen joined the Bosniak side of the war<sup>9</sup>.

Currently, the Balkans is a region of potential vulnerability to the phenomenon of foreign fighters and violent extremism. The “9-11 Commission<sup>10</sup>”, as far back as 2010, has warned that the countries of the Balkan region face challenges presented by the presence of extremist groups<sup>11</sup>, and that was even before the emergence of ISIS.<sup>12</sup>

However, it is interesting to note that when one takes out of the equation terrorist attacks connected to the armed conflicts that occurred in the countries which succeeded former Yugoslavia, there simply have not been many. Also, when these type of attacks have occurred, they have mostly been of a lone wolf character where no particular group committed the attacks. We can also see that there have been no major attacks with many casualties. The fact that no major religiously motivated terrorist networks

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<sup>7</sup> “Countering Islamist Radicals In Eastern Europe”, pg2. Gyorgy Lederer. Accessed December 20<sup>th</sup> 2015

<http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/testimony/33.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> “No widespread support for religious extremists in Macedonia and the Balkans” Filip Stojkovski, Analytica Think Tank. Accessed December 20<sup>th</sup> 2015

[http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/Commentary/comm201509\\_63a40.pdf](http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/Commentary/comm201509_63a40.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> “Bosnia: The cradle of modern jihadism?”. BBC. July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33345618>

<sup>10</sup> The 9-11 Commission was an independent bipartisan commission which was created by U.S Congress, with the approval of former U.S President George W. Bush. Its main purpose was to prepare a full and complete account of the circumstances surrounding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. It was also mandated to provide recommendations that would mitigate the threat of future attacks.

<sup>11</sup> 111th CONGRESS 2d Session H. R. 4728 IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES “Text of the Balkan Counter-Extremism and Security Act”. March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010. Accessed December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/111/hr4728/text>

<sup>12</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Official website, frozen on September 20, 2014. Currently a Federal record managed on behalf of the National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed on December 21<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<http://www.9-11commission.gov/>

have been created shows that extremist groups in the past could not mobilize supporters and therefore have been relatively weak.

## 2.1 Foreign Fighters

Even though the threat from violent extremism has not been high, it is important to note that the threat is, however, gradually increasing. One recent development that has gained attention is the issue of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans, who are mainly fighting in Syria and Iraq. Due to the complexity of the phenomenon, it is difficult to give an accurate estimate of the number of foreign fighters from Macedonia and the rest of the Balkans. However, the threat they pose to the region has been estimated to be a real one, and this has led relevant authorities to adapt new regulations on countering violent extremism.

According to the information presented by the President of Macedonia, Gjorgje Ivanov on June 22nd, 2016, there are 110 fighters from Macedonia in Syria, and additionally to that 25 have been killed in Syria, and 86 fighters have already returned to Macedonia<sup>13</sup>. Of the foreign fighters from Macedonia 3 are female, while 3 other foreign fighters, who are have taken their immediate family to Syria<sup>14</sup>. According to numbers from the Soufan Group, Kosovo and Bosnia had 232 and 330 cases respectively.<sup>15</sup> The issue of violent extremism and foreign fighters is therefore high on the agendas of Macedonia and other Balkan countries.

These numbers might seem high, but one should remember there is a total of 6.5 million Muslims living in the countries of Western Balkans. This shows that, as a percentage, the number of Balkan Muslims joining these groups is not too alarming. The Kosovo Center for Security Studies in their "Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq" provided stats on the number of fighters from countries in the world. Kosovo and Bosnia have 125 and 85 foreign fighters per one million citizens. This puts these two countries the highest ranking countries on the list provided by KCSS. However, when putting these numbers in terms of foreign fighters per Muslim population (per million), Kosovo and Bosnia are not even in the top 10 on the same list.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Website of the President of the Republic of Macedonia. "Speech by the President Ivanov" June 22nd 2016. Accessed on July 13th, 2016.

<http://www.president.go.mk/mk/2011-06-17-09-55-07/2011-07-19-10-40-39/3849.html>

<sup>14</sup> Interview with high ranking official in UBK. Conducted on 19.07.2016

<sup>15</sup> Newsweek. "Report: Number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria double to 31000". August 12th, 2015. Accessed on November 25th, 2015.

<http://europe.newsweek.com/foreign-fighters-syria-and-iraq-double-31000-86-countries-report-402084?rm=eu>

<sup>16</sup> The Kosovo Center for Security Studies "Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq". Pg25, table 1. April 2015. Accessed on November 29th, 2015.

An interesting phenomenon is that at first some of these fighters from the Western Balkans did not actually go on religious grounds as is often assumed, but actually joined the fight in solidarity against what they believed to be despotic governments in Syria and Iraq<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, they joined more moderate groups, such as the Free Syrian Army.

The fighters who join extremist groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra have been condemned by both political and religious authorities in the Western Balkans. The head of Bosnia's Islamic Community, Husein Kavazovic, denounced ISIS, saying "there is not 'but' in condemning those crimes"<sup>18</sup> and asked authorities to strip Bosnian ISIS fighters of their citizenship. The Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia was also quick to condemn the Charlie Hebdo attacks, stating, "This attack has nothing to do with Islam. We believe that there is no religion in the world that justifies these acts"<sup>19</sup>.

## 2.2 Violent extremism with Macedonian roots

The issue of foreign fighters is not a new phenomenon for Macedonia. Citizens of Macedonia in very small numbers have been *fighting in foreign wars* for the past several decades. There are reported cases of individuals joining groups that have been fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan and Pakistan<sup>20</sup>.

Initial alarms in regards to violent extremism were recently raised in Macedonia when reports started coming out about citizens of Macedonia being killed in Syria while fighting for extremist groups. The first report of a citizen of Macedonia being killed fighting in Syria broke in May 2013<sup>21</sup>, and it came as a surprise to the wider public. 28-year-old R.Z, from a village near Gostivar, had been killed while fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. A further shock to the public was when in one of the ISIS propaganda video released on June 12<sup>th</sup> 2014, there could be seen a group of

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<sup>17</sup> Prishtina Insight. Macedonia's ISIS recruits linked to top leaders. March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Accessed on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<http://prishtinainsight.com/exclusive-details-macedonias-isis-recruits/>

<sup>18</sup> Newsmax. "Muslim Clerics Lash out at ISIS Over Pilot's Execution". February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Accessed on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015. <http://www.newsmax.com/World/GlobalTalk/islamuslim-clerics-lash-out/2015/02/06/id/623249/>

<sup>19</sup> Voice of America-Macedonia. Borjan Jovanovski "Македонија реагира на нападот во Шарли ебдо (Macedonia reacts to Charlie Hebdo attack)"., January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Accessed on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015. <http://mk.voanews.com/content/voa-macedonian-macedonia-reactions-charlie-paris/2590750.html>

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Toni Jakimovski- Former National Counter-Terrorism coordinator. Conducted on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Utrinski. "Гостиварец загина во Сирија( A man from Gostivar has died in Syria)". May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Accessed on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015.

<http://www.utrinski.mk/?ItemID=3125F63C9C8F31489EE8E3A3F7E8E7A6>

ISIS fighters tearing up what appears to be their passports (one of which was a Macedonian passport and also two Kosovo passports) and renouncing their national and ethnic identities <sup>22</sup>.

These fighters pose a threat to the countries they return to. In his policy brief “*We Did Criminalize It-Now What<sup>23</sup>? Western Balkans’ Response to the Foreign Fighters Threat*” Andreja Bogdanovski gives several reasons why they do pose a threat. Three of his most significant reasons are: they can act as a medium for recruitment, they have received fighting and terrorism skills, and finally, they can act as lone wolves. While not all of these individuals will take the path of violence when they return to their native countries, it is important to address the issue due to the potential magnitude of the damage they *can* cause.

Most of the recruiting by groups like ISIS is not done through a central unit; it is performed at the grassroots level, which is the case in Macedonia as well. Finally, it is crucial to note that even if foreign fighters do not return to their countries, they still pose a threat with the possibility of radicalizing others online, which can be done from anywhere in the world.

The strategy of Macedonia predominantly focuses on executive and judicial powers, with little to no community engagement. Macedonian authorities tend to securitize the issue, and look at it mainly from a law-enforcement point of view. That is demonstrated by the fact that there is no separate CVE strategy, but rather CVE is seen as a part of the broader counter-terrorism strategy.

The topic of radicalization and violent extremism has also been high on the agenda of institutions in the country. President Ivanov after a meeting with representatives from Macedonia’s Islamic Religious Community (IRC) underscored the threat that Macedonia faces in terms of radicalization, adding that Macedonia’s limited resources are being spent on handling the refugees and migrants, which allows Macedonian authorities to work only on prevention of escalation of radicalization instead of dealing with the issue<sup>24</sup> at its roots.

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<sup>22</sup> Brif. “Џихадист од Македонија го искина пасошот(Jihadist from Macedonia rips up his passport)” Accessed on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015.  
<http://brif.mk/?p=154809>

<sup>23</sup> Andreja Bogdanovski, Analytica Think Tank. “We did criminalize it- now what? Western Balkans response to the foreign fighters threat”. September 2014. Accessed on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015.  
[http://www.analyticamk.org/images/stories/files/2014/Foreign\\_Fighters.pdf](http://www.analyticamk.org/images/stories/files/2014/Foreign_Fighters.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> MKD МК. “Иванов: И Исламската верска заедница треба да се вклучи во справувањето со радикализацијата (Ivanov- Islamic religious community should join in on tackling radicalization)” December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015. Accessed on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015.  
<http://m.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/ivanov-i-islamската-verska-zaednica-treba-da-se-vkluchi-vo-spravuvanje-so>

IRC has also publically spoken out against ISIS, stating that ISIS does not represent Islam and that IRC have always been against these wars. They condemned all forms of violence and extremism, noting that terrorism, especially when done in the name of religion, will not be tolerated<sup>25</sup>.

It is important to note that the number of foreign fighters from Macedonia has been on the decline. This could be partially due to the fact that *one of the top* recruiters for ISIS, Rexhep Memishi, has been arrested<sup>26</sup>. However, this does not mean that extremist ideas have stopped circulating. It is likely that, due to the government crackdown on recruitment for foreign groups, extremists have gone incognito, and either started traveling to Syria and Iraq more carefully or simply focused on strengthening their domestic support.

## 2.3 Citizens of Macedonia convicted abroad

There have been several cases of citizens of Macedonia being convicted or arrested in overseas countries on grounds of participation in foreign extremist groups, or of recruitment for the same. The most famous case is that of Muhamed Zekiri from Ohrid, who was sentenced to life in prison in Turkey on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016<sup>27</sup>. Zekiri and three other fighters were coming back from a training camp in Syria when they were stopped at a checkpoint in Anatolia (Turkey). They opened fire and killed two police officers and a truck driver. Another Macedonian citizen, A.V, was arrested near Venice (Italy) for recruitment for ISIS. During the police operation they had found out that several jihadists recruited by A.V<sup>28</sup> and the rest of his network had already travelled to Syria from Italy. Among them there were two Bosnians and one citizen of Macedonia living abroad.

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<sup>25</sup> Telegraf MK. “ИБЗ: ИСИС не го претставува Исламот (IRC- ISIS does not represent Islam)”. August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Accessed on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015.  
<http://www.telegraf.mk/aktuelno/makedonija/ns-newsarticle-295793-IRC-isis-ne-go-pretstavuva-islamot.nspix>

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Toni Jakimovski - Former National Counter-Terrorism coordinator. Conducted on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015.

<sup>27</sup>Radio Free Europe on Macedonian language. ‘Three members of ISIS convicted in Turkey’. June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Accessed on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016.  
<http://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/27801582.html>

<sup>28</sup> Ansa in English. ‘Macedonian arrested for recruiting jihadists’. February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Accessed on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016. [http://www.ansa.it/english/news/2016/02/26/police-arrest-macedonian-for-recruiting-mujahideen-4\\_b006fe25-c144-4e29-8b23-8edabc2dabcd.html](http://www.ansa.it/english/news/2016/02/26/police-arrest-macedonian-for-recruiting-mujahideen-4_b006fe25-c144-4e29-8b23-8edabc2dabcd.html)



## 2.4 Wider agenda

It is reported that aspiring fighters who have been banned from flying have driven or taken buses through the Balkans in order to get to Turkey. It is crucial for regional authorities to cooperate with each other and with other Western countries in order to prevent these individuals from reaching their final destinations<sup>29</sup>. Cooperation should rest on sharing intelligence, while at the same time building trust among authorities.

When it comes to intercepting terrorist travel, information sharing is the backbone of a strong security posture. The sheer volume of jihadist travelers has made it difficult for authorities to keep track of individuals who pose a threat and to turn attention away from those who do not. An important tool could potentially be Interpol's "foreign terrorist fighter" analytic file which is available to all 190 INTERPOL countries, where every member country can join the database and can screen against it to detect foreign fighters attempting to enter their territory. There are however complaints that some member countries are withholding information, or simply not sharing it fast enough<sup>30</sup>. Macedonian authorities claim that they utilize the Interpol database and update information on it on a regular basis<sup>31</sup>. However, President Ivanov has also stated that Macedonia has a lack of access to EU databases on foreign fighters<sup>32</sup>.

Macedonia, since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, has joined other western governments in supporting the efforts of the international community to put an end to the violence. Macedonia joins the international community in condemning the use of chemical weapons by the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Macedonia has stated that such atrocities must not remain unpunished<sup>33</sup>. Macedonia is also a part of the anti-ISIS coalition<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> International Business Times. "How foreign fighters joining ISIS travel to the Islamic State Group's Caliphate". March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015. Accessed on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015. <http://www.ibtimes.com/how-foreign-fighters-joining-isis-travel-islamic-state-groups-caliphate-1833812>

<sup>30</sup> Interpol. "Interpol Chief says 'unprecedented' foreign terrorist fighter threat requires global action". May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Accessed on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015. <http://www.interpol.int/News-and-media/News/2015/N2015-067>

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of Interior, Information obtained by utilizing the Law on free access to public information sent on 21.12, request nr 233/15

<sup>32</sup> Makfax, Ivanov: EU needs stable and secure third countries <http://makfax.com.mk/makedonija/nadvoresna-politika/ivanov-na-eu-i-se-potrebn-stabilni-i-bezbedni-treti-zemji> Makfaks. 'Иванов: На ЕУи се потребни безбедни и стабилни трети држави (Ivanov: E.U Needs safe and stable neighboring countries)'. September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> A1On. "Македонија ги осудува насилствата во Сирија (Macedonia condemns violence in Syria)". August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015. Accessed on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015. <http://a1on.mk/wordpress/archives/198349>

<sup>34</sup> The Washington Post. 'What the 60 members of the anti Islamic State coalition are doing'. September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Accessed on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/check-point/wp/2014/09/25/what-the-60-members-of-the-anti-islamic-state-coalition-are-doing/>

Many have questioned the security implications of the refugee crisis on the Balkans, as it is a main transit area for the refugees. There have been speculations that there is a significant number of extremists amongst the refugees, which helped bring about the decision to close the borders. Also, dealing with the refugee crisis is an additional strain on the already limited resources the authorities have. Having to divert resources into handling the migrants and preventing illegal crossings could mean that there will be insufficient resources for surveillance of all individuals suspected of being radicalized.

The refugees themselves, however, are fleeing war and extremism. They do not support the extremist groups; as a matter of fact, they are fleeing from them. These violent groups also already have a significant number of sympathizers in Europe, and it is hard to conceive that terrorists would take the migrant journey, which consists of thousands of kilometers of rough traveling. A more credible threat would perhaps be the gradual radicalization *of individuals* from the Syrian refugee community living in Europe, which will most likely be attempted over time by radical preachers who are already there. However it is important to note that one of the attackers from the November 2015 Paris attacks, who is an E.U national, had apparently travelled the migrant route coming back from Syria using a fake passport<sup>35</sup>. This would mean that the possibility of there being terrorists amongst the migrants, although low, does exist. It is difficult for government authorities along the migrant route to screen all the migrants effectively due to the migrants' sheer numbers and the limited resources and capacities of the authorities. It is necessary for better information sharing and cooperation to be established between the countries along the migrant route when it comes to screening of the refugees and migrants as terrorists could be hidden among them.

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<sup>35</sup> BBC. 'Paris Attacks: Who are the attackers?'. April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Accessed on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34832512>

### 3. Legal and Institutional Response

#### 3.1 Defining Countering Violent Extremism/ Preventing Violent Extremism

Countering violent extremism is a complex process that requires the involvement of a number of institutions (state, local, religious), and civil society together with the local communities. CVE requires a holistic approach with all relevant actors, and not only security institutions. Only with such a holistic approach can one uncover and then address the factors that drive people onto and then along the path of violent extremism. In the process of CVE, cooperation between all actors involved is crucial. For this cooperation to be at the required level, there must initially be a certain level of trust amongst the stakeholders.

When talking about CVE, the first association for many people is law enforcement and the criminal justice system. One key aspect of CVE is updating existing laws to better address the phenomenon of foreign fighters and the violent extremism that leads to terrorism. The criminal justice system must be able to respond to activities connected to terrorism with fair and effective investigation, prosecution, and punishment in the unfortunate event that they occur<sup>36</sup>. It is also necessary to have an approach that includes preventive measures such as prosecuting individuals for attempt, solicitation, financing, recruitment, and training.

Although the law enforcement aspect is always important, preventive measures are equally if not more important. It is important that more focus is put on other aspects such as “building community resilience to radicalization, promoting counter-narratives, promoting the role of youth and women as civil society leaders, [and] elevating the role of moderate religious voices<sup>37</sup>”. This is significant, as it makes it more difficult for extremists to approach and be able to recruit people for their cause.

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<sup>36</sup>Global Counterterrorism Forum. “The Rabat Memorandum of Good Practices for Effective Counterterrorism Practice in the Criminal Justice Sector”. May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Accessed on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<https://www.thegctf.org/documents/10162/38299/Rabat+Memorandum-English>

<sup>37</sup> U.S Department of State “U.S State Department and USAID Supported Initiatives to Counter Violent Extremism”. February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Accessed on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/02/237647.htm>

### 3.2 The Legal framework for CVE in Macedonia

Policymakers in Macedonia, in line with the countries from the Western Balkans and other European countries, decided to update its laws in order to more appropriately combat foreign fighter recruitment.<sup>38</sup>

Although Macedonia's legal framework did contain counterterrorism provisions before the revision, there were no special provisions that criminalized the participation in and recruitment for foreign armies. Macedonia's legislation covering the area of terrorism primarily comes from Article 394-a, 394-b, 394-c of the Criminal Code<sup>39</sup> and the Law on the prevention of money laundering and financing of terrorism<sup>40</sup>.

With the development of the war in Syria, the phenomenon of foreign fighters became an important issue, as countries all over the globe dealt with the issue of citizens joining these groups. Combating the phenomenon of foreign fighters and violent extremism became a top priority for the international community. Therefore it was important to have amendments to the existing laws that would specifically address the issue of foreign fighters.

According to the amendments that were adopted on September 3, 2014, article 322-a now states that joining foreign military or paramilitary forces or recruiting, training, or transporting fighters in any way is punishable by law with a prison sentence of a minimum of 5 years.<sup>41</sup> The law does not apply retroactively. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the prison sentence varies from no less than 3 years for joining foreign groups to 1-10 years for recruitment for such groups<sup>42</sup>, while in Kosovo it is higher and reaches up to 15 years<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Kosovo passed The Law on the Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory in March 2015, Serbia added amendments in regards to foreign fighters to the Criminal Code in October 2014

<sup>39</sup> Republic of Macedonia, Criminal Code. "Article 394-a. Accessed on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016. [https://www.unodc.org/res/cld/document/mkd/1996/criminal\\_code\\_html/FYROM\\_Criminal\\_Code.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/cld/document/mkd/1996/criminal_code_html/FYROM_Criminal_Code.pdf) pg 155-157

<sup>40</sup> Directorate for financial intelligence "Law for prevention of money laundering and financing of terrorism". Accessed on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://ufr.gov.mk/files/docs/Zakon.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Article 322-a from the Macedonian Criminal Code

<sup>42</sup> BiH Criminal Code article 162 b. Accessed on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://www.coe.int/t/dlapil/co-dexter/Country%20Profiles/Legislation/BiH%20Criminal%20Code%20Article%20162b%20-%20draft.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Library of Congress. "Treatment of Foreign Fighters in Selected Jurisdictions: Country Surveys. Accessed on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016 [https://www.loc.gov/law/help/foreign-fighters/country-surveys.php#\\_ftn162](https://www.loc.gov/law/help/foreign-fighters/country-surveys.php#_ftn162)

In the Macedonian law it is specified that there will be no punishment for individuals who have citizenship from the countries in whose regular military or police formations he/she participates, or is a member of military formations that are under control of internationally recognized governments or international organizations.

However, fighters that are joining moderate rebels in Syria, like those joining the armies of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition forces, which have been recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by 89 countries, but not Macedonia, still face the same legal consequences as those who join extremist groups. It is important for legislation to be flexible and up to date with latest developments from the battlefields of the world when it comes to the phenomenon of foreign fighters, due to the complexity of the situation. There have been several cases where the public prosecutors of countries in the EU even allowed its citizens to join groups that are fighting against ISIS, one of them being a case where several members from a biker group from Netherlands called “No surrender” joined the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Iraq<sup>44</sup>.

In order to prevent prospective foreign fighters from joining the fight, Macedonian authorities will not allow travel out of the country for individuals suspected of having ties with foreign extremist groups.<sup>45</sup>

The strategies of Macedonia and other countries from the Western Balkans predominantly focus on executive and judicial powers, with little to no focus on community engagement. This is a problem as it does not incorporate prevention of radicalization, but only deals with the consequences of it. Community engagement is necessary for addressing the root of the problems, getting an insight into why people take violent extremist paths, and being able to work on preventing radicalization.

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<sup>44</sup> The Australian “Dutch and German biker gangs join the Kurds in the battle against ISIS”. Accessed on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/the-times/dutch-and-german-biker-gangs-join-the-kurds-in-the-battle-against-isis/news-story/1db5987bd89956ce78f39405a38387e0>

<sup>45</sup> Ministry of Interior, Information obtained by utilizing the Law on free access to public information sent on 22.03.2016, request number 7410/2.



### 3.3 Institutional response

#### 3.3.1 Ministry of Interior

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) in Macedonia is responsible for the law enforcement aspect of CVE, which makes up the largest part of the CVE efforts undertaken by the Macedonian authorities. The **Directorate for Security and Counterintelligence** (UBK), the country's internal intelligence agency, when it comes to this issue, is in charge of gathering intelligence and monitoring individuals suspected of supporting violent extremists groups in any way, having joined the fight, planning to join the fight, or recruiting for the groups.

One institutional challenge according to an advisor in MOI is that currently MOI is too focused on gathering intelligence through SIGINT (intelligence gathering by interception of signals), and have therefore a lack of capacity for HUMINT<sup>46</sup>(the collection of intelligence through human sources). HUMINT in the case of CVE is very significant. An additional challenge is the lack of personnel who speak Arabic, which can be a major hindrance in gathering intelligence.<sup>47</sup>

The MOI of Macedonia seems to be a step behind its counterparts in Kosovo. The MOI in Kosovo has developed their CVE strategy in consultation with the relevant CSOs in Kosovo, which was not the case in Macedonia. It is a positive sign that the Kosovo CSOs claim that authorities view them as equal partners in CVE and highly value their input.<sup>48</sup> Kosovo's authorities were also more responsive on the topic and transparent in their dealings. The office for information of the Kosovo police answered to our CVE related questions via email, and in a matter of days, while obtaining any information from the MOI of Macedonia proved to be a very challenging process.

#### 3.3.2 Directorate for Security and Counterintelligence (UBK)

Macedonia's counterintelligence service UBK is very significant to the law-enforcement aspect of CVE in that it performs activities related to protection from terrorism, primarily through domestic intelligence collection. It is important for UBK to have sound intelligence on what individuals with an affiliation with and affinity for violent extremism are up to and whether they present a concrete threat to national security.

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with an advisor in MOI. Conducted on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015 .

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Sinisa Aleksovski, security advisor in the Cabinet of the President. Conducted on 21<sup>st</sup> December, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Lulzim Peci, Executive Director of KIPRED. Conducted on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

It is especially important for UBK's mission of monitoring the activities of foreign fighters that have returned to Macedonia before the law on criminalizing participation in foreign armies was passed in 2014. Most of the foreign fighters returned prior to the passage of this law. As these individuals cannot be put under trial, the UBK is only able to monitor their activities and social circles to determine whether they pose a threat<sup>49</sup>.

Apart from the repressive and reactive side, the UBK have also worked to a smaller extent on the prevention side of the issue, where they try to dissuade individuals from joining foreign extremist groups through engaging in conversation with their families or even through contact with potential foreign fighters. So far they have managed to dissuade 6 individuals through engagement<sup>50</sup>. However, they cannot be the only responsible actor in prevention, and even within the UBK there is a consensus that a coherent prevention strategy is missing from other relevant institutions<sup>51</sup>.

UBK officials claim to have very solid cooperation with other security institutions from Macedonia on the matter, and say they are constantly in touch with other institutions to inform them of any possible threats. They have in the past informed the Ministry of Education that several high school and elementary teachers in Macedonia have been linked to local extremist groups<sup>52</sup> and therefore present the potential danger of trying to indoctrinate their students.

It is interesting to note that UBK has had discussions on CVE-related matters with the mayor of Skopje, but not with the mayors of municipalities that are most vulnerable, like Cair<sup>53</sup>. Such discussions should be encouraged as they could lead to better cooperation and information sharing.

### **3.3.3 National Counter-Terrorism coordinator body**

In order to better address the complexity of countering terrorism and violent extremism, Macedonian authorities created the position of Counter-Terrorism Coordinator body. It is intended for the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator body to be an independent group that will work on countering terrorism and have employees from various institutions (MOI, Intelligence Agency, Military Intelligence, Customs, Public Revenue Office, and the Public Prosecution) working in it and sharing knowledge, experience and information<sup>54</sup>. This body will work on recognizing the forms of terrorist threats to Macedonia, and deciding on what measures should be undertaken as a response.

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with high ranking official in UBK. Conducted on 19.07.2016

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Toni Jakimovski. Former National Counter-Terrorism coordinator. Conducted on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016

On March 15<sup>th</sup> 2016 the National strategy for combating terrorism was approved by the government. A major challenge could be the fact that there is no separate CVE strategy, as the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator body puts CVE within the strategy for combating terrorism. This approach of securitization of the issue could prove to be a hindrance in the long-term efforts in CVE. There are no significant efforts for creating counter-narratives and raising awareness, which was noted in the State Department's country reports on terrorism 2015.<sup>55</sup>

On a more positive note, there are alleged plans to include other relevant state institutions like the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy as well as civil society and religious institutions in the action plan that this body is working on. It is an encouraging sign that the importance of these actors has been recognized. It is also encouraging that authorities intend on working with non-violent radicals, who can be of significant assistance in the process of CVE.

Another positive development is that the national Counter-Terrorism coordinator body also plans on recommending measures for resocialization and reintegration of violent extremists, as well as the education of civil servants who work in the education sector and correctional facilities. At the moment this position is vacant, and there is no available information on whether it will be filled out any time soon.

## Operation Cell

Macedonian authorities, as a part of the battle against violent extremism, launched an operation dubbed "Cell."<sup>56</sup> As a part of this operation, on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, they arrested 9 individuals under suspicion of organizing and recruiting fighters for foreign armies. 27 other individuals were unreachable, and 20 of them were presumed to have joined ISIS in Syria. The MOI executed raids in the cities of Skopje, Gostivar, Tetovo, Kumanovo and Struga. They searched several private houses, NGOs, an internet-café, and a mosque. They also arrested an imam who according to the police was the person behind the recruitment of individuals for joining extremist groups. The police also seized a number of items during these raids, including desktop computers, laptops, tablets, memory cards, a gun, travel documents, and other similar items.

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<sup>55</sup> U.S Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. "Country Reports on Terrorism 2015". Accessed on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016.  
<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257516.htm>

<sup>56</sup> 24 Vesti. 'Полициска акција 'ќелија' на МВР, уапсени 9 терористи, 27 се во бегство'(Police operation 'Cell', 9 terrorists arrested, 27 on the run). August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Last accessed on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016.  
<http://24vesti.mk/policiskata-akcija-%E2%80%9CEkjelija%E2%80%9C-na-mvr-uapseni-9-teroristi-27-se-vo-begstvo>

On the same day that Operation Cell took place, the US Embassy in Skopje expressed its support for it, claiming that this action presents a significant contribution to the regional and global efforts to put an end to terrorism. They also stated that from the information they possess, this operation was carried out after a long and careful investigation by the police and in accordance with the new anti-terrorism amendments to the law<sup>57</sup>.

It was very important for this operation to be carried out carefully, as Macedonia is a society where inter-ethnic relations are still fragile and any wrongdoings against particular religious groups can be problematic and create tensions. Following this line of thinking was a statement by the IRC, where they support the fight against violent extremism, reminding everyone that IRC should be seen as a partner in this fight, but cautiously warning that Macedonian authorities should not politicize the agenda<sup>58</sup>. Since the arrests on August 6<sup>th</sup> 2015, eight more suspects have been found and arrested, the latest one being on October 21<sup>st</sup> 2015.<sup>59</sup>

MOI launched operation "Cell 2" on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016 and arrested 4 individuals suspected of participating in foreign paramilitary organizations<sup>60</sup>. The suspects were aged 23-38 and had combat experience from their time in Syria, which could potentially be a threat to the security of Macedonia and the region.

One critique of the operation is its tardiness. IRC had been asking for police assistance since August 2014, after they publicly admitted that they have no control over several mosques in Macedonia and that radical preachers had started operating in those mosques<sup>61</sup>.

The authorities from other countries in the region launched these kinds of operations for the suppression of networks for recruitment a year earlier than Macedonia. Kosovar authorities, on August 11<sup>th</sup> 2014, arrested 40 individuals suspected of having links to ISIS and al-Nusra<sup>62</sup>, while Bosnian authorities arrested 15 people on suspicion

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<sup>57</sup> Telma. "Амбасада на САД во Македонија ја поздравил акцијата 'Ќелија' (U.S Embassy supports operation 'Cell')". August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Accessed on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<http://telma.com.mk/vesti/ambasada-na-sad-vo-makedonija-ja-pozdravi-akcijata-kjelija>

<sup>58</sup> Voice of America in Macedonian language. "Реакции на операцијата 'Ќелија' (Reactions to operation 'Cell')". August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Accessed on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://mk.voanews.com/content/article/2906454.html>

<sup>59</sup> Telma. "Полицијата уапси македонски припадник на ИСИС (Police have arrested an ISIS member from Macedonia)". October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015. Accessed on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<http://telma.com.mk/vesti/policijata-uapsi-makedonski-pripadnik-na-isis>

<sup>60</sup> Vecer. "Детали за операција 'Ќелија 2' (Details on operation 'Cell 2')". July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Accessed on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<http://vecer.mk/makedonija/detali-za-kjelija-2-eve-koi-se-uapsenite-pominale-voeno-teroristichka-obuka-vo-sirija>

<sup>61</sup> 24 vesti. "ИВЗ не контролира две џамии, бара помош од МВР (IRC has no control over two mosques, asks for assistance from MOI)". August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Accessed on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<http://24vesti.mk/IRC-ne-kontrolira-dve-dzhamii-bara-pomosh-od-mvr>

<sup>62</sup> BBC. "Kosovo police net Iraq and Syria 'militant' suspects". August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Accessed on January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

of financing terrorism and recruiting fighters on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014.<sup>63</sup> In this period there was growing criticism towards Macedonian authorities for not undertaking any similar repressive actions. Another critique has been the lack of transparency in the aftermath of Operation Cell. Very limited information has been given to the public on the process against the suspects. A lack of transparency can lead to unnecessary doubts amongst the civilian population about the motivation behind the action, sparking fears amongst people that it might be a politically-motivated process.

## Operation Cell trial

On March 25<sup>th</sup> 2016, 6 of the suspects in operation 'Cell' were sentenced to time in prison at the first open court session on this case. These 6 individuals pleaded guilty and reached a settlement with the prosecution. On May 16<sup>th</sup> 5 other suspects (Isa Fuga, Abdulah Abdulahi, Erol Rustemi, Muhamed Imeri, and Stefan Stefanovski) also pleaded guilty, despite initially pleading not guilty. Below is a profile of the 11 convicted individuals.

**Rexhep Memishi**, 36, an imam from the infamous Tutunsus mosque in Skopje. Sentenced to 7 years in jail for recruitment for foreign paramilitary organizations subject to article 322-a of the criminal code. Memishi, who is married and has two children, has no prior criminal record. He is considered the main recruiter for ISIS in Macedonia.

**Ahmet Darlishta**, a 31 year old government employee was sentenced to 5 and a half years in prison for organizing and financing recruitment and transportation for foreign paramilitary organizations subject to article 322-a of the criminal code.

**Sejfula Evdemovski**, 32 years old, was sentenced to 5 years in prison for logistics for and attempted participation in foreign paramilitary organizations, subject to article 322-a of the criminal code. He attempted to join the fight in Syria, but was stopped at the Istanbul airport and deported back to Macedonia.

**Resulj Saiti at 22 years of age** is the youngest of all convicted. He was sentenced to 5 years in prison for logistical assistance for Macedonian citizens who joined the war in Syria subject to article 322-a of the criminal code.

**Fazli Sulja**, a 23 year old goldsmith, was sentenced to 5 years in prison for participating in foreign paramilitary organizations subject to article 322-a of the criminal code. He traveled to Syria through the Skopje airport on the 21st of February 2015. During his time there he uploaded pictures from the front to his social media profiles.

**Muhamed Shehu**, an unemployed 27 year old from Gostivar was sentenced to 5 years in prison for participating in foreign paramilitary organizations subject to article 322-a of the criminal code. Shehu has no prior criminal record and, like Fazli Sulja, uploaded pictures from the front to his social media profiles.

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<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28739084>

<sup>63</sup> Deutsche Welle. "Bosnia police arrest more than a dozen for supporting terrorism in Iraq, Syria." September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014. Accessed on January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016 . <http://www.dw.com/en/bosnia-police-arrest-more-than-a-dozen-for-supporting-terrorism-in-iraq-syria/a-17896851>



**Isa Fuga**, a 24 year old from Skopje with no prior record. Sentenced to 4 and half years in prison for participation in a foreign paramilitary organization subject to article 322-a of the criminal code.

**Abdulah Abdulahi**, a 27 year old from Tetovo who is married and is the father of 5 children. He has no prior criminal records. Sentenced to 3 years and 1 month in prison for participation in a foreign paramilitary organization subject to article 322-a of the criminal code.

**Erol Rustemi**, an unemployed 36 year old sentenced to 6 years in prison for organizing transportation for foreign fighters and also participation in a foreign paramilitary organization subject to article 322-a of the criminal code.

**Muhamed Imeri**, a 38 year old cab driver from Skopje sentenced to 2 years in prison for participation in a foreign paramilitary organization subject to article 322-a of the criminal code.

**Stefan Stefanovski** is the only ethnic Macedonian convicted in the case "cell". He is 32 years old and is a doctor. He called upon the Hypocratic oath during the trial, saying that there is nothing wrong in providing medical assistance to people regardless of their faith, race, and nationality. He is sentenced to two years in prison for participation in a foreign paramilitary organization subject to article 322-a of the criminal code.

Sources: [www.akademik.mk](http://www.akademik.mk)<sup>64</sup>; [www.faktor.mk](http://www.faktor.mk)<sup>65</sup>

The diversity of the profiles of the convicted in operation 'Cell', goes to show that the path to violent extremism is not always found by specific types of people with certain types of past. This to a certain extent debunks the assumption that violent extremists and foreign fighters come from poverty, are not well educated and have prior criminal records. We see that these attributes, although true in some cases, are not a given. The fact that there is a doctor, a government employee, a goldsmith, as well as both very young and more mature people, shows the difficulty and the mistake of pinpointing a certain category of people.

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<sup>64</sup> Akamedik. "Случај 'Ќелија': Казни затвор од 5 до 7 години за признание за учество во паравоена формација (Case "Cell": 5 to 7 years in prison for confession of participation in paramilitary formation)". March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Accessed on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://www.akademik.mk/sluchaj-kjelija-kazni-zatvor-od-5-do-7-godini-za-priznanie-za-uchestvo-vo-paravoena-formatsija/>

<sup>65</sup> Faktor. "Случај 'Ќелија': Ќе се оценува дали ќе има судење за осомничените исламски регрутори. (Case 'Cell': Evaluation on whether there will be a trial for the Islamic recruiters.)" March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Accessed on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://faktor.mk/2016/03/25/sluchaj-kelija-ke-se-otsenuva-dali-ke-ima-sudene-za-osomnichenite-islamski-regrutatori/>

### 3.3.4 Intelligence Agency

**“The Agency has established and is continually developing appropriate mechanisms for prevention, anticipation, early warning and risks estimation. It informs the state authorities of the Republic of Macedonia about the processes that generate threats for national security and for the permanent and vital principles in order to establish a stable secure environment and sustainable long-term development. ”**

*Source: Website of the Intelligence Agency. <http://ia.gov.mk/nadelzni.html>*

Agencija za razuznavanje (AR) is Macedonia's external intelligence gathering agency. AR collects intelligence and information, outside of the territory of Macedonia, that is of importance to the security of Macedonia. It is important that AR is involved in CVE, as they can obtain information on Macedonian citizens travelling for the purpose of joining foreign armies and paramilitary formations and evaluate the risk of foreign citizens travelling to Macedonia (determine whether they have ties with extremist groups). It is important that AR's information sharing process with UBK and MOI is at an adequate level, so that the latter two institutions can react to information obtained by AR.

AR has been following the developments of radicalization and violent extremism for years, and have a special directorate that deals with this matter. AR gathers information through bilateral cooperation with partner and friendly agencies and through multilateral intelligence sharing within the south-east European intelligence community<sup>66</sup>. When AR gets information about Macedonian citizens in Syria, or those who are travelling there, they share this information with UBK and MOI, unless this information cannot be shared due to their having obtained it through specific intelligence sharing agreements with foreign agencies.

According to AR, sharing of intelligence on the topic of foreign fighters and violent extremists in the region is at a good level, which cannot be said for intelligence sharing on other topics.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with employee in AR. Conducted on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016

<sup>67</sup> Interview with employee in AR. Conducted on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016

### 3.3.5 OSCE Mission to Skopje

Since 2011, the OSCE's Mission in Skopje has supported the strengthening of the capacities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in combating terrorism by providing training courses in key areas including 'Prevention of radicalization and recruitment of potential terrorists.

At the end of 2014, OSCE in Macedonia started a project that focuses on early detection of radicalization. The project is based on the CoPPRa (Community Policing and Prevention of Radicalization) a project that has been in action since 2010 to help develop tools for CVE through early detection of radicalization. For those purposes there was a work group created that consisted of the UBK and uniformed police. It is important that OSCE was able to bring the UBK and uniformed police together. This working group made handbooks and manuals for teaching first responders about the signs of radicalization<sup>68</sup>.

The project centers on training police officers who will proceed to train their colleagues and share the knowledge they have received. Recognizing radicalization in the early stages is crucial as it is much easier to dissuade someone from committing acts of terror if that individual is still in the early phase of radicalization. This is the phase where the individuals still have not committed any acts of violence and they might not even contemplate going down the path of violence. It is important not to treat these individuals as terrorists or discriminate against and isolate them. Instead the focus should be on helping them develop critical thinking skills, which can help them challenge the radical narrative that they have been attracted to.

Four trainers and twenty high ranking police officers from the Ministry of Interior went through a one-year training within the Community policing and prevention of radicalization program. This is a positive development, as these 24 individuals have received adequate training in recognizing potential signs of terrorism or extremism in the communities they work in.

Unfortunately, at the moment the OSCE in Skopje is not engaging the local communities, but it is in their plans. The OSCE intends to expand their project to include all pillars of the community, such as religious leaders, teachers, and parents<sup>69</sup>. This is very significant, as it is crucial to engage the communities as a whole, with the objective being to involve the community in identifying and understanding problems and together working on preventive measures and solutions that would be best suited for the particular community. It is also important that there is a sense of trust between the law enforcement and the community.

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with a Senior Police Training Adviser at OSCE. Conducted on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

### 3.3.6 Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also has an important role to play in the process of CVE. The complexity of radicalization means that CVE efforts have to be coordinated between countries through regional cooperation and as part of a global strategy. States have to work both bilaterally and multilaterally to support and strengthen counter-terrorism and CVE capacities and to share good practices and lessons learned in addressing the threat. In light of this, it is expected that the MFA will join regional initiatives and work on increased cooperation in the region in terms of CVE.

Within the MFA, the Sector for International and Regional Political/Security Cooperation is in charge of the cooperation with countries from the region on the topic of CVE. At the meetings of the Adriatic 5 group<sup>70</sup>, of which Macedonia is a member, the issue of foreign fighters and CVE is always high on the agenda.<sup>71</sup> Macedonia is also a member of the EU Western Balkan counter-terrorism initiative, an EU initiative that aims to “eliminate further duplications and overlapping in countering terrorism and violent extremism activities in the Western Balkan region.”<sup>72</sup>

Macedonia is part of the U.S led anti-ISIS coalition. There is however insufficient information on how precisely Macedonia contributes to this coalition. Macedonia has similarly joined in on the EU sanctions against the Syrian government and agreed on the restrictive measures<sup>73</sup>. Other Balkan countries like Albania<sup>74</sup> and Croatia<sup>75</sup> are reported to be sending weapons to the rebels in Syria.

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<sup>70</sup> Adriatic 5 is an organization founded on May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2003, currently consisting of Croatia, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina created for the purpose of aiding their attempts to join NATO. Albania and Croatia meanwhile joined NATO on April 1<sup>st</sup> 2009.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Vilma Petkovska, Assistant Director, Directorate for Political and Security Cooperation, Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Conducted on December 15th, 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Council of the European Union. “EU Western Balkans counter-terrorism initiative: integrative plan of action”. December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Accessed on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2015/dec/eu-council-western-balkans-antiterrorism-13887-15.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> Official gazette of the Republic of Macedonia. Number 133. September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Accessed on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://www.slvesnik.com.mk/Is-sues/0d60d644027547028dfcbd154fbf180e.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> Balkan Insight. ‘Albania starts shifting weapons to Iraqi Kurds’. August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Accessed on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-starts-delivery-of-weapons-to-iraqi-kurds>

<sup>75</sup> The Telegraph. ‘US and Europe in major airlift of arms to Syrian rebels through Zagreb. March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Accessed on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.’ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9918785/US-and-Europe-in-major-airlift-of-arms-to-Syrian-rebels-through-Zagreb.html>

### 3.3.7 Islamic Religious Community (IRC)

Religious and community leaders are critical for CVE as they are often trusted community members that are well-placed within communities, in terms of community relationships but also in terms of their physical presence, and can advise and support the development of appropriate CVE initiatives. They can also recommend credible interlocutors who can participate in them<sup>76</sup>. Therefore it is important for religious leaders to be actively engaged in their communities and to spread counter-narratives. Religious leaders should also work with law-enforcement on developing appropriate counter-radicalization strategies. At this stage it is important that state institutions recognize the importance of cooperating with religious leaders in the relevant communities.

The IRC is the official Islamic religious community in Macedonia. They propagate against using violence in the name of any religion and are against using violence in the name of any religion. The IRC has been active in terms of speaking out against people joining violent groups, and has developed a proposal for a project for preventing radicalization and involvement in terrorism in cooperation with the humanitarian organization Hilal. Their project strategy is empowering moderate voices through public awareness and reaching out to the Muslim community in Macedonia, while also working on resocialization of former foreign fighters. The project intended to counter the narrative of a “distorted version of Islam” preached by radicals. The IRC believe that strengthening the religious voice that conveys what according to them is the right message of Islam to the Muslims in Macedonia should be the first and most immediate intervention within Muslim congregations<sup>77</sup>. The project proposal also contains elements of support for families who have had a member join foreign armies. These families face a major psychological burden and social exclusion from the community. The final pillar of the project is facilitation of the reintegration in society of foreign fighters that have returned to Macedonia. This project however never received the funding it required and is on hold at the moment.

IRC representatives have complained that the state authorities do not cooperate with them on the matter of CVE, and they have been invited to only one CVE-related meeting<sup>78</sup> (with President Ivanov). According to them, the high unemployment rate and overall bad economic situation for the youth in Macedonia is one of the drivers when it comes to radicalization. In a situation where young people see no hope for a better tomorrow, they are easier targets for manipulation.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Hedayah. “The roles of Families and Communities in Strengthening Community Resilience Against Violent Extremism”. May 2014. Accessed on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Preventing Radicalization and Involvement in Terrorism(STOP radTerr) Project Proposal. Humanitarian Organization Hilal

<sup>78</sup> Interview with high-ranking official in IRC Macedonia. Conducted on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016

<sup>79</sup> *ibid*



### 3.3.8 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

**Civil society organizations are not about representation, but about participation and channeling different voices within society. They can create platforms of dialogue and provide for the inclusiveness needed in society as an answer to the exclusion that might lead to violent radicalization.**

*Conclusion from the "Engaging Civil Society in Countering Violent Extremism" paper by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism-The Hague*

The civil society sector has been gaining recognition as an important actor in Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism, as it addresses and tackles conditions that make the spread of violent ideas easier, while also being able to act as a facilitator between the civilian population and the government, especially in areas where there is a lack of public trust in state institutions. The civil society sector can also act as a monitor of CVE strategy, as governments can, despite having good intentions; seriously infringe upon human rights and freedoms with their CVE tactics.

The CSOs in Macedonia, unlike CSOs in Kosovo, are not actively and fully recognized by state institutions as relevant partners in CVE. Due to this, there is little to no CSO involvement in this process. The number of CSOs working on this matter is also very limited. It is important to note that there is also a lack of knowledge on the matter within CSOs themselves. Analytica Think Tank seems to be the only organization in the country that provides insight and does research on CVE issues.

### 3.3.9 Local Municipalities

Preventing violent extremism requires a strategy of "engaging and empowering individuals and groups at the local level to build resilience against violent extremism"<sup>80</sup>. Communities have a key role to play in recognizing and combating violent extremism, as it is happening in their neighborhoods to people who are their relatives, their friends, and people they know. Therefore it is crucial to equip communities with the right tools and skills so that they can address this threat that is hurting their community.

Local authorities in Macedonia unfortunately do not have any initiatives when it comes to CVE. The local prevention councils that are set within municipalities have not functioned properly; they meet irregularly, and the issue of CVE is not on their agenda when they do meet.

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<sup>80</sup> The White House. "Empowering local partners to prevent violent extremism in the United States". August 2011. Accessed on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016.  
[https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/empowering\\_local\\_partners.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/empowering_local_partners.pdf)

## 4. Regional cooperation

This section looks into the regional dynamics of the issue of foreign fighters and radicalization that can lead to violent extremism. It highlights the importance of regional cooperation by showing how interconnected the region is when it comes to this threat. It also emphasizes the local specifics of the countries from the region.

The threat from increased radicalization and foreign fighters is a concern that all countries from the Western Balkans share. Due to the global nature of violent extremism, it is impossible for countries to deal with this issue on their own.

Increased radicalization is not only a matter of national security for individual countries; it also threatens regional stability by further polarizing religious divides in a region marred by fragile ethnic relations.

This is why regional cooperation at all levels is necessary to successfully combat the radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters. This is especially true in a region like the Western Balkans, where countries share similar security problems. The authorities in the region also face shared challenges aside from the foreign fighters problem, like organized crime, corruption, nationalism, high unemployment rates especially among the youth, and more.

A positive development is that it seems that the entire region is on the same page when it comes to making efforts to combat the phenomena of foreign fighters and violent extremism. The countries of the region have amended their Criminal Codes in similar ways, as well as other legal mechanisms permitting intervention that are aimed at stemming the recruitment and participation of their nationals in armed conflicts abroad. At the same time, all of the leaders from the region have pledged themselves to carry out vigorous efforts to fight ISIS.

There have been several high-level meetings involving authorities from the region on the subject. On October the 1<sup>st</sup> 2015, the Ministers of foreign affairs of the countries from South-Eastern Europe had an informal meeting in New York on the sidelines of the U.N General Assembly where they agreed to coordinate their activities against violent extremism. They accepted the proposal of the Regional Cooperation Council to form a Platform for regional cooperation against violent extremism and the foreign fighters phenomenon<sup>81</sup>.

Although regional initiatives are in place, some involving only countries of the region and some extending beyond the borders of the region, there is a need for closer cooperation, not only at the political level, but also at the technical level. In the report

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<sup>81</sup> Nova Tv. “Земјите од ЈИЕ заеднички ќе се борат против насилниот екстремизам и тероризам (Countries from SEE will combat violent extremism and terrorism together). Accessed on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<http://novatv.mk/index.php?navig=8&cat=5&vest=24678>

from the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2014 from the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator to the Council of the EU, it is mentioned that the Western Balkans requires increased cooperation. The report also outlined possible initiatives that would support increased regional cooperation.<sup>82</sup>

Macedonia and the countries from the region are part of the “EU Western Balkan counter-terrorism initiative: integrative plan of action initiated by the Council of the European Union.” This initiative is aimed to “eliminate further duplications and overlapping in countering terrorism and violent extremism activities in the Western Balkan region”<sup>83</sup>. This initiative is based on the assumption that countering violent extremism in the Balkans requires a coordinated approach of all stakeholders active in the region. And, as countries in the region have limited resources for CVE, it is also important to use those resources efficiently. The initiative has determined several objectives:

- **OBJECTIVE 1:** To enhance communication and exchange of information (operational/strategic) between relevant stakeholders in the region;
- **OBJECTIVE 2:** To support the development of national Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) capacities; prevention and strategic communication in the region with the support of EU RAN expertise;
- **OBJECTIVE 3:** Better identification of risks at borders, foreign terrorist fighters and gaps in exercising operational measures;
- **OBJECTIVE 4:** Prevent financing of terrorism;
- **OBJECTIVE 5:** Enhance analytical capacities and efficiency of operational measures;
- **OBJECTIVE 6:** To reach a better understanding of the state of play, gaps and needs in order to increase the efficiency of actions, adjust planning and prevent overlapping and duplication;
- **OBJECTIVE 7:** Raise awareness and Best Practice exchange on Reintegration and Rehabilitation;

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<sup>82</sup>Council of the European Union “Foreign fighters and returnees from a counter-terrorism perspective, in particular with regard to Syria: state of play and proposals for future work.” May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Accessed on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2014/may/eu-council-coter-syrian-fighters-9280-14.pdf>

<sup>83</sup> Council of the European Union “EU Western Balkan counter-terrorism initiative: integrative plan of action”. December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Accessed on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015.

<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2015/dec/eu-council-western-balkans-antiterrorism-13887-15.pdf>

- **OBJECTIVE 8:** To develop strategic communication and internet monitoring capacities;
- **OBJECTIVE 9:** To adopt/implement CT and CVE strategies, action plans and exchange or use good practices which will impact many of the above-stated objectives.

For each objective there are certain activities and measures to be undertaken. This initiative is important as it addresses various aspects of the process of CVE and works on overcoming obstacles through enhancing national capacities and increased and more efficient regional cooperation.

## 4.1 Regional dimension of the issue

The region of the Balkans over the last two decades has been involved in establishing and joining various platforms for tackling transnational crime. Examples include the networks of INTERPOL, EUROPOL, the World Customs Organization (WCO), the Southeast European Prosecutors Advisory Group (SEEPAG), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), among others. These platforms are most known to operate in the region, whether they have supported the reforms of the security sector directly or if they only served as regional platforms for establishing dialogue between the countries. Moreover, some of them also occasionally serve to facilitate cross-institutional collaboration and information sharing, as has often been shown to be crucial for tackling cross-border criminal activity.

However, one has to have in mind the history of the region and the enmities that were inherited after the breakup of Yugoslavia during the early 1990s, with the series of political upheavals and conflicts that the region experienced. New bilateral agreements for cooperation in security matters had to be re-established with each new country that emerged as independent. For example, since 1996, Macedonia and Serbia have signed over 60 bilateral agreements, of which 53 are already being implemented<sup>84</sup>. Among those agreements signed between the security institutions of Serbia and Macedonia are the ones regarding joint police patrol, which was utilized for the first time in 2013 during the summer months in the city of Ohrid, when there is an increased number

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<sup>84</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Macedonia, "Diplomatic Relations with Serbia" <http://www.mfa.gov.mk/index.php/mk/nadvoresna-politika/bilateralni-odnosi/sosedstvo> last time accessed: 12.06.2016

of Serbian tourists<sup>85</sup>, and during 2015 at the border area between Macedonia and Serbia, for the purpose of intercepting illegal crossings of migrants.<sup>86</sup>

Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, and Macedonia had to build institutional cooperation between the countries starting almost from square one. Bilateral agreements are still being signed between the two countries. The most recent one was signed in 2016, regarding free movement with IDs<sup>87</sup>. Another one, signed in 2013, related to integrated border management when the first jointly managed border crossing between Kosovo and Macedonia, “Belanovce – Stancic” (Kumanovo region) was opened.<sup>88</sup> With Albania, many of Macedonia’s bilateral agreements were signed much earlier; for example, Integrated Border Management and protocols for joint police patrols and border points have been in use since 2012.<sup>89</sup> These kind of bilateral agreements between neighboring countries in the region of the Balkans are important for fighting transnational organized crime and they pave the road for future joint police operations, or in the case of CVE, dismantling potential cross-border recruiting groups.

The cooperation between Macedonian security authorities and those of Kosovo has been seen as insufficient and faces a good deal of criticism both in Pristina and Skopje. There have been cases in Kosovo where convicted foreign fighters took the bus from Kosovo to Skopje, and then have flown from Skopje to Turkey.<sup>90</sup> These cases went undetected since there seems to be a lack of information flow in general, and the little information that is being shared is not being shared in a timely way between the security institutions of both countries. This could be seen with the “Kumanovo clashes” of May 2015 where an armed group from Kosovo clashed with the Macedonian police in the city of Kumanovo, Macedonia. President Ivanov declared that the security apparatus in Macedonia had known about the armed group since early 2015<sup>91</sup>, but it is not clear why this was not addressed and how was this case was handled between Macedonia and Kosovo, and whether the failure of prevention was due to poor cooperation.

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<sup>85</sup> Macedonian and Serbian policemen would jointly patrol in Ohrid [Македонски и српски полицајци заедно патролираат низ Охрид] <http://bit.ly/1VUP44R>, published on 19.07.2013

<sup>86</sup> Serbian-Hungarian police patrols on the border between Serbia and Macedonia [Српско-унгарски полициски патроли на границата меѓу Србија и Македонија] <http://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/DetalNewsInstant.asp?vestInstant=50074>, published on 29.06.2015

<sup>87</sup> Macedonia's and Kosovo's citizens will be crossing the border just with IDs [Граѓаните на Македонија и Косово ќе ја преминуваат границата само со лична карта] <http://tv21.tv/mk/?p=79522>, published on: 17.04.2016

<sup>88</sup> MoI: Successful realization of the Integrated Border Management Concept [МВР:Успешна реализација на концептот на интегрирано гранично управување] <http://vlada.mk/node/8326>; 15.02.2014

<sup>89</sup> Agreement between Council of Ministers of Republic of Albania and Government of Republic of Macedonia for opening the join border “Trebisht-Xhepisht” <http://www.dogana.gov.al/sites/default/files/Marrevshje.pdf>, 23.2.2012

<sup>90</sup> Three Kosovars sentenced for terrorism [Dënohen me burg tre kosovarë për terrorizëm] <http://koha.net/?id=27&l=105068>; 25.03.2016

<sup>91</sup> “Macedonia killings exacerbate political crisis” <http://www.dw.com/en/macedonia-killings-exacerbate-political-crisis/a-18443806>, 11.05.2015

## 4.2 Countering-Violent Extremism in the Balkans

Most of the countries in the Balkans have undertaken similar steps towards building an effective approach for dealing with the phenomenon of foreign fighters.

All the states of the Western Balkans started these steps by adopting repressive measures. For example, each of the countries has criminalized participation in foreign wars, Albania<sup>92</sup> and Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>93</sup> made changes to their criminal codes in 2014 in order to be able to prosecute individuals that participate in armed conflict outside the nation's borders, Kosovo criminalized participation in armed conflicts outside of the nation's borders in April 2015<sup>94</sup>, whilst Macedonia adopted the legislative changes in September 2014<sup>95</sup> but did not undertake any concrete action until one year later in August 2015 with the police operation called "Cell".<sup>96</sup>

The criminalization of participation in foreign wars was followed by similar police interventions in the Western Balkans region, and the first court verdict case occurred in March 2015 in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the grounds of human trafficking, as the sentenced person had been identified as a key person in the transportation of newly arrived individuals from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Syria. The person was sentenced with six years' prison time.<sup>97</sup>

Although these police operations took place immediately after the changes in legislation, official strategies on CVE were developed much later in all Western Balkan countries. Albania adopted its National Strategy in Countering Violent Extremism by the end of 2015 (criminalization happened in 2014)<sup>98</sup>, Kosovo adopted a strategy for Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization that leads to Terrorism in September 2015 five months after it was criminalized<sup>99</sup> and Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted the Counter-Terrorism Strategy in 2016. It is significant to note that Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro adopted Countering Violent Extremism strategies, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia

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<sup>92</sup> Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania <http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf>, pg 15, IDM Tirana 2015

<sup>93</sup> Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, "THE LURE OF THE SYRIAN WAR: THE FOREIGN FIGHTERS - BOSNIAN CONTINGENT" <http://bit.ly/1XTdwp6>, pg. 37, Sarajevo 2015

<sup>94</sup> Official Gazette of Republic of Kosovo, Law nr, 05/L For prohibition for joining armed conflicts outside the state's territory <http://bit.ly/1PZ1PKH>, April 2015, Republic of Kosovo

<sup>95</sup> Prison for participation in foreign wars [ЗАТВОР ЗА УЧЕСТВО ВО СТРАНСКИ ВОЈСКИ] <http://www.akademik.mk/balkanot-4/>, 05.09.2014 last time accessed 04.07.2015

<sup>96</sup> Nine persons arrested in anti-terror action of MoI [Приведени девет лица во антитерористичката акција на МВР] <http://alsat.mk/News/207907/privedeni-devet-lica-vo-antiteroristichkata-akcija-na-mvr>, 06.08.2015 last time accessed 04.07.2015

<sup>97</sup> Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, pg 38.

<sup>98</sup> Official Gazette of Republic of Albania: [http://www.qbz.gov.al/botime/fletore\\_zyrtare/2015/PDF-2015/203-2015.pdf](http://www.qbz.gov.al/botime/fletore_zyrtare/2015/PDF-2015/203-2015.pdf), Nr. 203, 25.11.2015

<sup>99</sup> The strategy for Prevention of Violent Extremism (PEO) and Radicalisation that leads to Terrorism 2015-2020 [http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGJIA\\_parandalim\\_-\\_SHQIP.pdf](http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGJIA_parandalim_-_SHQIP.pdf), Kosovo



and Macedonia upgraded their Counter Terrorism strategies with a secondary role of addressing CVE and prevention of radicalization and violent extremism.

This demonstrates a disparity in the chosen approaches in the strategies adopted in the Western Balkans states, despite the fact that all the states from the Western Balkans are members of the Anti-ISIS coalition, which makes them equally potential targets of terrorist attacks.<sup>100</sup> Some of them have adopted CVE strategies (Kosovo and Albania) while the others (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Macedonia) have adopted CT strategies. Why the countries have chosen to look at this threat differently we cannot say for sure, but when we make a comparison the states which adopted CT strategies view violent extremism as a more immediate threat and the strategies in large part focus on strengthening states' capacities in preventing attacks or managing the consequences of them. On the other hand, the states that adopted CVE strategies took up a more preventive approach and turned to soft measures with their core mission to actively carry out counter-messaging and the strengthening of local communities, thereby giving more of a social dimension to the issue. Of course, what is on paper and what is actually happening on the ground are two different things. For example, in the case of Kosovo and Albania, the number and magnitude of police actions against foreign fighters and recruiters have been quite strong. Even though the threat from attacks could not be entirely excluded, there is an often-used argument against this claim that attacks would not happen on Balkan soil, as that might have a negative effect on future recruitments of Foreign Fighters.<sup>101</sup>

What has contributed to the decision of adopting CT strategies in Macedonia and Serbia cannot be explained solely by pointing to one or two factors. However, as much as it might be complex, the impact that the migrant crisis has had on these countries to take more defensive stances can not be ignored. One of the Paris attackers used the Balkan migrant route to get to the EU,<sup>102</sup> which resulted in increased concern in Macedonia, where President Ivanov several times raised alarms on threats of possible extremists mixing with the groups of migrants<sup>103</sup>. While it is important to discuss the security dimension of the migrant flow and the impacts that it might have on the country, it is difficult to understand why migrants somehow connected with extremists would realistically pose a threat to Macedonia and its citizens, taking into account that the vast majority of the migrants crossed the border of the country in 24-48 hours at the heights

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<sup>100</sup> Isis official calls for 'lone wolf' attacks in US and Europe during Ramadan <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-official-calls-for-lone-wolf-attacks-in-us-and-europe-during-ramadan-a7042296.html>, 22.05.2016 last time accessed on 04.07.2016

<sup>101</sup> Qehaja, Florian – Securitization, an (un) thought consequence [Sekuritizimi, pasojë e (pa)menduar] <http://sbunker.net/op-ed/33935/sekuritizimi-pasoj-e-pa-menduar/>, 17.08.2015

<sup>102</sup> Paris attacks: Who were the attackers? - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34832512>, 27.04.2016

<sup>103</sup> President Ivanov statement at OSCE Security Conference in Rome, Italy <http://www.president.gov.mk/mk/2011-06-17-09-55-07/2011-07-19-10-40-39/3664-2016-03-04-11-43-09.html>, 04.03.2016 last time accessed on 05.07.2016

of the migrant flow. Considering the fact that one of the attackers in Paris had been registered as an asylum seeker in Greece and Serbia<sup>104</sup>, the lack of information flow and failure to effectively register the migrants portrays another inefficiency when it comes down to communication among the Balkan states. Furthermore, after the Paris attacks in November 2015, all the states in the region added to their security measures by placing heavily armed police and army officers to guard vital objects, such as airports and state institutions<sup>105</sup>.

Another pattern that accompanied the decision of Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to embrace the CT approach is that it could be identified that in all of the three countries the social cohesion was and is considered to be fragile. These places in the past had often experienced inter-ethnic turmoil, and the trust between the security institutions and minority groups is still considered to be low.

### **4.3 Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Bosnia and Herzegovina has chosen a multi-institutional approach to tackle the phenomenon of violent extremism, which can be seen in the activities planned in the Bosnia and Herzegovina's strategy. For each activity, the institution which is responsible for carrying out the activity is also given. However, this is not the case in the Macedonian strategy, which still sees CVE as something only to be taken care of by the security apparatus such as the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense, the Intelligence Agency and the Directorate of Counter-Intelligence.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has envisaged the monitoring of the implementation of the strategy to be conducted by a Supervisory Body that will be established specifically for this purpose. This body ensures a coordinated approach in meeting the strategic objectives. On the other hand in Macedonia the CT strategy has not foreseen the need for a second monitoring/evaluating body that would evaluate the work of the implementation bodies, and as a result the role of the CVE coordinator ends up being both implementer and evaluator.

### **4.4 Kosovo**

Kosovo has drafted its CVE strategy in collaboration with all the relevant stakeholders in Kosovo society, from religious leaders and security institutions to CSOs dealing with security and CVE matters. All these stakeholders participated from the very early phases of designing the CVE strategy until the final version was developed, which was approved by the government in 2015.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Returned Foreign Fighters the biggest threat to Macedonia [Повратници од војните најголема закана за Македонија] <http://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/NewsDetal.asp?vest=11251510943&id=9&setIzdanie=23623>; published on 25.11.2015

Specific element of the Kosovo's *Strategy on Violent Extremism and Radicalization leading to Terrorism* it is inclusive to religious communities. Namely, cooperation and coordination with the religious communities and credible imams is highlighted in methodology, activities and implementation of this Strategy. Such an integrative approach, by involving direct stakeholders as well as religious bodies in implementation of CVE strategies could significantly add to achieving strategic outcomes.<sup>106</sup>

The main implementing bodies for the CVE strategy in Kosovo are set to be the Ministries of Education, Labor and Social Welfare, Interior, Ministry of Justice as one of key implementing institutions, and the CVE coordinator from the Government of Kosovo, as a part of an agency which falls under the government. The Kosovo Security Council, jointly with the CVE coordinator, who is the Prime Minister's political advisor at the same time, both together are responsible for planning the activities, crowd-funding additional resources, and holding donor conferences for the purpose of achieving maximal implementation.<sup>107</sup> The Kosovo Security Council has an additional role in the monitoring and evaluation of the strategy, as it evaluates the work of all the other implementing bodies.<sup>108</sup>

The Kosovo CVE coordinator arranged the work of the technical working group which drafted the strategy. As well, he has a role in informing the public continuously on the progress in countering violent extremism in Kosovo, maintaining active communication with journalists, meeting representatives from CSOs and participating in debates, conferences and the like.<sup>109</sup>

The Minister of Interior of Kosovo, as part of the government's CVE program, has visited all municipalities in Kosovo and has participated in roundtables organized in almost every city of Kosovo,<sup>110</sup> with the purpose of supporting the local governments in countering the phenomenon, helping them to create the counter-narratives needed for raising awareness. Such high profile visits encourage local governments and police to act more proactively in the prevention and detection of early signs of radicalization, hence also improve gender sensitive PVE and CVE approaches at local level.<sup>111</sup>

In Kosovo the authorities debrief individuals returning from Syria and, according to the findings, they decide how to proceed. In cases where people have joined moderate

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with Besa Ismaili, professor at the Faculty of Islamic Science – Prishtina, CVE coordinator for working with women, conducted on 21.03.2016

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Edon Myftari, PMs political advisor/CVE coordinator in Kosovo, conducted on 19.02.2016

<sup>108</sup> STRATEGY ON PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION LEADING TO TERRORISM 2015-2020; Kosovo pg. 28

<sup>109</sup> Interview with official from the Kosovo Security Council, conducted on 19.02.2016

<sup>110</sup> Hyseni worried about the tendency in the Kosovo's society for radicalization [Hyseni i shqetësuar me tendencën e radikalizimit të shoqërisë në Kosovë]<http://klankosova.tv/hyseni-i-shqetesar-me-tendencen-e-radikalizimit-te-shogerise-ne-kosove/>, 28.07.2015

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Besa Ismaili, professor at the Faculty of Islamic Science – Prishtina, CVE coordinator for working with women, conducted on 21.03.2016

groups, it is decided that since they do not represent a danger for Kosovo, and have no intention of going back to the front, the prison sentence is replaced with monitoring of the individual<sup>112</sup>.

After the initial phase of the CVE strategy is implemented inside Kosovo's territory, Kosovo's authorities plan to look into the possibilities of extending regional cooperation, in terms of how the neighboring countries could help or be helped, or how they could learn through working together towards developing more effective CVE measures.<sup>113</sup>

Radical groups have been noted in higher numbers mostly operating in border towns and villages. In spite of that, so far an established pattern has not been identified where foreign fighters jointly work towards organizing attacks or recruitment. Similarly, there has not been any MK-KOS joint police operation from either state against any potential recruiter's group.<sup>114</sup>

In an opinion poll conducted in Kosovo, 57 percent of Muslim respondents stated that they trust the Islamic Community of Kosovo.<sup>115</sup> Meanwhile, the main arguments in 2014 as to why respondents were less predisposed to have trust in their representing religious institutions was related to their inability to prevent the penetration of extremist movements in Kosovo. The institutions' true aim according to the respondents was to misuse a particular religion for a specific political agenda.<sup>116</sup> With the emergence of violent extremism, the number of voices that criticize religious institutions has risen. Previously, citizens did not have the courage to challenge the authority of religious establishments.<sup>117</sup>

As of April 2015, the Parliament of Kosovo has adopted a bill that prohibits the citizens of Kosovo from participating in foreign wars as part of foreign armies, police, or paramilitary formations. It has been established that persons found guilty of these crimes would be imprisoned for up to fifteen years and lose their citizenship.<sup>118</sup> Until January 2015, about eighty alleged extremists suspected of fighting in Iraq and Syria or

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<sup>112</sup> [Interview with official from the Kosovo Security Council, conducted on 19.02.2016](#)

<sup>113</sup> Ibid

<sup>114</sup> Ibid

<sup>115</sup> Kelmendi, Vese; KOSOVO SECURITY BAROMETER Kosovar Centre for Security Studies Special Edition: The citizens' views against violent extremism and radicalization in Kosovo [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Raporti\\_final\\_CVE-Barometri\\_anglisht\\_583308.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Raporti_final_CVE-Barometri_anglisht_583308.pdf), pg. 12; June 2016

<sup>116</sup> [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Kosovo\\_Security\\_Barometer\\_-\\_Fifth\\_Edition\\_523670.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Kosovo_Security_Barometer_-_Fifth_Edition_523670.pdf) pg 17

<sup>117</sup> Kelmendi, Vese; pg. 15, June 2016

<sup>118</sup> The Law on the Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory: [https://www.mpb-ks.org/repository/docs/LIGJI\\_NR.05\\_L.002\\_PER\\_NDALIMIN\\_E\\_BASH-KIMIT\\_NE\\_KONFLIKTE\\_TE\\_ARMATOSURA\\_JAShte\\_TERRITORIT\\_TE\\_VENDIT.pdf](https://www.mpb-ks.org/repository/docs/LIGJI_NR.05_L.002_PER_NDALIMIN_E_BASH-KIMIT_NE_KONFLIKTE_TE_ARMATOSURA_JAShte_TERRITORIT_TE_VENDIT.pdf)

of recruiting foreign fighters had been arrested in Kosovo.<sup>119</sup> It is important to mention that this was one of the largest police actions in the region against violent extremism. However, it was questioned by the local population, since the authorities released 60% of those captured after the trial, either due to being unable to efficiently prosecute or process evidence and press charges accordingly.<sup>120</sup>

The Islamic Religious Community (IRC) of Kosovo does not have control of all mosques<sup>121</sup> and this could be problematic, since extremist propaganda can be still spread among visitors of those mosques, and when this happens in rural areas where the local citizens have only those mosques to visit, it makes it even harder to reach out to those communities with counter-messages.

According to a local NGO in Kosovo, KIPRED, the government's response to the radicalization phenomenon had been very late. Starting in 2006, some imams started to promote radical ideologies in Kosovo. These imams were never held responsible. Another issue that might have contributed to the late response is that Kosovo lacked an intelligence agency until 2009, the impact of which is considered to be great. International Administration was often accused during that time for not sharing information sufficiently with Kosovo's police.<sup>122</sup>

A question that often arises is the extent of the people's exposure to radical propaganda. Although the police operations have shown to be successful in deterring more foreign fighters to join extremist groups in Syria or Iraq, it is believed that extremist recruiters might have only changed their way of operating.<sup>123</sup>

The official authorities and CSOs in Kosovo and Albania declare that no one has joined ISIS for over a year. However, the first wave of foreign fighter returnees have reached the Western Balkans states. According to a survey in Kosovo, over 51% consider the returned foreign fighters to pose a threat, since they return from battle fields and their level of radicalization is not known. Neither it is known whether they have regretted joining ISIS or what their motive for returning is. According to CVE experts in Kosovo, the more followers these violent ideologies have, the more dangerous they will turn out to be.<sup>124</sup> These groups will focus on consolidation and better organization while

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<sup>119</sup> *Kosovo Police Arrest 40 Suspected ISIS Fighters*, CBN News (Aug. 11, 2014), <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2014/August/Kosovo-Police-Arrest-40-Suspected-ISIS-Fighters/>.

<sup>120</sup> Report Inquiring Into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Shkaqet\\_dhe\\_pasojat\\_e\\_perfshirjes\\_se\\_qytetareve\\_te\\_Kosoves\\_si\\_luftetare\\_te\\_huaj\\_ne\\_Siri\\_dhe\\_Irak\\_820753.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Shkaqet_dhe_pasojat_e_perfshirjes_se_qytetareve_te_Kosoves_si_luftetare_te_huaj_ne_Siri_dhe_Irak_820753.pdf), pg.7, April 2015.

<sup>121</sup> IRC admits that has two mosques out of control [BIK-u pranon se dy xhami i ka jashtë kontrolli] <http://www.telegrafi.com/bik-u-pranon-se-dy-xhami-ka-jashte-kontrolli/>, 16.02.2016

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Lulzim Peci Executive Director of Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), conducted on 19.02.2016

<sup>123</sup> Ibid

<sup>124</sup> Ibid

simultaneously de-radicalization programs are still missing in Kosovo and the region, thus leaving a gap for radicalization still to flourish.<sup>125</sup>

The key lessons coming from the region are that any attempt for addressing the issue of violent extremism and radicalization has to be complemented by the involvement of the communities and with wider public debate on the issue. Kosovo is an example of having very developed media coverage on the issue as well numerous TV debates being held with experts, religious leaders and state institutions talking about the issue of foreign fighters and violent extremism.

The civil society in Kosovo traces radical ideologies back to Syrians/Afghans/Yemenis, or other individuals with European passports who came along with humanitarian organizations in the post-war period and offered financial help, or various courses, which often time were mixed with religious lectures that advocated a stricter practice of Islam.<sup>126</sup>

Another issue that might be making the IRC of Kosovo lose credibility among their believers it is that it operates mainly in cash, which creates an additional gap in ensuring accountability and raises suspicion as to how money is used. Additionally, the fact that no specific law has been passed that regulates the religion institutions in Kosovo also contributes to its overall lack of functioning.<sup>127</sup>

It is believed that the extremist ideologies will remain in the region for the foreseeable future, since Kosovo will be facing an increased number of returning foreign fighters.<sup>128</sup> This is to be believed to be similar in all Balkan countries.

## 4.5 Albania

The Albanian criminalization of fighting in foreign wars has foreseen for the Albanian citizens that participate in a military conflict abroad to be sentenced to more than ten years of imprisonment.<sup>129</sup>

Albania's foreign fighters are a consequence of a complex phenomenon of radicalization. IDM's study has investigated eight areas in Albania, with some of them located in the border regions near Macedonia and Kosovo.<sup>130</sup> However, the study could not identify mainstream patterns of VE influence from the neighboring countries .

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid

<sup>126</sup> Interview with NGO representative working on security issues in Kosovo, conducted on 19.02.2016

<sup>127</sup> Ibid

<sup>128</sup> Ibid

<sup>129</sup> *Prison for Albanian Jihadists*, Gazeta Shekulli Blog (Feb. 25, 2014), <http://www.gazetashekulli.org/2014/02/25/prison-for-albanian-jihadists/>.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Gjergji Vurmo Program Director of Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) Albania, conducted on 10.03.2016



The Albanian Islamic Community (AIC) has made great strides over the past 20 years. However, there are still a number of challenges and concerns it is facing – starting with property restitution and (insufficient) finance related issues, capacities of local clerics (including theological) and skills to confront radicalism and VE, or even a hidden “power struggle” within which has caused tense relationships between higher rank AIC representatives and local imams..<sup>131</sup>

Since the criminalization of participation in foreign wars in Albania, 9 men have been jailed on accusation for recruitment or participation in foreign wars in Syria or Iraq.<sup>132</sup> Compared to Macedonia, the arrested imams in Albania still hold onto their beliefs publicly and make pro-ISIS statements while in courts, and as well their supporters come to court sessions and openly express their support. In Macedonia all those arrested for participation in foreign wars or recruitment pleaded guilty and made settlements with the public prosecutor's office for milder sentences but it remains unknown what the bargains were with the authorities.<sup>133</sup>

The returnee foreign fighters came back to Albania mainly before the adoption of the law that criminalized it, but it is believed that there have been cases of FFs returning in Albania after the amendments of the Penal Code.<sup>134</sup> However, no one in Albania has been convicted over participation in foreign wars, since most of the foreign fighters went to Syria before the criminalization of the participation in foreign wars, while the nine arrested individuals, including two self-proclaimed imams, were sentenced for facilitating and financing the recruitment of terrorists, but none of them were convicted for participation in foreign wars.<sup>135</sup>

The initial response to violent extremism was in concentrating all efforts in the security apparatus, but as the phenomenon evolved, the security institutions in Albania modified their approach, which could be seen with their opening up to the CSOs and allowing their inclusion in many CVE activities.

It is believed that 70% of foreign fighters returned within 3 months after they had left, due to disappointments with what it had been promised to them and what they

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Albania jails nine men for recruiting extremists <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2016/05/04/Albania-jails-nine-men-for-recruiting-extremists.html>, 04.05.2016

<sup>133</sup> "Cell Case, the accused of participating in a foreign war pleaded guilty" <http://www.akademik.mk/sluchaj-kjelija-obvinetite-za-uchestvo-vo-stranska-vojska-ja-priznaa-vinata/>, 16.05.2016 last time accessed on 06.07.2016

<sup>134</sup> Interview with a NGO representative working on CVE in Albania

<sup>135</sup> Spahiu, Ebi; "Jihadist Threat Persists in Kosovo and Albania Despite Government Efforts" [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=45551&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=26&cHash=7bb1f7dcd9ed286befd58d41eca40db4#V3zxEut97Dd](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=45551&tx_ttnews[backPid]=26&cHash=7bb1f7dcd9ed286befd58d41eca40db4#V3zxEut97Dd), 24.06.2016 last time accessed on 06.07.2016

encountered once they arrived there.<sup>136</sup> It is thought that ISIS has limited impact in Albania since family pressure is usually considered to be high and imams who spread propaganda were very early named and publicly condemned. The lack of public debates on the topic of violent-extremism such as in the case of Macedonia allows the questionable imams to strengthen their influence and continue spreading their harmful messages and cultivate potential extremists.

Since 2014, no Albanian citizen has gone to Syria, according to the authorities. However, the Islamic Religious Community in Albania, even though it has regained the mosques that were under extremist control, is still struggling to counter extremist influence, since it is reported to have questioned credibility among followers and often is accused of corruption.<sup>137</sup>

In Albania, the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization has planned for the Ministry of Social Affairs to be in charge of all de-radicalization activities planned in the strategy.<sup>138</sup>

However, this strategy does not see the IRC Albania as the main actor in de-radicalization and as such, it has been receiving criticism from the civil society for not having more involvement of the religious community. Every solution has to be tailored in a way that it would include the IRC, primarily in identifying mosques (hotspots) that they consider to be more in need of de-radicalization activities.

As shown in Albania's case, law enforcement institutions have the effect of spreading fear to potential recruiters, which is why more awareness campaigns should be conducted among citizens about the legal implications they would face if they chose to join such groups as Al-Nusra or ISIS.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Interview with ex-foreign fighter <http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/terrori-frika-e-botes-se-re-sonte-ne-2045-ne-te-te-paekspoazarit/>, 19.11.2015 last time accessed on 06.07.2016

<sup>137</sup> Spahiu, Ebi; "Jihadist Threat Persists in Kosovo and Albania Despite Government Efforts" <http://bit.ly/29kKPLH>, 24.06.2016 last time accessed on 06.07.2016

<sup>138</sup> Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020, Republic of Kosovo, [http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY\\_parandalim\\_-\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_-_ENG.pdf)

<sup>139</sup> Interview with Ebi Spahiu, independent researcher on radicalization and foreign fighter phenomenon in Albania, conducted on 10.02.2016

## 5. Resocialization and reintegration

One of the biggest challenges of the foreign fighters phenomenon is what to do with these individuals when they decide to return home. Fears that these individuals pose a threat to society have been heightened by attacks conducted by former foreign fighters, like the attack on the Jewish museum in Brussels on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2014<sup>140</sup>, conducted by a Frenchman who spent a year fighting in Syria.

One of the major difficulties of this topic is the fact that it polarizes society in general. There are those who believe that former foreign fighters cannot be reintegrated into society and even call for a ban for their entry in the country. Conversely, there are those who believe that these individuals can fully reintegrate into society.

The number of former foreign fighters and violent extremists who are returning to Macedonia is on the rise, with that number being 86<sup>141</sup> as of July 2016. Due to the difficulty of collecting evidence for individuals who have travelled to Syria, evidence that can be used in court is often scarce. As a result, the prosecution cannot always press charges, or sometimes, the charges are dropped.

The process of resocialization and reintegration offers an alternative option for those individuals who cannot be prosecuted but are still considered at risk of being violent extremists<sup>142</sup>. Moreover, this process is important not only for people who cannot be prosecuted, but also for people who have been sentenced to prison. These individuals might attempt to spread their violent ideas in prison, and might still pose a threat when they eventually leave prison.

Resocialization can be described as “a purposeful, planned intervention, which aims to change characteristics of the offender (attitudes, cognitive skills and processes, personality or mental health, and social, educational or vocational skills) that are believed to be the cause of the individual’s criminal behavior, with the intention to reduce

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<sup>140</sup>The New York Times. “Suspect held in Jewish museum killings”. June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. Accessed on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/02/world/europe/suspect-arrested-in-jewish-museum-killings-in-belgium.html?version=meter+at+1&module=meter-Links&pgtype=article&contentId=&mediaId=&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=meter-links-click>

<sup>141</sup>Website of the President of the Republic of Macedonia. “Speech by the President Ivanov” June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016. Accessed on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<http://www.president.gov.mk/mk/2011-06-17-09-55-07/2011-07-19-10-40-39/3849.html>

<sup>142</sup>International Centre for Counter-Terrorism- The Hague. ‘Rehabilitation for foreign fighters?’ December 2015. Accessed on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/ICCT-Entenmann-Heide-Weggemans-Dorsey-Rehabilitation-for-Foreign-Fighters-December2015.pdf>

the chance that the individual will re-offend”<sup>143</sup>. Resocialization and reintegration programmes entail a cognitive element (a change in beliefs and attitudes, often referred to as de-radicalization) and a behavioral element (ceasing violent activities, often referred to as disengagement<sup>144</sup>). Individuals who are disengaged might give up the path of violence, but still retain their beliefs. Resocialization programs aim to facilitate an individual’s transition back into society.

Successful programs must combine addressing different dimensions of attitudes, behaviors and social ties in very creative ways<sup>145</sup>. Extremist groups are important for individuals in many areas, such as identity formation, community building, the excitement of belonging to a higher cause, a feeling of security, and more. All of these areas need to be addressed.

When it comes to the public discourse on the resocialization of foreign fighters, it is critical to note that in the parliamentary debates in the Republic of Macedonia preceding the adoption of the legal tools for combating the phenomenon of foreign fighters, some of the parliamentarians had been skeptical about the possibility of the foreign fighters being able to return to normal life within Macedonian society<sup>146</sup>.

**Silvana Boneva** (MP from VMRO DPMNE): The perpetrators of these crimes should not be allowed to return to Macedonia because they cannot be resocialized.

**Roza Topuzovska** Karevska(Independent MP): It cannot be expected that those persons who were part of such crimes after their return back to Macedonia to be suitable for this society.

Currently in Macedonia there is no active program for the resocialization and reintegration of the foreign fighters that have returned and will return in the future. So far the Macedonian authorities have sentenced 12 individuals convicted of joining foreign paramilitary organizations or for financing and recruiting for these organizations. These individuals will come to be in touch with the general prison population, which is already more vulnerable to radical ideas, and will likely try to approach them to spread

<sup>143</sup>International Centre for Counter-Terrorism- The Hague. ‘Designing rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for violent extremist offenders’. March 2012. Accessed on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Veldhuis-Designing-Rehabilitation-Reintegration-Programmes-March-2012.pdf>

<sup>144</sup>International Centre for Counter-Terrorism- The Hague. ‘Rehabilitation for foreign fighters?’ December 2015. Accessed on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/ICCT-Entenmann-Heide-Weggemans-Dorsey-Rehabilitation-for-Foreign-Fighters-December2015.pdf>

<sup>145</sup>Tore Bjorgo, and John Horgan. ‘Leaving terrorism behind, individual and collective disengagement’ [https://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/82A2FB65-27B0-4129-ACC5-284E2B4F5F43/0/leaving\\_terrorism\\_behind.pdf](https://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/82A2FB65-27B0-4129-ACC5-284E2B4F5F43/0/leaving_terrorism_behind.pdf)

<sup>146</sup> “Report from the Parliamentary Committee on Political System and Inter-Ethnic relations.” Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia. September 02, 2014

their ideas. The UBK has assisted prison authorities in developing a special prison regime for extremist offenders. With this regime, the UBK hopes to prevent the radicalization of more prisoners.<sup>147</sup>

The lack of programs for the resocialization and reintegration of returned foreign fighters in Macedonia has also been mentioned in the U.S Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism 2015<sup>148</sup>. An additional concern would be the fact that prisons in Macedonia do not offer any programs whatsoever for rehabilitation for their general population<sup>149</sup>, which would make it even more challenging for them to create a program for rehabilitation of extremists.

In the beginning of 2015, there was an attempt by the Islamic Religious community to introduce a program that would have supported the fight against the social stigma that former foreign fighters, and specifically their families, face. The project was called STOP-RAD Terr, and besides the main part, which was focused on fighting radicalization, this project aimed as well to provide aid to families of foreign fighters in Macedonia.<sup>150</sup>

When it comes to the part of the project that addresses resocialization and reintegration, after detecting many families who had lost the support of their main breadwinner (due to the fact that most commonly males join ISIS or Al Nusra) the project focused on providing to these families humanitarian help such as basic necessities, food or hygienic appliances.<sup>151</sup>

The second goal of the project was to address the issue that the families left behind by foreign fighters often are stigmatized by the society. They face stigmatization in their employment in the private sector, where private companies refuse to employ these persons due to fears of having troubles with state authorities, since they believe by employing a person that has a family member in Syria or Iraq, they would become potential target for the intelligence agencies who assume them to have ties to or support extremist groups too.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Interview with a high-ranking UBK official conducted on 19.07.2016, Skopje

<sup>148</sup> U.S Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. "Country Reports on Terrorism 2015". Accessed on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016.  
<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257516.htm>

<sup>149</sup> Interview with a University Professor of Law. Conducted on March 15<sup>th</sup> 2016

<sup>150</sup> Head of IRC meets with ambassador Baily [Kreui BFI takohet me ambasadorin Bejli]  
<http://koha.mk/aktuale/35162-kreu-i-bfi-takohet-me-ambasadorin-bejli.html>, published on 05.02.2015 last time accessed on 19.07.2016

<sup>151</sup> From the "Stop Rad Terr" project proposal by the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia and Hilal humanitarian organization.

<sup>152</sup> Findings from the focus group with youngsters in Skopje, where one of the participant described that his father refused to employ a neighbor because of the fact that the person had a brother that went to fight in Syria. The focus group in Skopje was held on 18.05.2016 at the premises of Analytica Think Tank.

Sometimes the social stigma revolves around worries that the family members left behind might be radicalized and many families suffer from this prejudice even though usually they are not radicalized themselves. Many family members have spoken out against this prejudice many times publicly.<sup>153</sup>

Another issue that the IRC project proposal tried to tackle was the psychological state of the families of the foreign fighters. These families are in need of psychological support from professionals, since some of them might have lost their family members in Syria or Iraq, and some of them live in the constant fear of what might happen to their beloved ones that got radicalized and joined extremist groups to fight.<sup>154</sup>

Besides the fear and other health issues such as depression and anxiety that they might be facing, the threat that these families might still be targeted by potential recruiters is very high. This threat increases especially when these families have more male members of combat age. The threat that other males from the family, such as parents or siblings, might get radicalized is very high, since their relatives that are already in Syria or Iraq might be trying to persuade them to join them.<sup>155</sup>

Radicalization of siblings, such as male brothers, has been common. Examples can be found in many notorious cases of attacks, such as the Paris attacks, the Boston Marathon attacks and many others that were committed by siblings.<sup>156</sup>

The other dimension of radicalization is where one spouse radicalizes the other, such as in cases where the one partner is in Syria calls for the other partner to join them, and in these cases they usually even take children with them. In Macedonia there is information about three families where the fathers took their families, including children, with them.<sup>157</sup>

In order to equip these families with the necessary counter-narratives and coping mechanisms as how to deal with the issue of having a radicalized family member, strong de-radicalization programs are needed. So far in Macedonia the project from IRC addressed only the issue of the family members left behind, but did not include the returned foreign fighters in Macedonia. In the law that criminalized the participation in

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<sup>153</sup> The father of the radicalized girl speaks about his disbelief that his child has went to Syria - "18 years old girl has joined ISIS" [Vajza 18 vjeçarenga Kumanovai është bashkangjitur ISIS-it] <http://www.telegrafi.com/vajza-18-vjecare-nga-kumanova-i-eshte-bashkangjitur-isis-it/> published on July 2015, last time accessed 19.07.2016

<sup>154</sup> From the "Stop Rad Terr" project proposal by the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia and Hilal humanitarian organization.

<sup>155</sup> THE TIES THAT BIND: HOW TERRORISTS EXPLOIT FAMILY BONDS <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-ties-that-bind-how-terrorists-exploit-family-bonds>, published on 19.02.2016 last time accessed on 19.07.2016

<sup>156</sup> Brothers who work together in the name of terror. Why so many? <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-terror-brothers-20160323-story.html>, published on 23.02.2016 last time accessed on 19.07.2016

<sup>157</sup> Interview with a high-ranking UBK official conducted on 19.07.2016, Skopje



foreign wars for Macedonian citizens, the Macedonian government explicitly prohibits any contact with former foreign fighters, as any contact not reported to the state authorities can be seen as an act of accomplice and it would incriminate the person.<sup>158</sup>

Therefore, even the IRC in the past few years faced difficulties in carrying out effective de-radicalization activities. They face a situation where former foreign fighters are being pushed further to the margins of the society, either by being isolated totally or going into hiding due to the legal constraints of their friends and families being unable to reach out to them freely. This undoubtedly has an impact in the detection of those persons and the assessment of their effect in the further radicalization of others.

The IRC project lacked institutional support and did not manage to secure the financial means for its implementation. Although the president in his annual presidential speech called all institutions to provide support to IRC in fighting this phenomenon, so far no concrete action has been identified.<sup>159</sup>

The strategy for counter-terrorism for Macedonia, adopted in March 2016, addressed in small parts the prevention activities and possibilities for de-radicalization programs. These are excerpts from the strategy as to how it addresses de-radicalization and prevention.<sup>160</sup>

- Macedonia sanctioned as a criminal offense to participate in foreign armies and paramilitary formations, but requires continuous measures for its operationalization. In parallel with the measures for their prevention will take measures for their re -reintegration into society.
- Application of complex educational, economic, social and security measures and activities to raise public awareness and resistance to motivating factors and tools that encourage radicalization;
- Developing and implementing projects for de-radicalization of already radicalized individuals as well as projects for rehabilitation / reintegration of former terrorists
- Taking measures to prevent radicalization in prisons.

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<sup>158</sup> Article 322-a from the Macedonian Criminal Code

<sup>159</sup> Annual addressing of the President to the MPs

[ГодишнообраќањанапретседателотИвановпредпратениците]

<http://www.telma.com.mk/vesti/godishno-obrakjanja-na-pretседателot-ivanov-pred-pratenicite>,

published on 22.12.2015 last time accessed 19.07.2016

<sup>160</sup> NATIONAL STRATEGY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA TO FIGHT TERRORISM, 3.1 Prevention part.

- Raising awareness of citizens and the private sector in the fight against terrorism and the promotion of tolerance and public understanding of all types of terrorism;
- Strengthening moderate opinions over extremist ones that will ensure that opinions of extremists will not prevail. With the direct involvement of civil society in promoting moderate opinions, awareness that the majority supports moderate opinions will increase, and this will cut off the roots of extremism.

As can be seen from the text box above, the strategy lists possibilities to work on and develop such programs in the future, but so far it has not gone into details as to which institutions would be responsible for carrying out those activities. This is mainly because Action plans have still not been adopted.

Additionally, the lack of an Action Plan for the CT Strategy of Macedonia makes it even harder to accurately address the issue. Since there is not a designated institution for each activity, it is not clear how the budget money will be allocated for the implementation of this strategy, and there are no timeframes within which each activity should take place, thus making it harder to know when results can be expected and to see whether or not the strategy is meeting its goals on time.

Considering that the National Strategy on CT has foreseen the implementing bodies of this strategy to be only the security institutions, including the Ministry of Finance and its department against financial crime, it is not clear who from these bodies would be responsible for implementing de-radicalization activities, since none of them has an educational role, and the strategy's activities have everything to do with education.

One commonly used approach in de-radicalisation programs elsewhere in the world is that these programs are usually offered by organizations supported by the state, who for the most part are left open for the radicalized persons to voluntarily seek help from them or for family members of a radicalized person to reach out to these organizations and seek help for their loved one. They often provide hotline counseling as well. This approach is used by the state-funded organization Hayat which has been partner with the German Federal Office for Immigration and Refugee Affairs, and has established a national counseling hotline on radicalization.

In the example of HAYAT, experts conduct analyses and risk assessments and determine whether a person is in danger of becoming (violently) radicalized.<sup>161</sup>

Once the counselor has gained a clear picture of the concrete situation of a particular person, an individual counseling process and step-by-step plan is designed, including various measures to prevent further radicalization or to stop and reverse the process.

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<sup>161</sup> Hayat - German counseling program for persons involved in radical Salafist groups  
<http://hayat-deutschland.de/english/>

The counseling is offered for free, it is confidential and available in many languages like German, English and Arabic.<sup>162</sup>

It is of high importance that Macedonia learns from the practices that have shown some rate of success such as the case of Hayat, and that it involves the religious and local communities and civil society in the CVE process.

## **6. Views from the ground – with main focus on the cities of Skopje, Kumanovo and Tetovo**

The phenomenon of foreign fighters joining the war in Syria or Iraq, although a global challenge, has affected Macedonia in particular. As a consequence, this section of the policy study aims to look more into the local specifics as to what drives Macedonian nationals to join criminal groups such as ISIS. In the attempt to try to get a clearer picture of the situation in Skopje, Kumanovo and Tetovo, three focus groups with youngsters were held. This age group was chosen because it has been assumed that this is the most targeted group by violent extremist propaganda. These cities were chosen because of the frequent reports of foreign fighters coming from these cities. Fewer cases were also identified in other cities in Macedonia such as in Gostivar, Veles, Struga and in the village of Labunishta (Struga's rural area), likewise an increased presence of religiously motivated organizations in these cities was identified.

The main focus were students and high school pupils in order to get youngsters' perspectives on the issue of radicalization and the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Issues that were tackled in the focus groups were "how much is the youth informed about radicalization and violent extremism, have they been in any way affected by extremist propaganda such as being approached by potential recruiters, or do they know someone who went to Syria or had been radicalized?"

Two of the focus groups had 6 participants each (gender balanced), with the exception of the focus group in Kumanovo where there were 5 participants (3 males, 2 females). All the participants were university students except for one in the focus group in Skopje, who was a high school student in their final year. In the focus group in Skopje, four of the participants were from the municipality of Cair, while the other two were students from the Faculty of Islamic Science in Skopje, but were originally from Kumanovo and Veles. All the participants in all of the focus groups were ethnic Albanians, and the discussions were held in the Albanian language.

The set of questions that were asked compiled general questions such as: how they consider the socioeconomic conditions in their cities, what opportunities are available

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

for the youth, what challenges do they face in their cities, and what are the most immediate needs that they have as youngsters.

The second part of the questions focused on their knowledge about the radicalization phenomenon, such as how much they understand it, what they think that it signifies, their knowledge on violent extremism, and how they would recognize the signs of radicalization.

Finally, the last questions focused on how much the youngsters had first-hand experience in being approached by questionable organizations, in what way they were approached, whether they know someone personally from their immediate social circle that went to Syria or Iraq, or if they know someone who became isolated from their friends because, for example, of turning more to religion, or because of their looks like having grown a beard or for women wearing headscarves, which has been reported often as a reason for youngsters to be discriminated against.

Additionally, interviews with two youngsters from city of Skopje who had been attending the mosques that previously were outside of the control of the IRC were conducted. These two youngsters had been approached many times by friends and acquaintances trying to talk them into accepting different interpretations of the religion claiming to be the correct one.

A description of the findings will be given for each city and will include what local specifics were identified and what patterns show the tendency to repeat.

An unforeseen finding from the focus groups arose: that a majority of the participants knew someone that had gone to Syria or Iraq or someone that has a family member that has become a foreign fighter.

A low level of trust in state institutions appeared to be a common opinion shared between the youngsters in all of the focus groups, a particular disbelief was expressed when it came to the question on the ability of the state institutions to make a difference in countering the phenomenon of violent extremism.

In this section all the findings, both from the focus groups and individual interviews are structured per city in order to make them more comprehensive and avoid overlapping with each other.

Most of the youngsters thought that the state favours one religion over the other (Orthodox Christianity, which most ethnic Macedonians belong to, over Islam, which most of Albanians identify with, together with other minorities like Turks, Bosnians and ethnic Macedonian Muslims). The examples that were pointed out were that state could be seen sponsoring church buildings and financing of church activities, while the Islamic Religious Community does not receive any state funding.

All the participants stressed the issue of youth unemployment and the lack of opportunities for Albanian youth, such as lack of sports halls, movie theatres and cultural events. A general feeling of being socially excluded was noticed.

To the question on possible discrimination based on religion, most of the participants answered negatively by stressing that ethnic discrimination prevails over that of religion. Discrimination for religious reasons seems to be harsher only against Muslim women who are veiled, normally at the workplace, as the veils are rarely accepted at work. Cases of veiled Muslim women being ridiculed and bullied by professors at state universities were identified as well. Additionally, cases of veiled Muslim women being prevented from acquiring jobs in the national public administration or working as nurses at state hospitals were noted.

In none of the focus groups did we identify support for violent extremist groups such as ISIS or Al Nusra, or for the idea of going to Syria. Most of the participants shared the opinion that those who have been to Syria or Iraq ought to be given second chances, while they disagreed on the same provision for recruiters.

Cases of Macedonian women becoming radicalized or going to Syria were not covered that much by the media, however cases were identified during the field research phase.

**Up through July 2016, four cases of women becoming radicalized have been identified:**

1. An 18-year-old girl from Kumanovo went to Syria in early 2015. Reportedly she married someone after she went there. According to her father who spoke in one interview for the local media, his daughter used to speak to a girl from Kosovo before her radicalization, and videos of war propaganda were found in her computer. It was also reported by her fellow students that she watched these kinds of videos while at school.<sup>163</sup>
2. A woman from Struga, an ethnic Macedonian, converted to Islam in one of the countries in Western Europe and came back to Macedonia to her hometown of Struga before she travelled to Syria. This is a clear indication that not only ethnic Albanians join ISIS, but also other ethnic groups, who their first religion was not Islam.<sup>164</sup>
3. A young girl from the village of Aracinovo, Skopje in her early 20s attempted to go to Syria. She had reached Istanbul before she was interrupted on her

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<sup>163</sup> 18 years old girl from Kumanovo joined ISIS [Vajza 18 vjeçare nga Kumanova i është bashkangjitur ISIS-it] <http://www.telegرافي.com/vajza-18-vjecare-nga-kumanova-i-eshte-bashkangjitur-isis-it/>, published on March 2015, last time accessed 23.07.2016

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Agron Vojnika Head of Public Relations at Islamic Religious Community in Skopje, conducted on 04.04.2016

way by her father and other relatives who learned of her plans. She was discovered by her brother chatting with another Albanian from Macedonia currently in Syria who had been convinced to become a bride of another foreign fighter. This case of radicalization happened solely through the internet. It is not known whether the family reported this case to the state authorities, but they might not have since they might have been afraid of the social stigma the girl might have faced if it had become publicly known.<sup>165</sup>

4. And lastly, two girls from the rural area of Skopje in January 2016 attempted to go to Syria. These girls first travelled to Prishtina, where the uncle of one of the girls tracked them down and took them back home. The girls refused to discuss who their contact was or give any details about where in Prishtina they stayed. However, they both admitted to the intent of going to Syria, and both girls were minors at the time of their attempt. One of the girls was reported by one of the parents as a missing person, but it is not known whether the parents reported it further and disclosed the case fully to the Kosovo state authorities or to the Macedonian authorities, but once again social stigma and fearing what legal implications they would face might have contributed to these cases remaining unreported.<sup>166</sup>

Statistical data for cases of foreign fighters per city could not be obtained from the security institutions due to it being classified information<sup>167</sup>, which will impede future analysis on the part of the civil society, which could otherwise make suggestions for and contribute to tailoring better solutions according to local specifics.

Cases on foreign fighters from Macedonia who have died in Syria are mostly being made known publicly by media that came across the information through family members.

**Some of the cases the media wrote about are:**

1. Rasim Zeqiri from Gostivar – this was the first case reported of a foreign fighter from Macedonia who was killed in Syria. He was believed to be in his twenties.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Interview with family relative of the girl from the village of Aracinovo, Skopje, conducted on 16.05.2016

<sup>166</sup> Interview with family relative of one of the girls, coming from Skopje rural area, speaking about the case, conducted on 18.01. 2016

<sup>167</sup> Ministry of Interior, Information obtained by utilizing the Law on free access to public information sent on 21.12, request nr 214/15

<sup>168</sup> Albanian from Gostivar gets killed in Syria [Shqiptari nga Gostivari vritet në Siri] <http://www.telegrafi.com/shqiptari-nga-gostivari-vritet-ne-siri/>; published on 2013



2. Sami Abdullahu from Skopje – an ex-NLA fighter, he used to serve as an imam in Bremen, Germany. His death was reported in August 2013.
3. Adnan Rexhepi from Kumanovo – an ex-NLA fighter since 2001, Rexhepi was previously convicted with 4 years' imprisonment for a process of bomb installation in Kumanovo, which he had claimed he was framed for. His death was made known by the media in May 2014.<sup>169</sup>
4. Sadik Xhemaili from Gostivar – Xhemaili was 24 years old. It was reported that he had gone to Syria by first going to Albania.<sup>170</sup> This young man died in January 2015, after spending half a year in Syria.
5. Bashkim Bela from Skopje – Bela was 23 years old. It was reported that he was killed in July 2014.<sup>171</sup>
6. Fuad Mustafa from Skopje – in his early 20s, Mustafa is the latest victim to fall fighting under ISIS.<sup>172</sup>

These cases are just a portion of the foreign fighters that are believed to have been killed in Syria or Iraq, but these cases were the ones that were revealed publicly in the media. A specific fact that we can notice is that by early 2013 we could have identified older foreign fighters who fought for the NLA in 2001 as well, and both cases mentioned above express their motives to be purely based on solidarity with the Syrian population against the Assad regime, wanting to help stop the mass murder of civilians. Later, as ISIS evolved, it can be noticed that the target for foreign fighters in Macedonia shifted towards youngsters in early 20s without previous combating skills, who mainly joined under extremist motivation.

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<sup>169</sup> Another Albanian gets killed in Syria this time from Kumanovo [Tjetër shqiptar vritet në Siri, këtë herë nga Kumanova] <http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/tjeter-shqiptar-vritet-ne-siri-kete-here-nga-kumanova/>; published on 13.05.2014

<sup>170</sup> 24 years old Albanian from Macedonia Syria: gets killed in a jihadi war [Siri, vritet në luftë për xhihad 24 vjeçari, shqiptar i Maqedonisë] <http://www.oranews.tv/rajoni/siri-vritet-ne-lufte-per-xhihad-24-vjecari-shqiptar-i-maqedonise/>; published on 28.01.2015

<sup>171</sup> Bashkim Bela from Skopje gets killed in Syria [Vritet në Siri Bashkim Bela nga Shkupi] <http://koha.net/?id=27&l=16314>; published on 02.07.2014

<sup>172</sup> Another Albanian dies as a jihadist in Syria [Edhe një shqiptar vdes si xhihadist në Siri] <http://lajmpress.com/edhe-nje-shqiptar-vdes-si-xhihadist-ne-siri/>; published on 30.06.2016

## 6.1 Skopje

In the city of Skopje, according to the 2002 census, 28.6% of the whole population in Skopje are Muslims, with majority of them being ethnic Albanians.<sup>173</sup>

The Islamic Religious Community (IRC) had issued several public calls to the state authorities to act regarding mosques that were not under IRC control anymore due to occupation by self-proclaimed imams.<sup>174</sup> These imams were considered to preach a version of Islam according to them, that was different from the one that IRC teaches, which supposedly is in line with the Hanafi School of Islamic Jurisprudence.<sup>175</sup>

The preaching of the self-proclaimed imams calls for more rigorous practising of the religion and calls for believers not to recognize the official IRC and their imams by calling them deviants from religion, and by claiming that only their version of Islam is correct and the only one that should be followed.<sup>176</sup>

These imams attract mainly young groups of males, and usually preach in cafes, basements, or in the official mosques such as in Jahja Pasha Mosque in Skopje. There is information that even after the police operation "Cell," extremist preaching is still happening. The practice is the extremist imam and followers wait for the initial prayer by the IRC imam to end, and after that, the imam they recognize starts his own prayer.<sup>177</sup>

At the time when these mosques were not under IRC control, calls for joining different formations in Iraq or Syria were done usually after the evening prayer. After the police operation "Cell" these mosques returned under IRC control and for a short period of time, only official IRC imams held prayers. But, soon after that, "radical" imams reappeared in these mosques. So far, these "radical" imams have not been seen to make direct calls to join ISIS in Syria or Iraq, but after the prayers, there are lectures on the suffering of the Muslims in Syria, Western countries bombarding them, and in general anti-west propaganda followed by many Western World/Israel conspiracy theories. The groups that follow this imam at Jahja Pasha Mosque usually are not bigger than 40 persons and most are males under the age of 30.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Total population of the Republic of Macedonia according to declaration by religion, National Census 2002 <http://www.stat.gov.mk/publikacii/knigaX.pdf>, pg. 334, 2002

<sup>174</sup> IRC asks for help for control over mosques, MoI says is not responsible – stricter laws needed, both sides agree over this [ИВЗ бара помош за контрола на џамии, МВР вели не е надлежна – треба построги закони, согласни се двете страни] <http://www.akademik.mk/IRC-bara-pomosh-za-kontrola-na-dhamii-mvr-veli-ne-e-nadlezhna-treba-postrogi-zakoni-soglasni-se-dvete-strani-4/>; published on 21.08.2014

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Agron Vojnika Head of Public Relations at Islamic Religious Community in Skopje, conducted on 04.04.2016

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with youngster from Skopje, 24 years old that has witnessed this many time first hand, interview conducted in June, 2016.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

The imam Rexhep Memishi, who was convicted on charges of recruitment and preaching violent extremism, preached mainly at Tutunsuz mosque, an old mosque in Skopje, in the neighbourhood of Gazi Baba, Municipality of Cair. After his arrest, the prayers in this mosque were resumed by an imam from IRC, but it is not clear what has happened with Memishi's previous followers and whether they still attend this mosque after the change of imam. However, the Facebook page of Memishi and his extremist lectures on YouTube can still easily be found. Even though he is in jail, videos are still being uploaded on the Youtube channel "Minber media," which also has an active page on Facebook, where invitations for after-prayer lectures at Jahja Pasha Mosque in Skopje are shared.<sup>179</sup> One example of such videos, which is available online, is the troubling video of Memishi where he speaks about the Syrian War and explaining to believers what martyrdom is (shahid), where he claims that dying in defending the borders of the Islamic State (in the video called Islam State, not necessarily meaning ISIS) fighting against murderers in Syria is considered to be as act of holy martyrdom (from min. 6:35-6:59).<sup>180</sup> There are other videos where he clearly calls on sayings from the Prophet Muhammad to convince people by giving them religious evidence that they should be "in the land of Sham (Syria)" from min. 17:58 – 18:32<sup>181</sup>. This video dates from June 2013, and still is available online, and from the comment section we can see that still is actively watched by people.

The propaganda material of the self-proclaimed imam Memishi, even though clearly it is older material, is still being distributed actively on many different social media channels. This further highlights that operation "Cell" only partially addressed the violent extremism problem. It involved the arrests of recruiters who were mainly from Skopje, but did not deal with the damage that these people had already caused. The CT strategy of Macedonia addresses the issue of online radicalisation, but does not specify any activity that would be focused on clearing propaganda materials of already convicted imams/individuals.<sup>182</sup>

One youngster from Skopje who visits the Jahja Pasha Mosque regularly considers that the same rhetoric and extremist ideology as before is being pushed in this mosque; the only change he sees before/after the police operation "Cell" is that calls for joining ISIS are not being made so directly and openly by the imams anymore. As well, general

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<sup>179</sup> Facebook page "Teuhid.NET - Minberi i Teuhidit" <http://www.facebook.com/minbermedia> and the same Youtube channel -

<https://www.youtube.com/user/minbermedia/> that has been mainly identified to still be active and support the convicted imam from Skopje Rexhep Memishi, these pages last time were accessed on 25.08.2016

<sup>180</sup> Rexhep Memishi video: "War of the Servile" [Lufta e argatëve – HUTBE], piece on martyrdom from 6:35-6:59 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRV86JozIF8>, video published on January 11, 2014, last time accessed on 23.07.2016.

<sup>181</sup> Rexhep Memishi video: "Syria between hadith and reality" [SIRIA Mes hadithit dhe realitetit], the part on Sham (Syria) from 17:58-18:32 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3j77mQlvIWg>, video published on June 13, 2013, last time accessed on 23.07.2016.

<sup>182</sup> National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Countering Terrorism. March 15th, 2016.

support for ISIS in Skopje has decreased. According to this young man, most of the debates he hears are ridiculing ISIS for being too violent, for raping women and mentioning other actions that they do not think to be in line with what Islam teaches them.

However, supporters of ISIS are still found in significant numbers. Calls to radicalism and support of extremist ideologies are usually given by friends or acquaintances when the after-prayer lectures finish. This is usually done in a way where these radicalized youngsters try to engage this youngster in theological debates, and since his knowledge in religion is poorer than theirs, he often feels that he loses these debates with those youngsters.

This youngster, aged 24, gets invited to these two mosques in Skopje by his close friends who he describes as regular believers and neither radical nor more conservative, and he visits these mosques due to their being more popular or more attractive because of the "lectures" that follow the prayer, which often relate to social developments in the state or political events on a global level.

A concerning finding from all the focus groups, as in Skopje too, is that almost all the participants (15 out of 17, in Skopje 5 out of 6) knew someone that either went to Syria or Iraq, or someone who has a family member that had gone to Syria or Iraq.<sup>183</sup>

There was one case in Skopje, described by one of the participants in the focus groups, where two of his friends became radicalised. They both visited regularly the mentioned mosques. They were brothers and one of the brothers is currently in Syria, while the other brother travelled to Turkey but changed his mind before even attempting to cross to Syria. This brother (aged 25) has returned to Macedonia and still holds radical views. The participant in the focus groups believes he is still radicalised since meets him at the Jahja Pasha mosque and sees him socializing with imams that are known for not accepting the official authority of the IRC. As well, he often praises his brother who is still in Syria.<sup>184</sup>

The official number of Macedonian nationals in Syria according to the IRC of Macedonia currently is 140, but it is believed that not all of them joined ISIS or went to fight on the actual battlefield. According to the Islamic Religious Community, only 20 of them are foreign fighters.<sup>185</sup> After police operation "Cell" no one has travelled to Syria or Iraq from Macedonia.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Findings from the focus groups with youngsters in Skopje, Kumanovo and Tetovo; conducted between 18-21 May, 2016

<sup>184</sup> Finding from the focus groups in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica's offices, the participant was 22 years old, male, a student, living in the Municipality of Cair

<sup>185</sup> IRC: approximately 140 individuals, Macedonian citizens are in Syria and Iraq [BFI rreth 140 persona shtetas të Maqedonisë gjenden në Siri dhe Irak] <http://alsat-m.tv/News/251928/bfi-rreth-140-persona-shtetas-te-maqedonise-gjende-ne-siri-dhe-irak>, published on 08.05.2016

<sup>186</sup> Interview with high ranking official in UBK. Conducted on 19.07.2016

However, we can notice a difference between the numbers of foreign fighters given by the Islamic Religious Community and the numbers provided by the security institutions in Macedonia.

According to the Islamic religious community, the numbers given by the state might be higher because there is a tendency for this question to be politicized and often misused against the ethnic Albanians by trying to portray religious extremism solely as an Albanian problem. This would damage the public image of Albanians, showing them to be problematic and prone to terrorism. According to them, this is done by right-wing political parties in order for them to gain political points.<sup>187</sup>

On the other hand, the claim by the religious community that currently only 20 of those that traveled to Syria or Iraq are combatants shows a tendency for them to lower the numbers.

This may suggest the fragile links the state authorities have with the IRC and as such weakens the possibilities for meaningful fight against the ISIS propaganda. The low trust between the Islamic Religious Community was additionally severed when last year in May the offices of the IRC were under an armed siege for 14 days. For this, the IRC accused the authorities for not acting against the armed attackers even though they had asked them officially and called them publicly to do so.<sup>188</sup> As a result during that time the employees of IRC were forced to not leave the headquarter offices for weeks, and the health of three employees deteriorated.<sup>189</sup>

The distrust between these two bodies impedes cooperation and information sharing. As well, it creates consequences for joint actions in countering violent-extremism, where it makes such activities to be less accepted among the Muslim community. Similar concerns were mentioned in the discussion of the focus groups in Skopje.<sup>190</sup>

From the focus group in Skopje, in response to the question "What do they think that radicalisation means, how they would recognize a radical person," very diverse answers came up in the discussion. Some specific ones were:

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<sup>187</sup> Interview with Agron Vojnika Head of Public Relations at Islamic Religious Community in Skopje, conducted on 04.04.2016

<sup>188</sup> IRC continues to be under occupation of Shabani [BFI-ja vazhdon të mbetet e uzurpuar nga Shabani] <http://alsat-m.tv/News/192810/bfi-ja-vazhdon-te-mbetet-e-uzurpuar-nga-shabani>; published on 08.05.2015

<sup>189</sup> Health state of three employees of IRC deteriorated, Emergency healthcare intervenes [Влошена здравствената состојба на тројца вработени во ИВЗ, интервенирала Брза Помощ] <http://fokus.mk/vloshena-zdravstvenata-sostojba-na-trojtsa-vraboteni-vo-IRC-interveni-rala-brza-pomosh/>; 05.05.2016

<sup>190</sup> Focus group in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica's offices, a girl 21 years old student from Skopje, living in the Municipality of Cair expressed distrust on activities offered by the state to counter violent extremism.

- Radicalisation comes as a result of misinterpretations of religion, when people start taking things literally. For example: the word "fight" has a lot of meanings such as fighting your own ego, fighting bad habits etc., and does not necessarily mean to fight in a foreign war. Only by raising the awareness of people about themselves and their society can we minimize the factors that lead one person to participate into a war.<sup>191</sup>
- Every conversation they start, they find a way to link it with religion. That's the way I will differentiate whether that person is radical or not.<sup>192</sup>
- Students from the Islamic Science faculty said they would recognize a radical by the way they approach religion.<sup>193</sup>
- The word "Islam" means peace. If the person is violent and aggressive, that can easily be seen from the way he/she speaks. Most of them do not know Islam because they do not learn about it anywhere.<sup>194</sup>
- Radicalisation has appeared as a result of misinterpretations of Quranic and Biblical verses.<sup>195</sup>
- When one person intrudes on another person's integrity, it could be seen as sign of radicalisation.<sup>196</sup>
- Radicalised people can be recognized from the way how they approach social media. For example, posting positive comments on Facebook about going to Syria or Iraq. From these things you can assess how that person thinks about these matters.<sup>197</sup>

What we could identify was that most of the participants were confused as to how to define a "radical" and most of them did not see radicalism as something that is against the law just expressed their remorse for those individuals as they become isolated from their friends and that they do not actively contribute in the society.

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<sup>191</sup> 19 years old student (male) coming from High School of Economy in the Municipality of Cair - Skopje, participant in the focus group in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica's offices.

<sup>192</sup> 21 years old student (male) coming from a Private University in the Municipality of Cair - Skopje, participant in the focus group in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica's offices.

<sup>193</sup> 21 years old student (male) coming from the Faculty of Islamic Science - Skopje, participant in the focus group in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica's offices.

<sup>194</sup> 20 years old student (female) coming from the Faculty of Islamic Science - Skopje, participant in the focus group in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica's offices.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> 22 years old student (female) coming from the State University in Skopje as well living in the Municipality of Cair, participant in the focus group in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica's offices.

<sup>197</sup> 20 years old student (female) coming from the State University in Skopje as well living in the Municipality of Cair, participant in the focus group in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica's offices.



As for those who join ISIS in Syria or Iraq, they think they are manipulated people that join for different reasons, whether they are ideological or financial. Some of the most memorable comments were:

*"I know a friend that I used to hang out with for three months; I used to be very close to him. He describes the war as something very pleasurable, and he has two cousins that are fighting in Syria. His cousins often come to Skopje and leave back to Syria; you cannot tell when they are here and when not. This guy lives in my neighbourhood, he has not been to Syria but he has asked me do I want to go and that was when I terminated our friendship".<sup>198</sup>*

*"Personally I have friends that support the war in Syria and ISIS and I have friends that are against it".<sup>199</sup>*

During the focus group with students in Skopje, we noticed that almost the whole group knew someone that went to Syria or someone that had a family member that went to Syria. A more worrisome fact appeared: the male students had been exposed to the propaganda of these family members who are currently in Skopje by hearing stories from them about how their cousins or siblings in Syria live now luxurious lives, having houses with swimming pools, driving luxury cars, and more.

They all agreed that social media has a role in feeding extremist ideas and helping people connect with others that support extreme ideology, but social media propaganda did not have a direct, sole role in convincing someone to leave for Syria. Direct contact with a recruiter is believed to be the cause of radicalization and necessary to convince someone go to Syria or Iraq.

There is limited information coming from the state institutions as to where the foreign fighters are currently or what is happening to them. According to an interview with a youngster in Skopje, there is one case where a foreign fighter in his early twenties is currently living in the city of Kacanik, Kosovo due to fear that he will be arrested by the Macedonian authorities. This youngster once helped his friend buy goods to be sent to the former FF. This just highlights the importance of having a regional approach to the issue of violent extremism, or at least good bilateral cooperation on the issue among neighbouring states.

After police operation "Cell 1," no direct calls to join ISIS or leave for Syria to fight were traced. However there has been an increase of activities that call for overindulgence in religion and of different campaigns about following the religion more strictly. One possible consequence was that the three biggest Albanian high schools in Skopje faced a significant decrease in numbers of students that want to celebrate Prom Night,

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<sup>198</sup> 21 years old student (male) coming from a Private University in the Municipality of Cair - Skopje, participant in the focus group in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica's offices.

<sup>199</sup> 19 years old student (male) coming from High School of Economy in the Municipality of Cair - Skopje, participant in the focus group in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica's offices

a traditional festive gathering in the final year of high school. On the contrary, there were an increased number of students that did not want to celebrate prom night due to religious reasons.<sup>200</sup> The high school “Cvetan Dimov” in the municipality of Cair did not organize the Prom Night at all, due to the fact that a majority of the students there considered prom night as being “Haram” (Forbidden) according to Islam.

According to one teacher from “Cvetan Dimov” high school, the situation was a result of certain teachers inside the school organizing the students and instructing them to follow religion more rigorously by gathering groups of males and taking them to empty classrooms to pray, though this claim comes from a single interview with a professor there, not verified in field.<sup>201</sup>

Furthermore, it has been determined that promotional religious materials such as brochures are proliferated often and openly in most of the Albanian high schools in Skopje, like the professional economy high school Arseni Jovkov, the gymnasium Zef Lush Marku, the professional chemistry high school Marija Kiri – Sklodovska, the professional medical high school “Dr. Pance Karagjozov” and the gymnasium Cvetan Dimov. Three of these schools are located in the Municipality of Cair, except the chemistry high school which has programs in Albanian and Macedonian language and it is situated in the Municipality of Karposh and the medical high school “Dr. Panche Karagjozov” which is located in the Municipality of Centar. Classes in this school are offered in two languages as well. In this school, brochures were given only to Albanian students in Albanian language. Brochures against celebrating prom night based on religious grounds were shared among the high school students. As was mentioned, the number of students wanting to celebrate decreased. It is important to note that the Law on High School Education explicitly forbids organizing any kind of religious activities at high school premises and has foreseen fines up to 1600 Euro for schools that have allowed that. The organization “Thirja Islame” (Islamic Call) just in 2016 has made at least three religious campaigns in all the mentioned schools. The campaigns cover topics such as how to pray (Value of Namaz), which was given in the high school “Zef Lush Marku” – Skopje and was conducted on 27.04.2016<sup>202</sup>. Earlier brochures against the celebration of the New Year had been given to the youngsters in this school<sup>203</sup>, and according to a participant from the focus group in Skopje, he was often given brochures at his high school “Arseni Jovkov,”<sup>204</sup> where he also spoke about teachers who try to identify students that

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<sup>200</sup> Prom Night between “Fashion Runway” and “Haram” [Matura mes ‘sfilatës’ dhe ‘haramit’] <http://www.magazina.al/matura-mes-sfilates-dhe-haramit/>; published on 23.05.2016

<sup>201</sup> Interview with a Professor from the High School “Cvetan Dimov”, interview conducted on 05.06.2016.

<sup>202</sup> Value of Namaz 27.04.2016 in Zef Lush Marku [“Vlera e Namazit” (27-04-2016) në ZEF LUSH MARKU] <http://www.thirrjaislame.com/thirrja/?p=21300>, page last time accessed on 28.07.2016

<sup>203</sup> Why “New Year” 16.12.2015 – Zef Lush Marku High School [“Përse Viti i Ri” 16-12-2015 Shkolla e mesme ”ZEF LUSH MARKU”] <http://www.thirrjaislame.com/thirrja/?p=19675>, page last time accessed on 28.07.2016

<sup>204</sup> 19 years old student (male) coming from High School of Economy in the Municipality of Cair - Skopje, participant in the focus group in Skopje, held on 18.05.2016 at Analytica’s offices.

are more interested in religion and suggest to those students religious events to attend. The organization “Thirja Islame” (Islamic Call) is the one that has been doing the school campaigns that often call for a more conservative way of practising Islam, however this organization has been seen to be close to the imam from Kumanovo Sadullah Bajrami who often has been criticized for his controversial statements, such as “those who cannot attend Friday prayer because of work should quit work”<sup>205</sup>, or “studying at law school is un-Islamic.” In response to this, the head chief of the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia reacted publicly by condemning this imam and his controversial statements.<sup>206</sup>

## 6.2 Kumanovo

Kumanovo is a city located in the northern part of Republic of Macedonia. According to the 2002 census, approximately 30% of its population is Muslim. It is bordered by the Municipality of Lipkovo, which is a municipality of the rural area of Kumanovo that mainly consists of Albanian villages, where 90% of the population in this municipality is Muslim. This region of Lipkovo is known for high migration and youth unemployment. In Kumanovo the most shocking case of a person becoming radicalized is the case of the 18-year-old girl who is believed to be in Syria currently and has married a foreign fighter.<sup>207</sup>

Other than this case, in the focus group in Kumanovo, the young participants shared their views on the scale of radicalization and the foreign fighters phenomenon. They believe that the phenomena are not that apparent as in Skopje, and it is mainly individuals that for different personal reasons became radicalized.<sup>208</sup>

Regarding the question as how would they recognize a person that has been radicalized, similar opinions to those in the other focus groups prevailed. The way to recognize radicalized persons they identified was if the people, when talking with other people, they do not accept different opinions, especially when it comes to religious topics. They claim to know the true version of Islam.

“Their beard is different from other fashionable beards because it does not have a moustache, and then you can recognize they have it because of religious reasons, which

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<sup>205</sup> Imam Bajrami – If you could not attend Friday prayer quit that job [Imami Bajrami: Nëse nuk mund të shkoni në xhuma, lëreni punën e shtetit] <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/imami-bajrami-nese-nuk-mund-te-shkoni-ne-xhuma-lereni-punen-e-shtetit-60189/?archive=1>; published on 17.11.2014

<sup>206</sup> Head of IRC: Imam Bajrami paid to deter believers from true Islam [Kryetari i BFI-së: Hoxha Bajrami i paguar për ti larguar besimtarët nga islami i vërtetë] <http://www.zhurnal.mk/content/?id=1672612242559>; published on 26.07.2016

<sup>207</sup> 18 years old girl from Kumanovo joined ISIS [Vajza 18 vjeçare nga Kumanova i është bashkangjitur ISIS-it] <http://www.telegrafi.com/vajza-18-vjecare-nga-kumanova-i-eshte-bashkangjitur-isis-it/>; published in 2015.

<sup>208</sup> Findings from the focus group with youngsters in Kumanovo, conducted on 21.05.2016

is not a sign of radicalization. As friends we still welcome them in our company, but they tend to get isolated and socialize only with people who are similar to them, because they do not approve our way of living.

“Another sign of radicalization is when they post aggressive news or videos from Syria (like beheadings) on their social media profiles.”

Of the reasons why someone has joined ISIS or went to Syria, most of the reasons listed in the focus group in Kumanovo were linked to either ideology, in that these people had embraced that ideology strongly, or solidarity with the Syrian people and against the Assad regime. The other reasons listed were social injustice in Macedonia, where the state does not treat the two majority religions the same, and where there are tendency for Muslims to be portrayed as extremists but they overlook the Christian orthodox extremism that oftentimes is helped by the state. As an example they pointed out the 40-meters-high cross in the Municipality of Aerodrom in Skopje and the one in the Municipality in Butel that is planned to be built. In such cases they see it as provocative and make them feel unwelcome in this country.

One of the participants in the focus group, the 18-year-old youngster from Skopje that had been present at a lecture by what he considers a radical imam, says that all daily politics in the state is used as an excuse to convince them that they are victims in this country and that in Syria or the Islamic State they would have freedom and a good life.

They expressed the need of having someone that has been to Syria and has returned share his experience with youth, since they hear a lot of myths from these imams or friends but they lack credible information that they would use as an argument against them.

When it comes to religious discrimination, most of the participants answered they feel they can practice their religion freely, but they felt more discriminated on ethnic grounds, in the way that other Muslim communities in Macedonia like Turks and Bosnians are not described in the media as being Muslims firstly, but whenever a news story is linked with the Albanians there is tendency to give more attention to their religion.

Organizations that promote radical ideology have greater influence on youngsters without previous knowledge of Islam or who have low level of education, and sometimes school drop-outs.

A dominant opinion in the group was that the state fights extremism only to show off to the West, such as the EU or the US, that they are fighting it, but these operations are done only partially and do not really fight the phenomenon since most of the propaganda is being spread very openly and not so much in secrecy and therefore the state must have information about it.

The lack of school debates or poor debates in the subject of philosophy in schools leaves youngsters with a poor understanding of the religion and its role, and makes them easy to manipulate. They believe that extremist organizations are better organized than any other youth organization and that is why they have shown to be more successful in attracting more youth.

When it comes to the question of criminalization of the participation in foreign wars, most of the participants expressed concerns about this since they believe that the ex-foreign fighters are victims as well since the state failed to prevent radical imams from preaching, but all agreed that recruiters should be prosecuted.

Regarding the question as to who they would trust the most to do activities to counter violent extremism, the answers varied similar between Ministry of Education, to IRC with the cooperation with the parents. They also thought that these activities should not only involve Muslims but other religious communities, who should learn about Islam as well, and Muslims should learn about other religions in Macedonia, such as Christianity, since they lack knowledge and they think that makes them less tolerant against the other communities in Macedonia.

### **6.3 Tetovo**

Is city situated in the western part of Macedonia, where predominantly ethnic Albanians live, 70% of the population is considered to belong to the religion of Islam. The biggest part of the rural area of the Tetovo region is in the Municipality of Tearce, where 90% of the population is considered to be Muslim.

The Tetovo region serves as an example that the higher percentage of Muslims does not necessarily produce higher number of foreign fighters. Although statistical data per/city are missing, during the research activities, the more severe cases of foreign fighters or increased extremist propaganda were not identified in Tetovo, only sporadic cases and attempts of questionable organizations to install their influence.

From the focus group with youngsters in Tetovo, a young female student described the case where an organization rented an apartment on the first floor of their building and started inviting tenants to religious lectures. A very short time after this, the tenants organized themselves and signed a joint request that the organization be expelled from the building, which they succeeded in later.

Cases of foreign fighters who have died in Syria or Iraq coming from the city of Tetovo so far have not been identified publicly.

So far only two persons from the city of Tetovo have been arrested on the grounds of participation in foreign wars or of recruiting foreign fighters. The first one was arrested as part of the "Cell" police operation and has already been convicted with 3 years

and 1 month of prison time,<sup>209</sup> while the second person from Tetovo got arrested as part of the police operation “Cell 2” where he is being charged for participation in a foreign war in Syria or Iraq.<sup>210</sup>

During the focus group in Tetovo, the same questions were asked, such as how they would recognize a radicalized person, have they had experience of knowing someone being radicalized or that had gone to Syria or Iraq, have they been approached personally to join those groups, and the more general question of what do they consider that drives these individuals towards radicalization and what do they lack as youngsters in the city of Tetovo.

Answers coming from the focus group in Tetovo were more specific compared to the other two groups in Kumanovo and Skopje. To the question do they know anyone that had left for Syria or Iraq, most of the participants expressed they heard about someone that joined those groups in Syria or Iraq, but these were not cases whom they knew personally but rather people they heard about from their social circle without knowing the person directly.<sup>211</sup> Compared to Skopje and Kumanovo, participants were pointing out more persons or relatives of people from their immediate social circle or family.

However, when asked how they would recognize a radicalized person, most of the reasons listed were drastic change of behaviour in a very short time of individuals. Cases that they described were classmates or fellow colleagues/students who over very short period of time isolated themselves from all social activities and show interest only in having religious debates. One of the participants, a female student of Law in her early twenties, described the case of one of her cousins. Her cousin was a member of the Albanian diaspora who had returned to Tetovo to study, who became under risk of radicalization after he starting to socialize with a group of friends that influenced him to isolate from the rest of the family and other social activities. His parents reacted in time, and in a period of 2-3 weeks they were able to convince him to leave this group and leave Macedonia. This case just highlights the impact the parents can have on their children when youngsters are detected early in the radicalization process.

When it comes to the term “radicalization” most of the students in Tetovo struggled to use this terminology, since they could not provide arguments why it is bad as a phenomenon, or often times the process itself involves turning more to religion which is not seen as doing anything wrong. They lacked religious arguments as in at what point does

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<sup>209</sup> Case “Cell”: Prison sentences from two to four years and half for five of the accused [СЛУЧАЈ „ЌЕЛИЈА“: Казни затвор од две до четири и пол години за петтемина обвинети] <http://www.akademik.mk/sluchaj-kjelija-kazni-zatvor-od-dve-do-chetiri-i-pol-godini-za-pettemina-obvineti/>; published on 18.05.2016

<sup>210</sup> Four islamist suspects arrested in the police operation “Cell-2” [Четворица осомничени исламисти уапсени во полициската операција „Ќелија- 2”] <http://www.telma.com.mk/vesti/chetvorica-osomnicheni-islamisti-uapseni-vo-policiskata-operacija-kjelija-2/>; published on 09.07.2016

<sup>211</sup> Findings from the focus group with youngsters in Tetovo, conducted on 20.05.2016



radicalization become wrong and they stressed the need for this phenomenon to be better explained by religious leaders.

The vague concept of radicalization often leaves the youth, which is believed to be most targeted demographic in Macedonia, unprotected and unequipped with the needed counter-arguments or understandings for how not to fall into the traps of extremist propaganda.

All of the participants condemned the participation in the war of Syria or Iraq but not all agreed that the foreign fighters should be imprisoned since they did not believe that they would pose real danger for Macedonia. However, everyone agreed that they should be put in resocialization programs.

The overall assessment in Tetovo is that youth face socio-economic issues in general and that youth unemployment is high; most of the participants answered they would seek opportunities outside Macedonia once they have graduated. However, it is considered that there exist a few pockets on a low scale of groups that share extremist views in Tetovo, but compared to the other two cities from the case study, Tetovo appears to be less affected by the phenomenon.

## Conclusions

The issue of foreign fighters is not a new phenomenon for Macedonia. Macedonian citizens have been joining fighting in foreign wars for the past several decades, albeit in very small numbers. There are reported cases of individuals joining groups that have been fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The latest wave of foreign fighters, which began at the end of 2011 with the conflict in Syria gaining momentum, has been the most massive wave in recent history. Tens of thousands of fighters from all over the world have joined different factions in the war in Syria and Iraq.

Macedonia and the countries of the Western Balkans have also been affected by this phenomenon. There are 86 fighters who have already returned to Macedonia from the conflict in Syria and Iraq. 11 individuals have been sentenced to jail thanks to Operation Cell 1, while an additional 4 individuals have been arrested in 'Operation Cell 2' which took place on July 9th 2016. More than a hundred individuals from Macedonia are still in Syria/Iraq or were killed while fighting.

It is important to note in Macedonia since the first police operation "Cell" the number of Macedonian citizens joining ISIS or other formations in Syria or Iraq has dramatically dropped. However, this does not mean that extremist ideas have stopped circulating. It is likely that, due to the government crackdown on recruitment for foreign groups, extremists have gone incognito, and have either started traveling to Syria and Iraq more carefully or have simply refocused on strengthening their domestic support.

The strategy of Macedonia predominantly focuses on executive and judicial powers, with little to no community engagement. Macedonian authorities look at the issue mainly from a law enforcement point of view. That is demonstrated by the fact that there is no separate CVE strategy, but rather, CVE is seen as a part of the broader counter-terrorism strategy.

Preventing violent extremism requires a strategy of 'engaging and empowering individuals and groups at the local level to build resilience against violent extremism. Communities have a key role to play in recognizing and combating violent extremism, as it is happening in their neighborhoods to people who are their relatives, their friends, and people they know. Therefore it is crucial to equip the communities themselves with the right tools and skills so that they can address this threat that is hurting each individual community.

Another concern is the process of resocialization of the violent extremists and foreign fighters. Currently in Macedonia there is no active program for resocialization and reintegration of the foreign fighters who have returned and who may, thanks to the lack of programs, return to the battleground in the future. The individuals that have been sentenced to prison on grounds of violent extremism will come to be in touch with the

general prison population, which is already more vulnerable than the general population to radical ideas, and will likely try to approach them to spread their ideas.

Violent extremism is a global phenomenon and as such it is a threat not only to Macedonia, but also other countries in the Western Balkans and Europe. Due to the global nature of the phenomenon, it is impossible for one country to address it on its own. Therefore it is crucial for there to be solid cooperation on the issue, especially among countries from the Western Balkans. It is encouraging that governments from the region have realized this and are working on improving cooperation when it comes to matters of CVE.

## **Recommendations**

### **Parliament, MPs**

- Propose legal changes to the law that criminalized participation in foreign wars, article 322-a that would allow certain professionals (religious, social, health workers or specialized persons that would be responsible for de-radicalization activities) to approach foreign fighters without being prosecuted for not reporting them to the authorities

### **Government**

- Initiate new bilateral/regional agreements between the security institutions in the region and specifically the neighboring countries on timely sharing of information and increased cooperation in countering jointly this phenomenon.

- Revise CT strategy (2016) with wide consultation with all relevant stakeholders (CSO, Religious Communities, Local Communities).

- The revised CT strategy should be inclusive, offering a holistic government approach, contrary to the current one that main implementing body role has been assigned to the security institutions

- Adopt a detailed Action Plan that would include timeframes/budget/implementing bodies per activity promptly after the new strategy is adopted

- Appoint new CVE coordinator that would have public role in speaking/raising awareness on the violent extremism phenomenon, this person ideally should be someone that has trust from all ethnic/religious communities in Macedonia. The National CVE coordinator should also be a person with integrity and authority that can easily cooperate with state institutions as well.

- Create bodies of experts from different backgrounds such as psychologists, religious leaders, and social workers who can better evaluate whether former foreign fighters still have violent tendencies, and whether they are actually a threat to society.

Macedonian Government should also allocate financial/material/technical resources for the implementation of the activities related to CVE.

## **MOI**

- Declassify data for foreign fighters such as statistic numbers, profiles and similar for NGO sector or Academia who could help by conducting independent research on this issue.
- Be more transparent over police operations in releasing information in a timely manner for the public
- MOI should be more open for cooperation with other relevant actors such as IRC, CSOs, and the Ministry of Education when it comes to CVE.
- Hire more people with an understanding/background in religion, and Arabic speakers.
- Cooperate with religious leaders on educating their officers and employees for better understanding of religion, which would help them make more accurate distinction between individuals who practice conservative Islam and individuals who actually have violent tendencies.
- Train police officers how to recognize early signs of radicalization and how to approach such cases.
- Explore possible areas where Community policing as a concept can be further utilised in prevention of violent extremism.

## **CVE/CT coordinator**

- Develop training programs for MoI officials, Social and Education workers on early recognition of signs of radicalization.
- Develop prevention programs against radicalization
- Develop resocialization and reintegration programs in cooperation with other state institutions like the Ministries of Education, Health, Labor and Social Welfare and the religious community, which would be able to address the causes of the radicalization of these individuals and effectively counter them and provide solutions.
- Develop a prison deradicalization program jointly with IRC, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of labor.
- Ensure timely implementation of the CVE/CT strategy.
- Monitor and evaluate implementation of CT/CVE strategies activities, set frequent transparent reporting timeframes

## **IRC**

- Cooperate with CSOs. IRC should be more open and transparent when it comes to its finances to ensure credibility from the population as a religious institution

- IRC should increase its presence on social media by establishing a social media team that would counter the extremist propaganda online.

- IRC should work with former extremists who have given up on their violent ways, as together they can reach out to youth that are in the early phases of indoctrination.

- Develop educative programs on the radicalization phenomenon and actively speak to counter the extremist propaganda among believers in all mosques in Macedonia.

- IRC, Madrassas and the Faculty of Islamic Science should include classes where the students will learn more about the specifics of violent extremism, and how to recognize and prevent it.

## **Media**

- Should be more careful when reporting on CVE issues, not to propagate further extremist propaganda.

- Train journalists how to report and write in this topic.

- Journalists should cover CVE related topics in an investigative journalism manner which would provide foundations for more informed discussions on the issue.

## **Local government/municipalities**

- Activate their prevention councils and initiate community discussions on the issue of extremism

- Organize with the preventions council's campaigns for countering extremist propaganda in their municipalities and schools.

- Identify potential sources of extremist propaganda and report to authorities accordingly

## **Judicial System**

- Be more transparent in the cases of prosecution of individuals suspected of being violent extremists.

- Capacities of Public Prosecutor's Office should be enhanced in dealing with cases regarding participation in foreign wars.



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- Interview with youngster from Skopje, 24 years old, interview conducted in June, 2016.
- Interview with family relative of the girl who attempted to go to Syria from the village of Aracinovo, Skopje, conducted on 16.05.2016
- Interview with family relative of one of the girls coming from the Skopje rural area who had an intention to go to Syria but were stopped in Pristina, speaking about the case, conducted on 18.01. 2016
- Interview with Lulzim Peci Executive Director of Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), conducted on 19.02.2016

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- Interview with NGO representative working on security issues in Kosovo, conducted on 19.02.2016
- Interview with Gjergji Vurmo - Program Director of Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) Albania, conducted on 10.03.2016
- Interview with official from the Kosovo Security Council, conducted on 19.02.2016
- Interview with Ebi Spahiu, independent researcher on radicalization and foreign fighter phenomenon in Albania, conducted on 10.02.2016
- Interview with a University Professor of Law, conducted on 15.03.2016
- Interview with Besa Ismaili, professor at the Faculty of Islamic Science – Prishtina, CVE coordinator for working with women, conducted on 21.03.2016
- Interview with Edon Myftari, PMs political advisor/CVE coordinator in Kosovo, conducted on 19.02.2016
- Interview with high ranking official of IRC Macedonia. Conducted on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016
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## Focus Groups

- Discussions with three focus groups from municipalities of Cair-Skopje, Kumanovo and Tetovo conducted on 18.05.2016, 20.05.2016 and 21.05.2016.

## Questionnaires sent via Freedom of Information Act

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