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# RETURNING FROM VIOLENCE: HOW TO TACKLE THE FOREIGN FIGHTERS' PROBLEM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?



INSTITUTE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE



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Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

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\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.



# ABOUT THE PROJECT

The project that is entitled “Returning from violence: How to tackle the foreign fighters’ problem in the Western Balkans?” has been launched by the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade in Budapest in order to encourage research and exchange of information and experience on the foreign fighter phenomenon in the Western Balkans and thus to contribute to better understanding of the problem and the challenge foreign fighters and returnees mean for security and stability.

The project addresses a topic that is highly politicised and securitised and which lures great attention of the media and politicians as it is often associated with the themes of terrorism and migration crisis. Unfortunately, the political and public discourse often lacks the proper understanding of the phenomenon while easily stigmatises countries or groups of people. For this reason, the primary aim of the project is to explore the phenomenon in a comprehensive manner that highlights its complexity (incl. conflicts zones and societal groups that are concerned).

Through a comprehensive approach, the communication with the public can be depurated from negative prejudices while it can contribute to better policy solutions both in the EU/V4 and the Western Balkan countries. The project facilitates the analyses of the phenomenon and the policy solutions of the countries in concern which will allow the exploration of gap between problems and solutions as well as opportunities for cooperation. The latter is of utmost importance in the Western Balkans where confidence-building among governments is still a challenge. The security and stability of the region is also prerequisite for the broader European security.

The project involved experts from both the Visegrad and Western Balkan countries who exchanged their views and experience on this topic on a conference in Budapest on 26 April 2018 as well as contributed with their research findings and recommendations to this book.

The project was coordinated by the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade. The core partners of the initiative are Warsaw Institute for Strategic Initiatives, the Slovak Foreign Policy Association and the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy.

From the Western Balkan countries, the following experts took part in the project:

- Sanjin Hamidićević, project coordinator, Centre for Security Studies - BH, Sarajevo
- Mentor Vrajolli, senior researcher, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, Pristina
- Redion Qirjazi, independent researcher and consultant, Tirana
- Marija Ignjatijević, researcher, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Belgrade
- Stefanija Agrotova, teaching assistant, Marshall Center’s Alumni Association - Republic of Macedonia, Skopje
- Milica Kovačević, president, Center for Democratic Transition, Podgorica

The project is funded by the International Visegrad Fund Standard Grant (Nr. 21710399).

# FOREWORD

ANNA OROSZ<sup>1</sup>

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The foreign fighter phenomenon gained broad public attention as a consequence of terrorist attacks in the EU and the migration crisis, and it became a popular topic of the media as well as the political discourse. Unfortunately, the communication about this important but complex issue often lacks a neutral and balanced approach and it is rather abused for attention-seeking and popularity-increasing purposes.

Until 2017 approximately 42,900 foreign fighters from 120 countries travelled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIL/Daesh from whom more than 5,000 individuals were from the EU. Meanwhile several terrorist attacks motivated by the Islamic States were committed in the territory of the European Union (including France, Germany and the United Kingdom) that further increased the attention on this phenomenon but it also strengthened a discourse that mainly focused on Islam radicalisation.

Meanwhile, the conflict in Ukraine also emerged that lured large number of foreign fighters. However, this aspect of the phenomenon were given much less attention for several reasons. On the one hand, large majority of foreign fighters in Ukraine is of Russian origin, and it is often hard to define whether they are volunteers or member of the official Russian forces (although denied by Moscow). Another reason for the lower level attention is that these fighters and returnees did not commit such terrorist attacks like the jihadist. But it is to be noted that they can also pose threat to state security like the case of Montenegro demonstrates..

Although the Visegrad countries are directly less concerned with the foreign fighter phenomenon – interestingly, they might be more concerned with the problem of far-right extremism than Islam radicalism –, they are committed to sustain security in the EU and for this reason, the V4 pays attention to the developments related to this issue. Furthermore, the V4 supports the European integration of the Western Balkan countries that to the contrary face various challenges related to foreign fighters.

Azinović and Bećirević (2017, p. 7) found that approximately 1,000 people (including both combatant and non-combatant men, women, children and elderly) travelled from the Western Balkans to Syria and Iraq in the period between end of 2012 and end of 2017. The number of returnees is around 300, while the number of killed is estimated to be ca. 200. Some 400 remained in the conflict zones, while others are considered as missing persons. The departures slowed down since mid-2015 and almost stopped by mid-2016.

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Even though their number is much lower, the region is also source of foreign fighters who travelled to Ukraine to join mainly pro-Russian separatist forces. However, as Jelena Beslin and Marija Ignjatijevic notes, "other [than Islam] forms of extremism, such as right-wing nationalism, if acknowledged at all, are regarded as a secondary concern" (2017, p. 1). The principal country of origin is Serbia: approximately 100 men joined the conflicts in Ukraine. From the whole Western Balkan region, ca. 150-200 individuals took part in the battles in different parts of Ukraine. Although both groups of people could be described as foreign fighters, the public opinion and the political discourse on the fighters in Ukraine significantly differ from the one on jihadists and this has also tangible effect on the way in which legal provisions are applied and prosecutions are carried out.

Although the contributors of this book are aware of the differences in the number of foreign fighters in the different conflicts, there are several reasons that justifies their common analyses. The Western Balkans is a region where different ethnic and religious groups live next to each other and where conflicts and wars having also inter-ethnic character took places. The break-up of Yugoslavia has a long-term negative impact on inter-ethnic relations and for this reason supporting reconciliation process is essential to support stability in the region. Nonetheless, the above mentioned double standards in the application of legal measures can easily harm this sensitive process by alienating certain Muslim groups in these countries. Furthermore, the narrow interpretation of the phenomenon by focusing one or another group of foreign fighters can be also easily abused by politicians who hope additional votes by strengthening division within the society, although both jihadists and right-wing nationalist can pose challenge and threat to the state in the Western Balkans even though their motivation, tools and targets are different.

The regional approach in the Western Balkans is inevitable. Based on the data on foreign fighters' background and the number of travels, similar patterns can be realized among the countries concerned. In the first phase of the conflicts both in Syria and Iraq, and in Ukraine participation of foreign fighters was motivated to a large extent by the legacy of former wars (for example the support of other Muslim mujahedeens to Bosnian Muslims and Albanians against oppression, or the support of Russia to Serbia, etc.). Nevertheless, many of these fighters returned after they faced the real nature of the conflicts. Consequently, the nature of threat that the first returnees pose is different from those who returned or will return later.

On the other hand, political tensions are still prevalent among the countries of the Western Balkans, and regional cooperation in combating terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation might underpin confidence-building that would also support the Euro-Atlantic integration process of these countries. The Berlin process also pays increasing attention to cooperation in this field. Fighting extremism and

radicalisation was taken on the agenda on the Vienna Summit in 2015 ("Final Declaration by the Chair of the Vienna Western Balkans Summit," 2015) and since then several steps and measures (including information sharing, cooperation with Europol, European Counter-Terrorism Centre and the Police Cooperation Common Centres, implementation of the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe, actions against trafficking of firearms, small arms and light weapons) have been foreseen. ("Declaration by the Italian Chair," 2017)

Returnees can also pose important challenges to the Western Balkan countries. The governments have already launched strategies to prevent/counter violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism. However, the prevention and de-radicalisation haven't been handled as a priority so far. Most of them enacted amendments to their Criminal Codes that enabled actions of the security and police forces that concluded arrests of returnees, recruiters and other supporters of phenomenon.

The experts from the Western Balkans contributing to this book give an insight into the state of affairs of each individual country. The country papers provide updated information regarding the numbers and backgrounds of foreign fighters and returnees, as well as about the measures that were put in place by the state institutions to counter the phenomenon. They also present the role of other actors in these measures and actions. Last but not least, the contributors evaluate the situation in their respective countries and formulate some recommendations that hopefully will be considered in the future.

Authors from the Visegrad countries contributed to this book by presenting themes that are relevant for the foreign fighter phenomenon from a more general perspective. Peter Wagner, senior research fellow of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade introduce the concept of foreign fighters and provide a general outlook on this phenomenon. This chapter is followed by the study of Andrzej Kozłowski, research fellow of the Warsaw Institute for Strategic Initiatives who analyses the online recruitment and radicalisation techniques that are definitely hard to cope with and therefore, it is important to understand the way in which they work and what contents they use. In the light of the increasing challenge of radicalisation, a specific chapter was dedicated to the introduction of the Aarhus model, multi-actor and multi-layer de-radicalisation model that could serve with good examples for bottom-up approach in fight against radicalisation. Christian Kvorning, research fellow of the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy(Prague) covered this topic within the framework of this project. Last but not Tomáš Madleňák, researcher of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association analyses that how the EU and some V4 countries deals with the foreign fighter phenomenon, what measures were launched and highlights similar problems and anomalies in their approach than in case of the Western Balkan countries.



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# FOREIGN FIGHTERS FROM EUROPE: A SHORT OVERVIEW

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PETER WAGNER, PH.D.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Europe has been facing a growing number of jihadist attacks. Most atrocities are committed by a new type of jihadist whose primary characteristic is that they carry out their attacks in a country that is different from their country of origin. These so-called foreign terrorist fighters have been returning now to Europe and other regions (Russia, North Africa, United States) posing a new risk for the political systems, counter-terrorism and social services.

The big dilemma is how to handle this influx. There are two main approaches: according to the legal one, the best way is to sentence these jihadists. On the other hand, the de-radicalisation approach questions the efficacy of heavy sentences, having learned that prisons are the best soil for spread of radical ideas and recruitment.

The pressure on our political and legal systems is immense, because hundreds of these foreign fighters are coming back to Europe and even if just a few of them commit a terrorist attack in Europe, there will be heavy demand for tougher actions against them and government policies will be made responsible. After the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014 a new form of the foreign fighter phenomenon emerged. Volunteers joined both militias fighting on the Ukrainian side and in the Eastern-Ukrainian separatist groups. Although their numbers and effect on European security is by far not as significant as that of jihadist foreign fighters, their existence has pointed out that the foreign fighter phenomenon is not specific to a certain geographical region or ideology.

This paper offers an overview of three aspects of the foreign fighter phenomenon. First we discuss the efforts and different forms of definition of the concept and also highlighting the evolution of the phenomenon. The second chapter brings together the different estimates on the numbers of foreign fighters published by different sources in the last couple of years. The last chapters focus briefly on the importance of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans and Ukraine offering a short overview of literature already published about these two regions.

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## THE CONCEPT OF FOREIGN FIGHTER

When discussing the Foreign Fighter phenomenon we constantly face the problem that this has been a relatively new phenomenon hence there is no universal definition regarding it. David Malet who wrote a book on the foreign fighter phenomenon defined the fighters as “non-citizen of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil war” (Malet, 2013, p. 13.).

Thomas Hegghammer who builds his definition on Malet’s one, uses four criteria. A foreign fighter is an agent who:

- has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency,
- lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions,
- lacks affiliation to an official military organisation, and
- is unpaid. (Hegghammer, 2011b, p. 57-58)

These distinctions are important, because we have to separate foreign fighters from the other types of violent actors who participate in conflicts other than their country of origin. Mercenaries are paid, insurgents are related to conflict by ethnicity or kinship, and soldiers are part of official military organisations. Hegghammer argues that a foreign fighter is not an international terrorist per definition, because the latter “specialize in out-of-area violence against non-combatants” while the former tend to fight in one combat zone. (Hegghammer, 2011b, p. 58)

Other authors defines foreign fighters as “non-indigenous, non-territorialised combatants who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict to participate in hostilities” (Moore & Tumelty, 2008, p. 412). The common aspects in all of these definitions are the lack of role of financial incentives in motivating the individual fighters and the lack of legal bond between the combatant and the territory where he/she takes up the fight.

Various authors tend to emphasize that the foreign fighter phenomenon is not a new one. Jeanine de Roy van Zuydewijn brings the example of the Zuavi Pontifici (the Papal Zouves), an approximately 5000 strong force from a dozen countries, whose Catholic fighters came to defend the Papal State during the Italian unification process in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (de Roy van Zuydewijn, 2017, p. 1) We also have to add that foreign fighters fought on the other side of the conflict as well including Hungarian veterans of the 1848/49 Hungarian revolution.

David Malet goes even beyond that, arguing that European foreign fighters (who we usually describe as freedom fighters) participated in the revolutionary wars in the American Revolutionary War and in Simon Bolivar’s revolutionary wars in South America. Since 1814 Malet counted at least 90 conflicts in which foreign fighters have been involved. (Malet, 2018, p. 7)

Some authors argue that the definitions listed above are too narrow, and mercenaries and those joining to the French Legion should be included in the

**TABLE 1: (European) Foreign Fighters in History**

Conflict	Foreign Fighters	Approx. Total	Approx. Europeans
American Revolution (1770s-1780s)	Various Private Volunteers	500	400
Bolivarian Revolutions (1810-1820s)	Albion Legion, Irish Legion	7,000	7,000
Greek War of Independence (1820s)	Filiki Eteria	1,500	1,200
Italian Risorgimento (1860s)	International Legion	2,500	2,500
Russian Revolution and Civil War (1910s-1920s)	International Brigades	50,000	30,000
Spanish Civil War (1930s)	International Brigades, Leftists, Fascists	60,000	55,000
Afghanistan (1970s-2000s)	Jihadis	25,000	1,500
Bosnian War (1990s)	Jihadis	5,000	500
Chechnya (1990s-2010s)	Jihadis	700	20
Somalia (1990s-2010s)	Jihadis, Al Shabaab	2,000	200
Iraqi Occupation (2000s)	AQI	5,000	100
Yemen (2010s)	AQAP	4,000	200
Ukraine (2010s)	Azov Battalion, Donbass International Brigade	3,000	3,000
Syria-Iraq (2010s)	ISIS, Jihadis, Peshmerga	40,000	5,000

*Note:* Figures provided in this table are estimates, with a high degree of imprecision, based on the best information available. While interesting for comparative purposes, figures should be regarded and used with extreme caution.

SOURCE: DAVID MALET (2018): OP CIT 9.

category of foreign fighters. (Larsen, 2017, p. 13) This would go against the criteria which focus on the ideological/ethnic motivation of the combatants participating in civil wars.

David Malet’s compilation of important civil wars where European foreign fighters have participated shows two major conflicts where the number of volunteers highly exceeded those who have fought in the Syria-Iraq conflicts. While it is right to include the Spanish Civil War in this table, we need to further think about the exact role of the foreign fighters in the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Most of the volunteers in the International Brigades were ex-combatants of the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary whose only aim was at that time to return to their homeland as soon as possible. Most of them did not join the belligerents because of ideological motivation but either because they were mobilized to fight by the Reds or the Whites or because that seemed the most effective way to ensure their way back home.

Being a foreign fighter and a terrorist in the same time is a recent phenomenon. Only since the 1990s do we consider combatants of jihadist background as terrorist. The United Nations first used the term Foreign Terrorist Fighter in 2014, after a high level



summit in New York. Organized as the direct response to the declaration of the ISIS “Caliphate” and the growing number of foreign fighters joining the terrorist organisation, in September 2014 the UN Security Council adopted the Resolution 2178/2014 in which it called the Member States to take concrete actions. The resolution defined Foreign Terrorist Fighters as “individuals traveling to a state different from their nation of residence or citizenship for the purpose of carrying out, planning, preparing or participating in acts of terrorism or to provide or receive terrorist training” (UNSC Res. 2178/2014).

### **FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN NUMBERS**

Until recently the most comprehensive attempt to track volunteers who joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria was done by Richard Barrett and the Soufan Group. Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees was published in November 2017 and as its title suggests it also focused on a new development, the growing number of returnees. The countries with the most fighters in the conflict in Syria and Iraq are from the former Soviet Republics (8717), the Middle East (7054), and Western Europe (5778). The document categorized the Balkan as a distinct region with 845 identified combatants fighting in the ranks of the ISIS.

The overall size of foreign fighter contingent has changed according to the battlefield success or losses of the ISIS. There is a general consensus that the numbers of volunteers peaked sometime in 2016, and since then their number have been slowly decreasing. After the declaration of the “Caliphate” there was a steep increase in the number of volunteers, in December 2015 the previous report of the Soufan Group estimated that approximately 27,000 and 31,000 people travelled to Syria and Iraq. (The Soufan Group, 2015) In February 2016, James Clapper, the Director of the National Intelligence<sup>2</sup> claimed that 36 500 fighters joined different organisations in the civil war. (Clapper, 2016, p. 5) Finally, in July 2016 the head of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee estimated, that up to 30 000 foreign fighters were operating in Syria and Iraq. (Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, 2016)

This is a huge number of foreign fighters compared to previous conflicts, as Table 1 shows. In his study on Muslim foreign fighters, Thomas Hegghammer (2011a, p. 1) estimated in 2011 that since 1980 between 10,000 and 30,000 such fighters have inserted themselves into conflicts from Bosnia in the west to the Philippines in the east. If we compare these estimates with the potential number of volunteers traveling to the Middle East to participate in violent jihadism, we should realize that between 2011 and 2016, in just six years more Muslim foreign fighters joined the Islamic States than any other jihadist organisations in the preceding 30 years.

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2 The Director of National Intelligence (DNI) is a cabinet level position in the United States government established in 2004. The DNI serves as the head of the U.S. intelligence community composed of more than a dozen different agencies.

Why has the Syrian civil war become so popular among the jihadist fighters? The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 did not only destabilise the country, it also served as a breeding ground for future jihadist. Just like the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan two decades earlier, – as the U. S. National Intelligence Estimate in 2006 puts it – “The Iraq conflict has become the ‘cause celebre’ for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment of US involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement” (National Intelligence Estimate, 2006, p. 5).

While the insurgency remained dominated by Iraqis resenting the occupation, between 1,000 and 3,000 foreign fighters arrived in Iraq, responsible for most of the suicide bombings and exacerbate the intercommunal strife. (Hoffmann, 2004, p. 13)

From a jihadist point of view, accessing the frontline in Iraq from the outside world was much harder than later in Syria. Iraq's border with Turkey (through the Kurdistan Regional Government's security apparatus) and Iran were almost “sealed”. Jordan, Kuwait and Saud-Arabia were close allies of the USA, willing to take every step to prevent the inflow of potential jihadist from their territories. Due to several geopolitical reasons Syria became the main entry point for volunteers for entering Western Iraq. But Syria itself was a security state with limited air and land connection (and strict visa regulations) to Europe and the West. Reaching Damascus either directly or through Lebanon was fairly expensive and complicated, from there travelling to Iraq could be done only under the watchful eyes of the Syrian authorities.

Almost ten years after the Iraq War the Arab world was already in upheaval when the civil war broke out in Syria. After some months of hesitation Turkey placed its bets on opposition, opened its border for the influx of volunteers and military support (and also for the outflow of refugees). Turkey, especially its southern Mediterranean regions were hot pots for mass tourism with daily low cost connections with major European cities. The relative cost for entering the foreign fighter “lifestyle”, joining the armed opposition groups, the Kurds or the jihadist organisations were exponentially lower than in Afghanistan in 1980s or in Iraq in the 2000s.

Two developments sped up this recent decrease in numbers. On the one hand, due to the pressure of the international community, Ankara gradually made it more difficult for them to travel to Syria, while the Islamic State lost its overland border to Turkey. On the other hand, fights against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria escalated. This is when the organisation first went into defensive, and it gradually started to lose both territory and popularity.

## **FOREIGN FIGHTERS FROM THE WESTERN BALKAN AND UKRAINE**

The case of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans has been underrepresented in Western academic and policy research. Compared to the academic studies on British, Scandinavian, German, or French speaking foreign fighters, only a handful of papers on the region's jihadist volunteers have been published, probably due to the



lack of information. One of the earliest analyses was published by the Combating Terrorism Center in 2014<sup>3</sup>, whereas the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network issued a longer report in 2016<sup>4</sup>. In 2017 EUISS offered a short brief<sup>5</sup> and a chapter in a book about the foreign fighter phenomenon focused on the Western Balkans.<sup>6</sup> The dilemma of returning foreign fighters has added a new angle of research, in 2017 a long article was published by New Eastern Europe website<sup>7</sup> and a policy paper in 2018 by the Strategic Policy Institute from Slovakia.<sup>8</sup>

The Soufan Center identified 845 persons who travelled from the Balkans to Syria and Iraq excluding approx. 448 women and children who joined the volunteers. (Barrett, 2017, p. 11).<sup>9</sup> The number of foreign fighters identified by the Center slightly decreased compared to its previous report which counted 875 volunteers, almost 800 of them coming from four countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. (The Soufan Group, 2015).

Why should the academic community put more emphasis on studying the foreign fighters from the Western Balkans? On the one hand these states in the soft underbelly of Europe are more vulnerable to any kind of challenges than their counterparts in Central and Western Europe. Western Balkan states usually have weakened state institutions, lack organisational capacity to cope with emerging challenges and are in an almost constant internal political struggle. Their capacity to deal with returning foreign fighters both in terms of policing capacity and de-radicalisation efforts are limited or in some cases non-existent.

On the other hand returning foreign fighters in the Western Balkans could also affect the security of the Western European countries. There is a sizeable Albanian and Bosnian diaspora living in Scandinavia, Germany or Switzerland. Using informal channels, family connections, those extremists could use their native country to transit to Western Europe and plot a terrorist attack there.

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3 Holman, T. (2014). Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkan in Syria. CTC Sentinel, Vol. 7 No. 6, June, 2014, pp. 8–13. Retrieved from <https://ctc.usma.edu/foreign-fighters-from-the-western-balkans-in-syria>

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9 This number may be higher since the report was based on open source information regarding Kosovar and Bosnian women and children.

If foreign fighters from the Western Balkans are underrepresented in academic research, the situation is even worse regarding Ukraine. As we showed above, for decades the history of Sunni Jihadi foreign fighters was the dominant narrative. Since 2014 a new kind of foreign fighters phenomenon emerged in the Ukrainian civil war, volunteers mainly from Europe appeared on both sides of the front line. Here the foreign fighters phenomenon has been developing in a very different legal and media environment compared to Syria and Iraq, hence systematic research is even harder than in the case of the Islamic State.

So far the only noticeable effort in terms of academic research has been put forward by Kacper Rekawek, published in his research paper “Neither NATO’s Foreign Legion Nor the Donbass International Brigades” in 2015 which was the first of its kind. In 2016 Rekawek extended his research with the help of the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme and organized a workshop on comparing Syrian and Ukrainian foreign fighters adding four new research papers to the academic literature including András Rácz’s paper on Russian foreign fighters in Ukraine and Pierre Sautreuil’s research on French foreign fighters in Ukraine.<sup>10</sup>

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# THE RECRUITMENT OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN CYBERSPACE. THE CASE OF ISIS

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## INTRODUCTION

The following article focuses on the mechanism of recruiting foreign fighters by using the internet. In this research paper the case of the Islamic State will be presented due to the fact that this organisation has developed the most sophisticated tools and methods in this area. This paper claims that the internet has played a significant role in recruiting people and has been crucial in attracting a massive number of foreign fighters.

This article presents the grand strategy of ISIS to explore the main goals of this organisation and to highlight the importance of recruitment of foreign fighters to achieve them. Then, the structure of communication cell will be depicted, which was responsible for creating a tempting and cohesive message to attract Muslims from all around the world. The next part of the paper focuses on the presentation of ISIS as an attractive brand and the actions that were undertaken to strengthen this image. The paper brings examples of propaganda magazines and videoclips to demonstrate the practical aspects of ISIS propaganda. Afterwards the distribution via social media will be analysed. Finally, the article assesses shortly the effectiveness of ISIS recruitment strategy.

## PROPAGANDA AND RECRUITMENT IN THE SERVICE OF ISIS GRAND STRATEGY

More than 30 thousands of foreign fighters from around 100 countries travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). The significant scale of this phenomenon caught the attention of media, experts, governments and the international institutions. However, the foreign fighter's concept is not completely new and does not belong only to the digital era. Throughout the history we can observe their activity in various conflicts with the most famous case of Civil War in Spain 1936-1939 where around 35 thousands foreign fighters defended the Spanish Republic against forces led by General Francisco Franco.

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In fact, it was far before the information age, and the information and propaganda were spread by printed press and broadcast on the radio, which limited its range and access to content. Nowadays, the conflicts in Syria brought one of the biggest numbers of foreign fighters since the Spanish Civil war in the 20th century.

The grand strategy of ISIS was to set up a new global caliphate. After seizing the large territories of Syria and Iraq, ISIS planned to expand its territory further. Achieving this strategic aim required strong military forces and many new recruits from various countries. The consolidation of ISIS as a state could have been achieved only through the formation of a strong base of supporters. (Harleen, 2014, p. 1) Ali Bakr Al-Bagdadi and his strategic advisors believed that only massive mobilization of Muslims in the whole world would enable the realization of this idea and would encourage them to fight for the caliphate.

In his research Haroro J. Ingram (2014) divided the general ISIS communication strategy into three media strategies. These cover “the use of a multi-dimensional, multi-platform approach that simultaneously targets ‘friends and foes’ to enhance the reach, relevance and resonance of its messaging; the synchronization of narrative and action to maximize operational and strategic ‘effects’ in the field; and the centrality of the Islamic State ‘brand’ to its entire campaign” (Ingram, 2014, p. 4).

## **STRUCTURE**

ISIS created its own propaganda branch called Al-Hayat, which was responsible for producing movies, creating online magazine, preparing the speeches of ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani and drafting and implementing the advanced usage of social network. The main aim of this sophisticated propaganda machine was to encourage Muslims to travel to Syria and Iraq and use their skills to support the foundation of a caliphate. (Ramsauer, 2016) Instead of giving a detailed prescription of conducting terrorist attacks in Europe with the all available tools, ISIS focused on helping people interested in joining the organisation by advising them how to travel to Turkey and later cross the border (Ramsauer, 2016). The group strictly controlled the process of production of its videos and messages and the distribution channel.

The produced movies consisted of seemingly incompatible themes. One group of videos depicted the caliphate as the idyllic domain, while the other presents the violence and apocalyptic scenarios (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015). The main motivation behind this dualism is to reach divided, polarized audience.

The immolations, beheadings and other violent acts were aimed to appeal to disenfranchised Muslim and showed the courage, decisiveness and determination of ISIS and its supporters. Furthermore, ISIS attempted to create awareness about the group and its activities and thus sent a signal to all volunteers that they would join a strong organisation. It is worth mentioning that the idea of using these shocking

techniques was taken from the commercial corporations, which try to attract customers in the same manner (Al-Rawi, 2016, p. 6). These kinds of movies sent a positive signal to jihadists, who were looking for thrilling experiences.

The next group of videos presented ISIS as a great place to live, where everyone will find an adequate care. It also presents the organisation from its charitable side, such as helping elderly people or organizing life in the cities they control. There are pictures of fighters, who are relaxing after fight, people swimming, eating and playing with cats and also images of basic infrastructure like markets or wells construction (Collier, 2015). What is more, people on these movies are happy, smiling and the omnipresent police ensure their safety (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015). ISIS wanted to promote the vision of itself as the well-organised state, where people enjoy their life and the safety is guaranteed. This message is addressed to both the outside world and the people they control and ISIS wanted to show the strength of the group and the fact that it was not affected by military operations of its enemies. The research showed that 45% of the monthly video production presented this image of caliphate (Tarabay, Shiloach, Weiss, & Gilat, 2015).

Movies developed by ISIS were characterised by the sublime atmosphere, well suited music, professional directing and other elements characteristic for "Hollywood visual style". (Dauber & Robinson, 2015) During the first year of ISIS existence, there were around 100 movies produced with increasing quality from the amateurish one to fully professional. Obviously not all movies aimed at encouraging people to come to Syria and Iraq (Jaszczuk, 2015). But professionally prepared movies helped to build ISIS as a leading brand in the world of terrorism and influenced many foreigners to come and fight.

### **ISIS AS A BRAND**

The most popular brand in the world of terrorism was Al-Qaeda, especially after the terrorist attack on 9/11. However, the rapid expansion of ISIS in Syria and Iraq and the decision to recreate the caliphate with the sophisticated use of social media and other Internet tools had changed this situation and ISIS replaced Al-Qaeda as the most popular terrorist organisation. There were also several differences between these two groups in how they organised their own propaganda. AQ focused more on promoting own leaders, especially Osama Bin Laden by conducting short interviews with him or other key figures in AQ hierarchy like deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. On the opposite side, ISIS particularly concentrated on showing its fighters and its activities. The leaders of this organisation such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi or other senior leaders were very rarely seen in videos. ISIS offered a more Hollywood-like visual style, full of dramatics scenes, special effects and stylized transitions (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015). According to a U.S. intelligence official, who was interviewed by the Washington Post, "the group is very image-conscious, much like a corporation". He added that the ISIS approach reflects the corporation way of building a brand, like Coca-Cola did. (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015)



Cori E. Dauber and Mark Robison from University of North Carolina claim that ISIS created its own brand by using the same repeating motives like presenting disciplined formations of own militaries or the galloping horses in the background. What is more, there was a special way of filming executions. The executioners wore black clothes to show that they were much bigger than their victims, who wore orange outfits. There was a specific style of presenting suicide attacks. They presented a smiling, well dressed suicide bomber with the finger pointed toward the sky – the symbol of unity with God. All of these elements should lead to great recognition, which is the most important tool in building the brand awareness (Tarabay, et. al., 2015). Musanna Abd as-Sattar the former spokesman of the Free Syrian Army said that every time he watched movies of ISIS, he felt the necessity to take part in jihad. Young Muslims in Europe interviewed by a German journalist Petra Ramsauer said that they felt enormous satisfaction while watching these movies and they were proud of ISIS actions (Ramsauer 2016, p 233). Sasha Havlicek from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue wrote that “caliphate label” played the most important role in recruitment of the new fighters (Bennhold, 2015). Without creating the image of attractive organisation among young people, ISIS would not think about recruiting them.

### **DABIQ AND RUMIYAH – RECRUITMENT MAGAZINES**

ISIS was not the first terrorists organisation with its own magazines. In the past Al-Qaeda developed Inspire magazine. ISIS responded with publication of Dabiq in July 2014. The Clarion Project organisation, which focused on research on radical Islamism claimed that Dabiq content focused more on establishing religious legitimacy of ISIS and reference to the history of the caliphate, thus encouraging Muslims to emigrate to Syria and Iraq in order to help building a Muslim state there (Clarion Project, 2014).

The second magazine developed by ISIS – Rumiyah – shared similar aims continuing the work of the previous magazine. Both magazines were primarily promoted in English but also translated into French, German, Russian and Arabic to reach potential recruits from various countries. These magazines were distributed firstly in Deep Web, a part of the Internet largely inaccessible with conventional search engines. Later the products have become also available in public source of the Internet (Masi, 2015).

The main topics of Dabiq and later Rumiyah stressed that ISIS is not just another-military or terrorist organisation but is something bigger with the ambitions to establish its own political institutions. The success of ISIS was linked with God’s approval. In this way ISIS seeks to attract supporters to the Islamic State in order to realise its grand strategy. Moreover, Dabiq tried to present how ISIS consolidated power, and how its jurisdiction over the territory and the mechanism of judicial system work in order to create a more comprehensive picture of its actions that distinguish them from other terrorist cells. Both magazines wanted to recruit this way Muslims to

come to Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, there was a strong pressure on the Hijrah (emigration), concept, which was many times presented in speeches delivered by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It generally differs from the works of Al-Qaeda, which particularly concentrated on inspiring people and then teaching them how to prepare terrorists attack in Western Europe (Gambhir, 2014).

### **ANALYSIS OF A SINGLE CLIP**

Considering the importance of videos in ISIS propaganda, the most characteristic features of them will be outlined through the following analysis of one of them. The title of the short, one-minute movie is "I saw GOD". Daniel Jaszczuk who analysed this clip for Nowa Strategia portal claims that this title is not accidental. It indicated that the movie's scenes presented a way to salvation and depicted the identity and true values of Islamists. Then, a camera moves to show the images of the average city in the Muslim world. Hundreds of thousands of similar places exist all over the world. The authors of this movie deliberately used this motive to reduce distance and eliminate barriers between the heroes of the movie and the audience in Muslim countries. These images were used to invoke the feeling of belonging among Muslims and encourage them to migrate to ISIS. Just after the beautiful scenery, we saw an explosion to stress that the fight for the better world still continues and additional forces were necessary. (Jaszczuk, 2015)

The next frame presents the well-equipped and trained ISIS military forces, which were participating in the shootout. They are under the heavy artillery fire, equipped only with personal rifles. This disproportion in armament is used here to symbolise their determination and courage. The scenes of fighting showed the strength of the army of ISIS. (Jaszczuk, 2015)

The next scene depicted the two marching columns of armed people. One of them is military while the second column consisted of civilians only. It symbolised that not only the professional military but also civilians who never participated in fight are welcomed and can fight for ISIS. At the end of the movie there is a scene of marching soldiers over the territories of several countries, which underscored the success of ISIS. (Jaszczuk, 2015)

To sum up, this movie is a mixture of old, traditional music and pictures, which showed a courage of ISIS fighters and the propaganda of success. There are a lot of references to religious values, which may be important for people especially in Europe, where the advancing secularisation takes place. The propaganda movie presents the world open for every Muslim and the welfare of ISIS should encourage young, poor, isolated people from various regions to come to ISIS, where they will be paid back for their service. (Jaszczuk, 2015)

Other motives used in movies are based on depicting enemies as the weak one and present the destroyed M1A1 Abrams tanks – the legendary symbol of American military myth to stress the strength of ISIS as an organisation, which is able to defeat even the



most advanced enemy. No other terrorist organisation could do it, so in this way, ISIS presents themselves as much stronger than other terrorist groups. (Jaszczuk, 2015) In some clips, there is a repetitive statement “Caliphate called us to light the fate of the world”, which encourages people to come and fight for ISIS (Ramsauer, 2016, p. 227). Motives from this particular movie were also present in other productions, which perfectly shows how the ISIS wanted to promote itself in the media and the importance of these elements, which encourage people to come to Syria and Iraq.

### **THE SOCIAL NETWORK STRATEGY**

Even the best content cannot reach the wider public without a proper distribution strategy. ISIS surpassed Al Qaeda in this field and developed an advanced strategy of using social media to promote their content. The first step was to set up a special IT branch within the structure of ISIS, which was solely responsible for 24/7 online activity on the Internet. This group of professionals was supplemented by thousands of volunteers who worked for ISIS from all over the world. The social media created completely new opportunities of spreading messages. It could be compared to the swarm of bugs, which change immediately the trajectory during the flight. The main communication channels of ISIS were Twitter and Facebook.

The group used a limited number of centralised Twitter accounts that “tweet official statements and news updated” and a group of provincial accounts which transmitted local ISIS operations live (Saltman & Winter, 2016). Furthermore, there was a certain group of so called ISIS “jihobbyists” – the supporter of the organisation from all around world (Winter, 2015, p. 23).

In the beginning of 2015, ISIS possessed more than 40.000 accounts on Twitter but later these numbers increased reaching even millions. The real identities of many of the users or automatic bots – the computer programs which simulate the human behaviours, were hidden by using animals’ photos and landscapes as the profile and background photos (Ramsauer, 2016, p. 238-239). The supporters of ISIS were encouraged to retweet or repost pro-ISIS material creating a global unofficial network for spreading the content (Yeung, 2015, p. 4). In addition, there were online recruiters on online forums on jihad and related topics and when someone watched an ISIS video published on one of these media platforms, immediately received a message from ISIS recruiters (Yeung, 2015, p. 6). Such a decentralised structure complicated the fight against this propaganda.

When Twitter and Facebook started the elimination of these accounts, ISIS moved to Russian communication platforms like Telegram and they developed their own channels of communication aimed at certain groups of people and countries. ISIS also used other popular communication technologies such as Viber, Surespot, Whatsapp, FaceTime, Kik and Skype to address its supporters all over the world. Beyond the communication technologies mentioned above, ISIS used also less known networks and websites like

Friendica, Quitter, Justpase, Ask.fm, Soundcloud and Mixlr ("Islamic State Shifts to New Platform after Twitter Block," 2014). The wide network of followers and sympathizers covered not only the Middle East but also North America and Europe (Klausen, 2015).

Furthermore, the ISIS IT specialists invented their own smartphone application "The Dawn of Glad Tidings", which were distributed via the Google Play shop. This software allowed to receive content produced by ISIS automatically ("ISIS official app was available to download on Google," 2014). Besides the propaganda material like movies and magazines, there were also guidelines how to get to the Islamic State covering such topics as reaching Turkey, crossing a border and the necessary equipment everyone needs (Gadher, 2015).

### **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RECRUITMENT ON THE INTERNET**

The research published by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution showed that even in the era of Jihad 3.0 the contacts in real life are more important. The report refuted the popular thesis of experts and security service community that the Internet played more and more important role in process of radicalisation. Most of them visited the well-known place of radicalisation and contacted the local Islamism figures (Jansen, 2015).

However, the underestimation of the Internet would be a mistake. The Austrian Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in its annual report warned that jihadist were using techniques of collecting information about the potential recruits similar to those used by companies to gather data about potential customers. According to the report the information is automatically collected about people visiting websites with jihadist content which are later analysed. If the profiles of these people matched the required patterns, the ISIS recruiter contacted them personally (Verfassungsschutzbericht für 2014, n.d.). The advanced recruitment process includes the combination of online tools and offline personal contacts. The Internet helps to narrow the group of people, potentially interesting from the perspective of ISIS recruitment and therefore reducing time necessary for finding potential foreign fighters in Europe. Last but not least it also reduces the risk of being traced and arrested by security services.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Islamic States used propaganda and disinformation, which are based on disseminating its ideology in many languages and through different channels to reach as many people as possible. President Barack Obama described the ISIS propaganda very accurately in his speech delivered in February 2015: "The high-quality videos, the online magazines, the use of social media, terrorist Twitter accounts – it's all designed to target today's young people online, in cyberspace" (Gilsinan, 2015).

The Internet played a crucial role in recruiting and later facilitating the travel of foreign fighters to conflict zones. ISIS developed advanced, sophisticated methods



to appeal to persons from all around the world to join this organisation. The propaganda machine consisted of videos production and two magazines published on the Internet. They aimed at encouraging people to migrate to Syria and Iraq and join ISIS by presenting this organisation as a strong one with powerful military, but also as a paradise on earth open to every Muslim.

Initially, the ISIS propaganda was a successful one considering the high number of foreign fighters joining the organisation in Syria and Iraq. In 2014 it was approximately 1000 foreign fighters (Schmitt, 2014). Later, the IT giants: Twitter, Facebook and Google started a campaign to eliminate ISIS propaganda from their network and therefore the reach of ISIS significantly decreased.

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# THE AARHUS MODEL FOR DE-RADICALISATION – THE BEST PROACTIVE ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL DE-RADICALISATION TOOLS?

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CHRISTIAN KVORNING<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

De-radicalisation is defined as “The action or process of causing a person with extreme views to adopt more moderate positions on political or social issues”<sup>2</sup>. As such, it can easily be extrapolated that de-radicalisation is often most successful when applied to people who have not already converted their radicalised convictions into concrete actions, which, in the context of this paper, is people who have journeyed to conflict zones and become ‘foreign fighters.’ Once people have turned into foreign fighters, judicial systems – particularly ‘weaker ones’ easily influenced by political interference, mass media reports and labelling – often resort to extreme prison sentences, irrespective of whether or not these returning foreign fighters actually pose a threat upon returning. One such example is the 2016 case of 9 Albanian citizens who received a sentence of 126 years of imprisonment by the Tirana Serious Crimes Court in a case related to foreign fighters. (Lamallari, n.d., p. 5) Considering that analysis of foreign fighters returning from Syria shows that only one in 2-300 returning foreign fighters pose a threat upon return (Lister, 2015, p. 2), it merits evaluation whether or not punitive prison sentences are truly the most optimal approach to defusing the danger of returning foreign fighters as prisons are often incubators for radicalisation. (Brandon, 2009; Lister, 2015; Deutsche Welle, 2015; Crouch & Henley, 2015) This holds true both for hardening already-converted radicals and recruitment and radicalisation of new inmates. (Hamm, 2008) Given that at least 5,600 returning foreign fighters from Syria are estimated to have returned recently to at least 33 countries of origin (BBC, 2017), we can extrapolate that according to the aforementioned

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2 Deradicalisation | Definition of deradicalisation in English by Oxford Dictionaries. (n.d.). Retrieved April 10, 2018, from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/deradicalisation>

statistic, the threat they pose is minimal<sup>3</sup> relative to the potential threat they pose if continuing radicalising new converts in prisons. At the same time, inaction in tackling the challenge presented by returning foreign fighters is unforgivable if they carry out acts of terrorism upon return, begging the question how to optimally strike a balance between de-radicalisation, which is generally incompatible with harsh, punitive prison sentences, and security. In this regard, the Aarhus model, which was initiated in 2007, has proven successful, if not infallible.

### **THE AARHUS MODEL FOR DE-RADICALISATION: PRINCIPLES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The Aarhus Model comprises programmes for both early prevention and exit processes. The prevention programme aims to prevent further violent radicalisation of youngsters who do not yet represent any danger or security risk but may become dangerous if their radicalisation process continues in a violent direction (and who may then perpetrate acts of terrorism). The exit programme is directed at already radicalised people who have intentions and capabilities of committing politically and/or religiously motivated violent crimes and terrorism. (Bertelsen, 2015, p. 241) In terms of both preventing de-radicalisation and the exit-programme for returning foreign fighters, the Aarhus Model is unique both for its approach and its success; thus, it has garnered wide acclaim, leading to, amongst other things, then-US President Barack Obama inviting the mayor of Aarhus to “the White House summit to counter violent extremism” in February 2015. (Aarhus Stiftstidende, 2015a)

The Aarhus Model’s theoretical foundation is grounded in Life Psychology, a scientific discipline combining elements of psychology, social sciences and humanities developed at the Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Aarhus University. Due to spatial constraints the deeper intricacies of Life Psychology will not be explored in this paper, but reference to relevant literature is provided for further reading. (Lund, 2016) In the context of this paper, the fundamentals will be covered in order to provide an understanding of the underlying perceptions governing its functions and focal points. It revolves around three core presumptions:

Everybody aspires to a “good-enough life.” “Good enough” because life is seldom (never) perfect in terms of avoiding various challenges, obstacles and setbacks concerning one’s aspirations and life projects. (Bertelsen, 215, p. 246)

Having a good-enough grip on life means coping sufficiently successfully with the tasks life offers, which depends on having the necessary skills to handle them. The tasks may be concrete daily-life tasks regarding one’s social life, work or leisure as

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3 This is not to diminish the threat returning foreign fighters pose, which can be devastating; merely an attempt to put it into perspective with the goal of strengthening security.



well as making important choices, or perhaps a wish to make a difference in life. (Bertelsen, 2015, p. 246)

Every human being regardless of gender, cultural background, abilities and disabilities, life history as well as social situation is confronted with exactly the same fundamental life tasks. (Bertelsen, 2015, p. 246)

It can be summed up in the following figure.

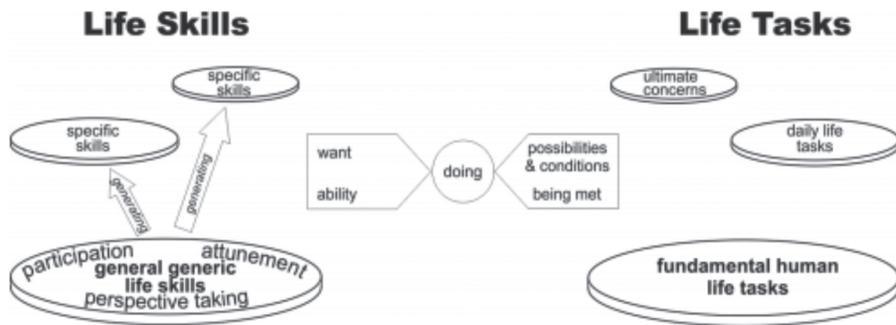


Figure 1. The connection between life skills and life task on different levels.

SOURCE: BERTELSEN, 2015, P. 246.

The underlying view of radicalised people is that they are individuals striving for agency in their own and common life, who – due to lack of these fundamental life skills to cope with generic life tasks – become radicalised in an attempt to regain agency in any shape or form in their life.

Thus, the Aarhus Model encompasses a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to de-radicalisation involving multiple municipal and societal agencies. It has three core characteristics around which these agencies operate:

- Close and flexible cooperation among several already existing institutions and authorities working with exposed and vulnerable young people.
- Inclusion.
- Scientific foundation. (Bertelsen, 2015, p. 242)

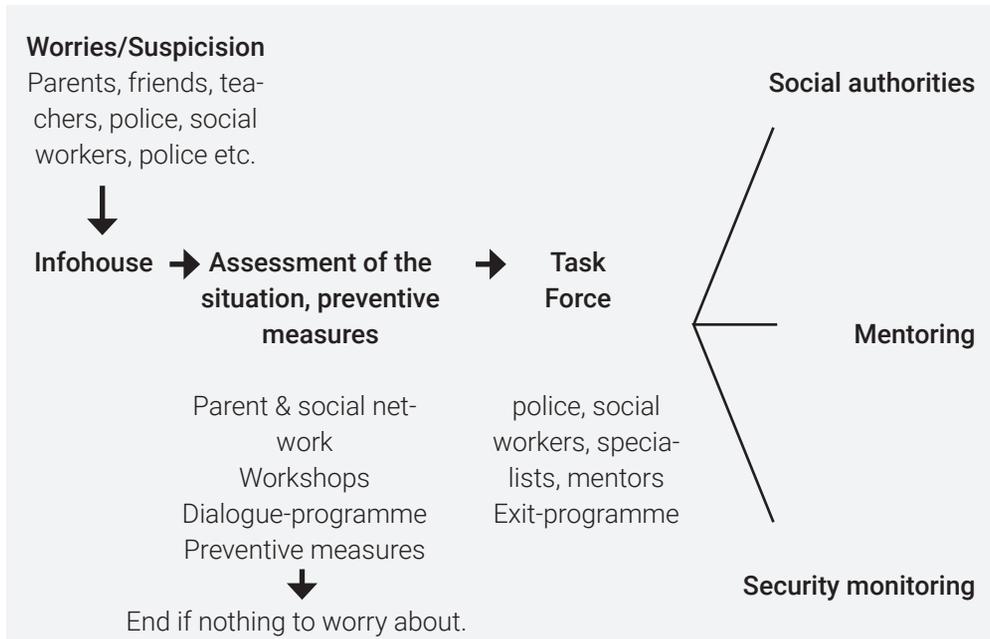
The de-radicalisation effort is supervised by SSP (an interdisciplinary collaboration between Schools, Social authorities, and Police aimed at crime prevention), a collaboration that has existed in 40 years in Denmark and has traditionally been aimed at preventing vulnerable schoolchildren slide into criminal activity, which has recently also been expanded to include de-radicalisation efforts. (Bertelsen, 2015, p. 242) Furthermore, the Aarhus Model cooperates with social services, several ministries, PET (the Danish Security and Intelligence Service) as well as RAN (Radicalization

Awareness Network). (Bertelsen, 2015, p. 242-43) Lastly, as the problem of foreign fighters increased in recent years, the authorities began cooperating with the local mosques; involving them in the de-radicalisation efforts through regular meetings, citing that they have to be part of the solution rather than the problem. (Henley, 2014) This covers the first characteristic.

The second "inclusion" and the third "Scientific foundation" (Life Psychology, covered above) are intertwined and closely tied to the Danish understanding of what constitutes important elements of life and thus primary bulwarks against radicalisation – or rehabilitation for already radicalised people. Therefore, it revolves around reintegrating vulnerable or radicalised individuals into common cultural, social and societal life. The road to accomplishing this revolves around transforming the personal, social, cultural and political motivations of the people in question, be they merely vulnerable individuals or already radicalised, into legal modes of participation and citizenship. (Bertelsen, 2015, p. 242-43) Ultimately, the end-goal is to help the subjects achieve a better life as per the Life Psychology model to inoculate them against radicalisation, or encourage them to abandon already-embedded radicalised convictions.

### MAIN INITIATIVES OF THE AARHUS MODEL

This figure sums up a traditional process of the Aarhus Model.



SOURCE: LUND, 2016, P. 329



Based on either outreach from concerned relatives, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, or suspicion from authorities, information on the relevant 'case' is delivered to the Infohouse, which is run by the regional police department. (Aarhus Kommune, n.d.) At the Infohouse an interdisciplinary counselling group comprised of psychologists, social counsellors, doctors, education- and employment counsellors, police and relatives conduct an in-depth assessment whether it is a case of potentially violent, illegal radicalisation or merely a false-positive. (Lund, 2016, p.330)

If an individual is identified as being at risk of radicalisation, several concrete anti-radicalisation measures are adopted. The Infohouse will initiate contact to brief the person on the assessment of him/her, and to explain the concerns regarding the dangerous developmental trajectory and mindset the subject is suspected to have embarked upon. Additionally, parts of the person's network (family, peers, school, and clubs) will – if available as resources – be mobilised in the process of helping the person to acknowledge and seek alternative, legal, ways to respond to the challenges that led the person down to the path of radicalisation. This process is, as mentioned before, rooted in Life Psychology, and generally involves finding answers to questions of life as well as alternative ways to resolve resentment and offence (personal as well as social or cultural) and regain agency in life. (Bertelsen, 2015, p. 243) In some ways, it can also be termed as "refocusing" the subject through community efforts.

In parallel with this highly individualized approach, workshops are regularly held at schools and similar institutions in areas identified as having a higher vulnerability to radicalised recruitment, and a parental network led by educated, municipally employed facilitators but also comprising parents whose children has successfully completed the Aarhus Model is available for parents. This network aims at building competences and capacities of parents, thus educating them and enabling them to become an active resource in radicalisation prevention. (Lund, 2016, pp. 331-37)

Should the above-stated measures prove insufficient to change the trajectory of radicalisation, or if the subject is a returning foreign fighter, the next concrete steps carried out by a highly educated, specialised and dedicated task force commence.

First, the prior steps are continued in parallel with an added layer of individualised mentoring. Aarhus currently employs 10 highly educated mentors who have been recruited with regard to age, gender, ethnic background, formal education and experience, first-hand knowledge of different cultural and social environments as well as political and religious knowledge. This enables them to meet the often-different individual profiles and specific needs of the targeted people, tailoring the processes to the subject. (Bertelsen, 2015, pp. 243-244) The mentoring process is highly intimate. The goal is to create a safe, free space in which the mentor and mentee,

often meeting a total of 8-10 hours a week, can develop a personal relation based on trust, which can then serve as a foundation for cooperation towards helping the subject. (Lund, 2016, p. 344) The importance of this bond between mentor and mentee cannot be understated; while the professional, often-clinically-seeming help provided by task force specialists such as psychologists, behavioural specialists and police is of course essential, having it supplemented by this more even-levelled, equal relationship between mentor and mentee is invaluable. Be it for discussing religious, social, cultural, family or other matters, the mentor with his or her broad skills tailored to the subject insofar that is possible provides a perspective that institutions and/or authorities otherwise would.

Second, the social authorities, often comprised by a specialized team of psychologists, behavioural scientists and social workers, offer a more institutional, though still personal insofar that is possible, help by coordinating and intensifying initiatives to steer the subject back on a more constructive trajectory. Lastly, the police intensifies monitoring of the individual if the individual is deemed an acute security risk. If not, the police continues assisting in informing the subject of the dangers of radicalisation.

The exit-programme is a separate initiative that draws upon the same initiatives as stated above, yet which was only launched in 2013 in a response to returning foreign fighters from Syria. Before an exit-programme is initiated, it has to be approved based on a feasibility evaluation as well as an intimation by the subject that he or she is willing to complete the Model. If an exit-programme is approved as feasible, the case is passed on to the task force who will then assess which specific services should be offered to the homecoming person, as well as to the resource persons in his or her social network (family, peers, school, work etc.), to maximize the likelihood of success. Subsequently, a written exit process cooperation agreement is made in collaboration with the returning foreign fighter who will then be offered help as regards employment/education, housing, psychological counselling/therapy and medical care, with a view to a successful exit process and inclusion in society. (Bertelsen, 2015, p. 245)

The exit-programme presupposes that the returning foreign fighter has done nothing criminal aside from the journey which was made criminal itself last year. (Aarhus Stiftstidende, 2017) If the person has committed crimes beyond travelling, he or she will be prosecuted according to the Danish law. Either way, the person will be subjected to de-radicalisation measures within the prison system which includes many of the aforementioned resources as well. Ultimately, the exit-programme is established for those who are genuinely motivated to successfully complete an exit process and strong measures are taken to prevent the exit programme from being used as some sort of hiding place for people intending to commit terrorist acts – hence the PET's involvement (Danish secret services). (Lund, 2016, p. 338)



## **RISKS AND CHALLENGES OF THE AARHUS MODEL**

The Aarhus Model is by no means infallible. In 2015, a terrorist shooting resulting in two casualties and numerous people wounded was carried out in Copenhagen by a radicalised individual. (Crouch & Henley, 2015) Expecting the Aarhus Model to be infallible would be a fallacy, but that being said, a few challenges and risks unique to the model merits elaboration.

First, its 'soft approach' has since its inception occasionally been met with criticism from parliamentary lawmakers; due to its holistic, all-encompassing approach, it is hard to quantify exactly which aspects of the model are effective and which are not. A hammer wants every problem to be a nail, and for lawmakers a holistic model such as this is easy to cast doubt upon, irrespective of its results, simply because it is hard to quantify the 'value' of each element in it. (Jyllands-Posten Aarhus 2016) Furthermore, one former, successful participant in the exit-programme has recently publicly criticized it, doubting whether the police's involvement was desirable or necessary in the exit-programme. (Nielsen, 2017) Yet while the police might be a negative element for one subject, it can be a redeeming factor for another; thus, this criticism has so far been dismissed due to the proven results of the Aarhus Model. (Mansel, 2015) However, given its 'soft approach', a single case of failure – such as a foreign fighter returning, being admitted into the model and then carrying out an act of terrorism – could be fatal for the Aarhus Model. While it is indisputably much more efficient and economic than disproportionate prison sentences, it is also more vulnerable to stigma from society as well as decision-makers should it fail as its subjects are 'free' while undergoing its treatment, as opposed to if they were imprisoned.

Second, it takes time. Time to build capacities in institutions, time to build institutional credibility, time to build trust between citizens and authorities. It took a decade for the Aarhus Model to become institutionalised and fully trusted by minorities and vulnerable population segments – as a result, it is more used than ever. (Aarhus Stiftstidende, 2017) In its first 6 years, it received 250 contacts – of which 100 were in 2013 alone. (Aarhus Stiftstidende, 2015b) The number has only increased since then, underlining the point that time is one of the most precious resources that the Aarhus Model has benefitted from, yet which is arguably the scarcest of resources when it comes to de-radicalisation.

## **RESULTS OF THE AARHUS MODEL**

The results of the Aarhus Model have previously been alluded to, but concretely 28 people have completed a mentoring process and been reintegrated into society with six more currently undergoing mentoring since November 2017. Four people have completed the exit-programme as of November 2017, with three more currently undergoing treatments in the exit-programme. (Nielsen, 2017)

Given that the Aarhus Model only engages in the mentoring programme when there is an acute fear of radicalisation to the extent that the people could become

foreign fighters or terrorists, it is remarkable preventive results. Similarly, the exit-programme's flawless success rate has enabled otherwise potentially dangerous elements to society to reintegrate into society in a constructive manner. As previously mentioned, prisons are often incubators for radicalisation, and thus the preventive effect can arguably have cascaded, although we cannot make a qualified estimate whether or not this is the case.

Furthermore, since 2014 no one from Aarhus has travelled abroad to become foreign fighters, indicating a strong preventive effect on top of de-radicalisation of existing subjects. (DR, 2014)

Suffice to say, all the above-stated are vital reasons for why the model has received international acclaim and has been, consensually and without exception, recommended by leading experts on de-radicalisation as the most efficient contemporary model for de-radicalisation, worthy of implementation in any city or country experiencing these challenges.<sup>4</sup>

Conclusion: a unique approach offering unparalleled success – for those willing to develop it

The Aarhus Model is a unique, subtle and nuanced approach to a challenge often met by blunt force. Lawmakers and decision-makers, often seeking to capitalize on shows of strength, frequently resort to imprisonment, even on dubious judicial foundation. As mayor of Aarhus Jacob Bundgaard said, "you cannot pass laws to legislate how people should think, feel or believe. What you can do is a coordinated, hands-on, ground-level, everyday approach nudging people in the right direction and discouraging them from taking the wrong one" (Henley, 2014). When put like that, it seems logical that the Aarhus Model is successful; treating people as equals rather than perpetrators is indisputably more conducive to rehabilitation than top-down, harsh measures.

However, it is not easy. Denmark enjoys the luxury of one of the highest levels of trust in public institutions and authorities in the world. It has enjoyed political stability for decades contrary to many other countries. Its extensive public sector, funded by some of the highest taxes in the world, has the means to engage in pioneering projects such as the Aarhus Model. Countries who do not enjoy these luxuries face a stark challenge of capacity building in institutions, developing interdisciplinary expertise, pathways of collaboration, and nurturing budding trust between citizens and institutions. All of it requires political leadership as a catalyst to creating an environment in which these processes can flourish and grow. In politically, socially, judicially and societally unstable environments (relative to Denmark) such as the Western Balkans, this will be challenging.

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<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan Birdwell's assessment, leading expert from the think-tank ISD, at: <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/regionale/oestjylland/ekspert-aarhus-modellen-er-den-bedste-mod-radikalisering>



Nevertheless, it is not an insurmountable challenge. The knowledge is available, Aarhus has proven willing to knowledge-exchange and capacity-building assistance on numerous occasions to various international actors<sup>5</sup>, and the prevailing consensus is that the model is not only the most efficient contemporary model for de-radicalisation of already-radicalised people, but also instrumental in preventing radicalisation on a long-term basis.

Ultimately, to paraphrase Aarhus police commissioner, “If we were not doing this, we really could not do much. We cannot prosecute without evidence. Then these people would just be floating around, a potential danger. Which would you rather?” (Henley, 2014) Indeed, the question is one of will, and regardless of how challenging implementing the Aarhus Model may seem to prospective countries, the rewards outweigh them by far.

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# FROM VIOLENCE BACK TO THE UNION: THE RESPONSE AND IGNORANCE OF THE RETURNING FOREIGN FIGHTERS' PHENOMENON IN THE EU

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TOMÁŠ MADLEŇÁK

## INTRODUCTION

Who are the “foreign fighters” according to the EU and its member states? This contribution aims to provide evidence that the dangerous phenomenon has more than one face, that both are dangerous, and that EU is surprisingly blind to one of them. First, through personal stories, I demonstrate that foreign fighters are not just young Islamist extremists who go to fight in Syria, but that there is also a similar group of right-wing pro-Russian nationalists, who go and fight in Crimea, Luhansk, and Donbas. Then I move on to argue that the second group is ignored by their states of origin because acting strong against the agents of Russia would bring negative political points to the elites of these states. However, as I demonstrate in the next part, this group of returning foreign fighters is still dangerous, as the example of a foiled coup d'état in Montenegro assured us. In the last part of this contribution I go on to argue, based on the examination of the actions of the Council of the EU and European Council on the problem of returning foreign fighters, that this dangerous practice of CEE countries is also replicated on the European level.

## THE ONE IN SYRIA

Samer Shehadeh was born in Prague. Being a son of Pakistani immigrants, he was raised in the Islam faith and in his adulthood, he became the “Imam of Prague”. At least he himself proclaimed to be imam, even though today, the Islam Foundation of the Czech Republic is denying he ever was an imam or that he ever was in any way connected to it. (Novák, 2018) It is not known what led him towards the radical interpretations of the Quran, or when exactly he started to sympathise with extremist Islamist ideas. But from the published information on him we know (TASR, 2018) that he was under suspicion and watched by the secret services for quite some time, minimally since he displayed his radical and intolerant ideas by sending a WhatsApp message to the Muslims he knew in Prague telling them not to take part in the common prayer against terrorism held together with the Christian

community: "He who believes in Allah and in the judgement day, he shall not participate in this event. May Allah be my witness that I have warned against this!"(quotation translated by the author, TASR, 2018).

Omar Shehadeh is 27 years old, Samer's younger brother. According to the police officers from the National Headquarters against organized crime, as quoted by iDnes.cz (Janouš, Hruběš, 2018), he travelled to Syria in October 2016. In the war zone, in Idlib, Northern Syria, he voluntarily joined the terrorist organisation Jabhat Fatah as-Sham, the successor organisation of the terrorist group Jabhat an Nusra, the al-Qaida's Syrian organisation. He went through the training, he successfully completed several-week courses in which he learned how to handle weapons and bombs and the fight tactics. Later, he was selected to teach and train 'brothers' to fight and commit terrorist attacks.

A third person in this story is Fatima, a 24 years old girl previously named Kristina who married Omar after she travelled to join him in Syria, without ever before knowing or seeing him. She apparently considers herself to be a mujahedeen in Jihad. Her Jihad is mainly about providing background for her husband Omar, cooking for him, doing his laundry, but also to train together with him with firearms.

Omar is the fighter, Fatima is his support, and Samer? Samer is the one who have persuaded both of them to go to Syria and join the jihadist group. Currently, he is hiding in Mauritania, because both he and his brother, just as the young jihadist wife, have been uncovered by the Czech police and are now charged with terrorism. This is the first case of terrorism brought in front of a court in the Czech Republic and it is very likely that this will also be the first time someone will be found guilty and sentenced for the crime of terrorism. Even though all three anti-heroes of this story are far away from where the Czech authorities can reach them and the effectiveness of this trial therefore is questionable.

There is another important case where the effectiveness is undeniable. 24 of February 2018, the regional court in the Czech town Plzeň found young, 22-years old Jan Silovsky guilty and sent him to jail for 39 months, as well as ordered psychiatric care for him (TASR, 2017). His crime: According to the indictment, he converted to Islam and subsequently decided to join the Islamic State in Syria in 2015. But he got to Istanbul only, where he was detained during an airport check. The security found videos of the Islamic State on his smartphone. He was subsequently deported back to the Czech Republic.

## THE ONE IN UKRAINE

So, there is at least one person with Czech citizenship who is adding to the violent situation in the Middle East. It is not too surprising to find out there is at least one Czech, who is active in the violent conflict much closer, both geographically and from the perspective of fighting ideologies: the one in Eastern Ukraine.

According to the watchdog site [hlidacipes.org](http://hlidacipes.org) Czechs fighting in Donbas on the side of pro-Russian separatists are still an underreported and under-reflected topic. Although there are speculations about the presence of up to a dozen



Czech fighters, two names have been known for some time – “Behemot”, whose name is not known to the public, and Pavel Botka, also known as “Kavkaz”. (Mikel, 2017)

And there is one more name discovered by [hlidacipes.org](http://hlidacipes.org). In September 2016, the “Honorary Consulate” of the Donetsk People’s Republic was ceremonially opened in Ostrava. It is not a real consulate but only a registered association, and the Czech Republic does not recognize it either. It was headed by a former Czech communist politician and led by one of the paramilitary national militias (which are present and mostly ignored by the state, as they do not openly break any laws, they mostly “only” train in the woods and use fake or legally owned guns) chiefs Nela Lisková. Before this “consulate”, she already founded a “Representation of Donetsk region” in Prague. Similarly to the so called consulate, the representation also operated in an unofficial and unrecognized manner, officially as a civil association. One of the signatures under the registration of this association was Kirill Belyakov, a Czech citizen of Russian origin. Belyakov has worked for a prestigious Czech media agency Modea Group since 2004, and he has been its executive director since 2006. We do not have any information about how, why, or when exactly Belyakov travelled to Ukraine, but after a closer look on the public data and photos on his Facebook and vKontakte profiles it is clear that he is there now, most probably as an armed member of some paramilitary group.

There is a number of photos he posted himself, on which he is wearing a uniform and holding an assault rifle, besides numerous posts spreading typical pro-Russian separatist propaganda. What is even more interesting is the fact that Ms. Nela Liskova also shared at least one similar photo, from the same place.

It might be surprising that this story has a very different ending than the ones connected to Syria. We have no knowledge of any legal action against Ms. Liskova or Mr. Belyakov. But only for an observant who is not familiar with the nature of things not only in Central Europe, but in the EU generally.

### **WHO IS AND WHO IS NOT A CRIMINAL?**

The approach of the Czech Republic might seem surprising, but Czechs are not alone in this. The governments of all countries that logically produce fighters for pro-Russian separatists, mainly in Central Europe, are turning a blind eye to the problem.

There are several factors that contribute to growing pro-Russian sentiment in the society. The influence of the Orthodox Church might be one of them in the case of Bulgaria and Greece, while pan-Slavic ideologies are still popular in the nationalistic movements of Slavic countries. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are especially vulnerable because of the still-present effects of the 1968 invasion and subsequent occupation and “normalisation” of the communist rule which was connected with heavy use of propaganda and pan-Slavic indoctrination in order to lower the resistance of the public against the occupying armies.

Pro-Russian societies logically elect pro-Russian politicians, most prominent examples might be the Czech President Miloš Zeman, the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, or Bulgarian President Roumen Radev. Even if the pro-Russian sentiment is hidden or hindered by the membership in NATO and EU and by the unwillingness of these leaders to commit an economic suicide, it is not in a pragmatic interest of these leaders to raise their voices and push for criminalisation of the foreign fighters fighting in the Russian interest. It would not be popular, especially not as much as jailing foreign fighters who tried to fight for Islamist radicals. This is the cold reality of why we have no court ruling over people like Kavkaz, Behemoth, or Belyakov. Even though Czech Republic and Slovakia do have legal basis upon which these courts and police could act.

As Mareš (2017) states in his legal analysis of the phenomenon:

“Service in foreign armies is not generally prohibited according to the Czech law, however, it requires specific conditions or approval. According to Act No. 585/2004 Coll., on conscription and its ensuring (the Conscription Act), Czech citizens can serve in the armed forces of a foreign state after the approval of the President of the Czech Republic. This approval is not requested in the case of more citizenships or if military service is provided in the armed forces of a member state of an international organisation of collective defence (of which the Czech Republic is a member).”

It is more than clear that none of the foreign fighters currently in Donbas have received the approval of the President Zeman, nor are the regiments in which they fight part of NATO. In case of Slovakia the case is even clearer as fighting in foreign army is forbidden by the penal code 300/2005 § 392 – Service in foreign army. The penalty is up to eight years in prison. Previously, the code defined only the service in an official military of recognized state, and left foreign fighters fighting for unrecognized paramilitary groups in a legal vacuum. This was changed by an amendment in 2016, but the new paragraphs have not yet been used (Kováč, 2015).

The situation is very similar to the one in the Czech Republic as the Criminal code of the Czech Republic states in § 321: “Citizen of the Czech Republic, who contrary to another legal regulation performs service in the army or the armed forces of another state, shall be sentenced to imprisonment for up to five years. An offender shall be sentenced to imprisonment for three to ten years, if he/she commits the act referred to in Sub-section (1) in a state of national peril or state of war”.

The persecution of service in military forces of a non-recognised state is questionable from the point of view of the current Czech Criminal Code just as was the case in Slovakia. “The use of paragraph 409 of the Criminal Code (Relations Endangering Peace) is not adequate and it has not been tested by the Czech judicial system up to now. The application of new paragraphs 312a (Participation in a Terrorist Group) or paragraph 312e (Support and Propaganda of Terrorism) is possible in case of service in terrorist organisations with their own armies. The proposed change of the Czech



Criminal Code in the “main” paragraph 321 was discussed in 2016. The goal of this change was to prosecute service not only in any state’s military forces but also in the forces of a “foreign agent” (in the sense of a non-recognised entity). This amendment has not been adopted up to now.

While the attempt of a Czech citizen to serve in the so-called Islamic State was sentenced according to §312e Propaganda and Support of Terrorism in 2017, the legal assessment of foreign fighters in the Ukrainian conflict is not sufficiently solved. The service in Ukrainian units which are subordinated to governmental structures (e.g. Regiment “Azov”) was prosecuted under paragraph 321. The assessment of service in freelance nationalist units (mostly the Volunteer Corps of the Right Sector) is not clear. Current attempts to apply “anti-terrorist” paragraphs against foreign fighters in the separatist armed forces have not been confirmed by valid court judgments up to now. (Mareš, 2017)

The fact remains that countries of the eastern half of the EU do not wish to understand that the terrorism in the regiments of a self-proclaimed unrecognised Islamist State and fighting for the regiments of self-proclaimed unrecognised People’s Republics are not different in anything but the “colour of the skin” of the majority of fighters. This cannot remain as the only real difference between who is and who is not considered a criminal. The institutional structure of the EU and the fact that, despite what the majority of pro-Russian trolls believe, EU is not just a bureaucratic Brussels but the decisions are made by a unanimous vote (in case of foreign affairs always unanimous) by the representatives of all the member states, means that this misunderstanding is bound to be repeated by the EU itself. And that is bad news not just for EU, but for the Western Balkans as well.

### **THE VERY REAL THREAT OF RETURNING FOREIGN FIGHTERS**

The Orthodox Church, pan-Slavic ideologies, that is all present in the Balkans. It is not the purpose of this work to discuss if or why people from the Balkans go and fight in foreign conflicts. That has been discussed sufficiently by other contributors. As Beslin and Ignjatijevic noted: “The Western Balkan region is not an exception to this trend. Violent extremism in the region is generally perceived through the lens of Islamist radicalisation and foreign fighters who joined Daesh or Al-Nusra in Syria and Iraq. Other forms of extremism, such as right-wing nationalism, if acknowledged at all, are regarded as a secondary concern.” (2017, p. 1)

The trend of prosecuting the people who went to fight in a foreign conflict in Syria and ignoring those who did the same thing for different but apparently just as dangerous ideals, is the same here as is in Central Europe.

Two things need to be stressed here.

First, EU always influenced Balkans (just like all the countries in its neighborhood for that matter) by the tried and effective system of sticks and carrots of the

enlargement. Using a mental shortcut, we can say that we always lead by example. Here, we are setting a very dangerous and bad example.

As Beslin and Ignatijevic note, the countries of Western Balkans adopted legislations similar to those we discussed in the case of Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The effects are very similar, too. "The adoption of national legislations not only had a different impact on the engagement of foreign fighters in remote battlefields but also did not result in equal treatment and prosecution of returnees from Syria and Ukraine." (Beslin and Ignatijevic, 2017, p. 3)

Second, it is the Balkans where we can demonstrate how dangerous the example is.

On October 16, 2016, a group of 20 radicals from Serbia allegedly planned to assassinate the pro-Western prime minister Milo Djukanovic, should he win the election again, which he did. The plan was however foiled as one of the plotters contacted the police days before it should have happened. After the plot failed, accusations have been raised towards Russia (Farmer, 2017a). The Telegraph (Farmer, 2017b) summarizes the story of two Russians, Eduard Shirokov and Vladimir Popov (now wanted by Interpol), both officers with the GRU, Russia's military intelligence service, and Mr. Sindjelic, a veteran anti-Western activist from Serbia and also former convict who had fought with Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine. Sindjelic allegedly recruited more Serbian radicals and they planned the terrorist attack. The message is clear – it was returning foreign fighters of Serbian nationality who fought in Donbas and/or Luhansk, who were preparing a terrorist attack with theoretically dramatic consequences in a small Balkan country. Yet, we continue to turn a blind eye on the issue of returnees from the Ukraine-Russia conflict and refuse to call the matters by their right name.

## **WHAT IS THE EU DOING?**

"The primary responsibility in the fight against terrorism lies with the member states. However, the EU can and should play a supportive role that helps respond to the cross-border nature of the threat." – as stated by the webpage of the European Council (2017a) devoted to the policies related with the Foreign Fighters and terrorist attacks in Europe.

The issues of foreign fighters and radicalisation of the European citizens have been on the agenda of the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers) and the European Council since the first half of 2013. On 28 June 2013, the Council agreed on EU measures to support member states' efforts to tackle the challenge related to foreign fighters, in accordance with the consultations at the Justice and Home Affairs Council meetings that were specifically dedicated to the issue of returning foreign fighters from Syria. The response of the EU strongly built on the four areas identified by the report prepared by the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator: Prevention, information exchange on iden-



tification and detection of travel, criminal justice response, and cooperation with third countries are the four areas where EU action would be important to support member states.

After going through notes and minutes of the Council of the EU and European Council meetings that discussed the issue of returning foreign fighters (European Council, 2017b), it can be said: in all policy responses and statements, specifically the regions of Middle East and Syria, and radicalisation of young Muslims are named directly. If the EU documents address the issue of extreme right-wing radicalisation, they do not say it directly, nor ever name Russia directly. EU leaders mostly called for specific counter-terrorism measures, some of them with strong links to the foreign fighters' phenomenon, namely the adoption of a European Passenger Name Records (PNR) directive, strengthening existing Schengen framework, including through systematic and coordinated checks of EU citizens at external borders, increasing cooperation in the fight against trafficking of firearms and terrorist financing. It is positive that the focus was also moved more towards anti-radicalisation by calling for more detection and remove internet content promoting terrorism or extremism. Another big topic is counter-terrorism cooperation with countries in the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey and the Western Balkans – never with Ukraine, Russia, or Eastern Europe.

7 March 2017 marks one of the milestones in EU response to the foreign fighters' phenomenon, as the Directive on Combating Terrorism was adopted by the Council of the EU. There are two specific points that need to be highlighted. First, point 4 of the directive says:

“The terrorist threat has grown and rapidly evolved in recent years. Individuals referred to as “foreign terrorist fighters” travel abroad for the purpose of terrorism. Returning foreign terrorist fighters pose a heightened security threat to all Member States. Foreign terrorist fighters have been linked to recent attacks and plots in several Member States. In addition, the Union and its Member States face increased threats from individuals who are inspired or instructed by terrorist groups abroad but who remain within Europe.”

This part seems positive, as the directive could be an effective tool in combating terrorism and foreign fighters' threats coming from both the Middle East and from the regions where Russia-backed separatists are attracting right-wing radicals from Europe. Then, however, there is the point 6:

“Taking account of the evolution of terrorist threats to and legal obligations on the Union and Member States under international law, the definition of terrorist offences, of offences related to a terrorist group and of offences related to terrorist activities should be further approximated in all Member States, so that it covers conduct related to, in particular, foreign terrorist fighters and terrorist financing more comprehensively. [...]”

This, of course, gives the Member States the option to keep on ignoring the fact that there are foreign fighters in Ukraine as well, not just in Syria and Iraq. There is no better conclusion to this contribution than this fact. That ignorance can cost us dearly, as we have demonstrated on the example of the Balkans, the right-wing terrorists are just as dangerous as those motivated by radical interpretations of religion. That ignorance is therefore dangerous for us. And it is a growing danger for the Balkans, where we are losing our leverage and abilities to point the countries who applied for membership in the right direction, if we ourselves are moving in the wrong way.

## CONCLUSIONS

The European Union is one perfect example of a multi-level governance, but that also means it is susceptible to replicate the misjudgements, bad policies and failures on multiple levels. In case of approach to the foreign fighters, as I have demonstrated, it fails to recognise that there is a separate and dangerous subgroup of them that flies completely under the radar. This is happening because the foreign fighters motivated by extreme far-right and pan-Slavic ideologies are probably exclusively a central-eastern European thing. While the politicians in these countries are unable or unwilling to target this group of possibly dangerous criminals because of their own pro-Russian sentiments or simply because of fear of losing political points with the pro-Russian part of their electorate; the politicians in the old member states may be simply unaware of this phenomenon completely. That, however, does not mean that these returning foreign fighters do not pose a threat also to the western part of the EU. As the Montenegrin example demonstrates, terrorist actions by these radicals might be actually targeted specifically at the "West", the NATO, and the EU. Because of the free movement of people inside the Schengen Area, that could happen anywhere. It is therefore strongly recommendable to the politicians of all EU member states who attend the Foreign Affairs Council and Security and Defence Council to start discussing this topic and push their CEE counterparts to recognise its severity.

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# ALBANIA

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REDION QIRJAZI<sup>1</sup>

## GENERAL OVERVIEW - THE CASE OF ALBANIA

Albania has long been distinguished for its centuries-old tradition of religious tolerance; which is why the partaking of Albanian Foreign Fighters (FF) in the Syrian conflict sparked large public outrage and raised important questions on what motivated Albanian citizens to join the ranks of the so called Islamic State (ISIS) and other terrorist organisations such as the al-Nursa Front and Jayesh al-Islam. This was perhaps the first alarm bell indicating that Albania had a problem with extremism, which, if not violent until then, was certainly lurking in the background and waiting for the opportune moment to emerge.

Albania is a predominately Muslim country and although the percentage of the population varies in different reports, between 60%-80% of the country identifies itself as 'just Muslim'<sup>2</sup>(Pew Research Center, 2012). This is often the result of mutual exchanges in religious practices between the Sunnis and the Shias in the country and of a culture of inclusiveness. Albanians have always maintained a strong religious understanding and cross religious solidarity, as it is also shown through inter-faith marriages and communal celebrations of most major religious holidays (Vurmo, Religious Tolerance in Albania, 2018, p. 70).

The end of WWII marked a fundamental change in the practice of religion in Albania. The ruling communist party abolished religion and in 1967 it made Albania the only officially atheist country in the world (Vickers, 2008, p. 1). Many of the religious structures were turned into warehouses or cinemas, religious figures were persecuted and jailed and practitioners had to restrict themselves from exhibiting forms of religious beliefs. After the fall of the communist regime, the newly adopted 1991 Provisional Constitution recognized freedom of religion as a fundamental human right stating that "Albania is a secular state" and that it "respects freedom of religion and enables the conditions for practicing it" (Provisional Constitution of the Republic of Albania, 1991).

The period between 1991 and 2008 saw a gradual increase in the influence of religious communities in Albania (Dyrmishi, 2017, pp. 26-27). Whereas in the early 1990's religious communities such as the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC) were

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2 The Pew Research Center, with its Mapping the Global Muslim Population (2012) identifies Albanian Muslims as making up 80% of the country, while the US Central Intelligence The World Factbook identifies only 60% of the population as being Muslim.



mainly focused in maintaining a state of neutrality, over time they acquired a greater societal and institutional influence. This can be attested through the changes in both the legal and institutional framework. Although there is no particular law on religion in Albania, the relation between the state and religious communities has been regulated by mutual agreements and other laws which delineate the limitations of religious activity. As such, in 1991 a law was passed to ban political parties formed on the basis of religion (Law No. 7502 & No. 8580, 1991 and 2000); and another one in 1995 which prohibited religious teachings in pre-university education (Law No. 7952, 1995).

Furthermore, the Albanian Muslim Community and the government signed a mutual agreement which was formalized into law on 22 January 2009 which requires the AMC to “notify the appropriate authorities on cases of an extremist nature” (Law No. 10056, 2009). Other documents such as the statutes of the AMC, enacted in 1993, 1998, 2002, and 2005, have also served to clarify the objectives and vision of the Albanian Muslim Community and remain a strong referencing point regarding the stance of the AMC. Nonetheless, over these years, the mission of the AMC has transitioned from primarily “inculcating love for the homeland” to “awaken and strengthen the Islamic faith among Muslim believers.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it was this transition from a form of Islam which favored national identity towards one which was predominantly focused on religious identity, in Albania, that contributed to an increase in the number of violent extremists who turned into FF.

Another driving force behind this chaotic unfolding of religion in Albania was the lack of a consistent engagement between the state, society and the religious communities. For example, in 1992 the Albanian government hurried in making Albania a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference as a gateway for greater aid and investment in Albania; a move which a few years later would lead to uncontrolled investments and funding to clerics by some Salafi and Wahhabi groups which would later spread a form of radical ideology (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2014). On the other hand, the rise of early radical religious ideology in Albania was also due to wavering AMC leadership and competence. In the early 1990’s Albania’s Muslim community was deprived of qualified clerics due to a long period of inexistent religious institutions. Hence, upon return from their education abroad, many of the new Imams who had graduated from religious institutions in the Middle East began to quickly challenge the more traditional views of the older generation of Islamic clerics. This gave rise to some of the first clashes within the AMC (Zoto, 2013, pp. 50-51).

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3 These are the different missions of the Statute of the AMC in 1993 and 2005 respectively; Article 2 states the mission and vision of the AMC.

In fact, between 1991 and 2005, about six major Islamic Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) linked to terrorist organisations worldwide were operating in Albania (Kullolli, 2009, pp. 42-47). However, thanks to several counter-terrorism operations conducted by the Albanian government, with the help of the Western Allies, many of the organisations ceased to exist (Zoto, 2013, pp. 53-55). This was also a result of the global counter-terrorism efforts which encouraged countries to target the funding base of many charities which were being exploited by terrorist organisations (Woehrel, 2005, p. 1).

Between 1991 and 2002 Albania was in a state of socio-political transition, with many internal economic and security challenges which made the prospects of joining extremist groups quite bleak for many believers. Most likely the pervasive socio-economic difficulties of the society, coupled with the general lack of religious identity contributed to the general disinterest of Albanians in potentially engaging in the Balkan wars as did many more foreign fighters coming from the Middle East (Deliso, 2007, p. 31).

### **ALBANIAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS: NUMBERS AND PROFILE**

Fast forward to 2012, in the wake of a large-scale armed conflict within Syria, Albania faced the problem of having many of its citizens leave the country to become fighters in that conflict. The situation was particularly interesting for Albania as it was the first time this phenomenon appeared. According to a study conducted in 2015, the drivers are complex but typically involved a mix of 'uncontrolled religious practices out of the mainstream Islam, socio-economic isolation and lack of institutional proximity – that is, the ability of state institutions to influence people's lives (Vurmo, Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania, 2015, p. 110).

According to official records, Albania has had a total of 140 foreign fighters who took part in the conflicts of Syria and Iraq between the years 2012–2015. Of these, 44 have returned, 20 have been killed and 76 still remain in the conflict zones. Of the FF present in the conflict zone 12 are believed to be women, 32 children and the remaining 32 are foreign fighters (Azinovic, 2017, p. 2). The numbers are not always exact as, for example, the European Commission's report on Albania indicates that a total of 144 Albanians have left for Syria; of which 45 people have returned, 26 have been killed, 73 remain in the battlefield, of which 18 fighters and 55 family members) (European Commission, 2018, p. 36). According to both state and non-governmental actors, no Albanian FFs have left the country since 2015.

As mentioned above, motivations vary on a case to case basis; however, radicalisation has occurred typically in isolated communities. Although they vary in age, the majority of radicalised individuals are between the age of 19 and 29



(Spahiu, 2017, p. 37).<sup>4</sup> Socio-economic and political factors also play an important role. Factors like corruption, lack of accountability and transparency in politics, unemployment, economic, and dysfunctional institutions have the highest impact on people from marginalized communities (Azinovic, 2017, p. 13). Most foreign fighters also experience ideological isolation where recruiters try to deconstruct the previous identity and belief system of the individual. Such recruitments could take place in the privacy of people's homes and in informal religious gatherings where individuals are offered a sense of belonging and purpose (MAPO, 2014).

### **TREATMENT OF RETURNEES IN ALBANIA**

A distinction needs to be drawn between 'returnees' and 'foreign fighter returnees' as technically the number for the latter is zero. Otherwise said, there is no evidence to suggest that the returnees have partaken in combat while in Syria and/or Iraq. Another reason for having no positive identification of returnees might be the fact that most of them came back within 2 or 3 months of their departure (Telegrafi, 2014). At that time, neither the criminal law, nor the National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism (VE) was enacted, which made it difficult to classify it as a punishable offense. Therefore, of the 44–45 individuals who are believed to have returned to Albania from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, no one has been convicted (Bogdani, 2016).

The predicament between the legal dispositions provided by the penal code and the attempts to engage in de-radicalisation programme is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand potential returnees might help authorities and NGOs deliver counter-messaging to violent extremism while on the other, if identified, they could face legal prosecution and even jail. This has led to a situation where the returnees can neither be faced with legal charges, nor used in efforts to counter radicalisation and/or de-radicalisation.

### **DE-RADICALISATION AND CVE STRATEGIES IN ALBANIA**

The government has taken serious action to counter the threat of violent extremism (VE) and prevent the continuation of the foreign fighters phenomenon through deterrence. For example, the Albanian government has set up harsh sentences for supporting or participating in terrorist activities; it has adopted new 'good practices' for countering the violent extremism threat, committed to supporting a NATO centre of excellence for studying the foreign fighters phenomenon and even expressed interest in leading a regional centre for countering violent extremism (Rama, 2015). Furthermore, in February 2017 Albania decided

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4 The author cites an interview conducted with a representative of the Albanian State Police.

to enact a centre for the study of the foreign fighter phenomenon. It will also serve as one of NATO's many centres of excellence (Council of Ministers, 2017). The problem remains that it is yet to begin operations and nothing is known on the possible start date.

In February 2014, Albania amended its penal code (Articles 265/a, and 265/b) to tackle terrorism and VE in a wider spectrum while also imposing stricter interpretations of the violations related to violent extremism and terrorism (Penal Code of the Republic of Albania, 2014). Furthermore, during this period, security agencies increased their repressive measures regarding FF and terrorism in general. In fact, Albania has perhaps the most punitive measures for people who are convicted for terrorism, compared to other countries in the region. Cooperation between the police force and the intelligence services also intensified in both formal and practical aspects.

Furthermore, in November 2015, Albania approved the National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism (CVE) and the Action Plan (Council of Ministers, 2015). Although the strategy is a step in the right direction, its reach has been rather limited and confined to cooperation and coordination functions. There seems to be a lack of information on the implementation of proposed benchmarks set by the document.

Another important component of the National Strategy on CVE is the establishment of a National Coordinator in charge of reporting directly to the Prime Minister on issues concerning violent extremism. Although the office has been operational for about 3 years, very few procedures and directives have been enacted. The glitches in communication are partially due to a very understaffed office and partially to inadequate funding for maintaining the operational costs of the office. As of December 2017, the office of the National Coordinator does not have a sufficient budget to fulfil many of the tasks and objectives set forth by the National Strategy, and as it stands, the proposed strategy and action plan resemble a 'wish list' rather than calculated courses of action (Council of Ministers, VKM 737, 2017). With that said, the office has achieved some success but in order to rise up to its requirements, it needs to deliver in practice many of its written objectives.

As shown above, Albania's leading strategy against violent extremism can be summarized as 'prevention through deterrence'. Due to the harsh legal consequences on individuals affiliated with violent extremism, and given the lack of identified returnees, it's safe to assume that there isn't any effective de-radicalisation programme in place. On the other hand, the office of the National Coordinator has played a role in countering radicalisation, although these efforts can mostly be attributed to the work of civil society organisations. Hence, thus far "state actions so far lack a solid prevention-oriented perspective and approach



within national borders” (Vurmo, 2015, p. 15), therefore it’s imperative that Albania’s counter-radicalisation efforts achieve greater unity of purpose to be as comprehensive as the strategy suggests.<sup>5</sup>

What haven’t lacked a prevention-oriented perspective are the endeavours of the civil society. Civil society in Albania has engaged in dozens of projects with communities at the local level as well as institutional and state actors. Both think tanks and grassroots organisations have helped inform policymakers about the fundamental causes of VE and executed projects in line with policy actions for countering and preventing violent extremism in the future. The most recent projects to be implemented involve empowering local communities, improving the roles of schools as community centres.<sup>6</sup> These projects have been particularly effective as they provide a multi-layered approach to preventing violent extremism and building community resilience through the coordinated cooperation among local institutions, schools, community centres, community police, and religious communities.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS IN COUNTERING VE IN ALBANIA AND POTENTIAL VULNERABILITIES**

Regardless of the lack of a comprehensive approach towards violent extremism, the Albanian government has improved its institutional capacities in better countering and detecting violent extremist activity. As such, the MoI has increased trainings, acquired new equipment and increased the number of personnel working for the Counter-Terrorism Directorate, and is also working on improving its surveillance capabilities (European Commission, 2018, p. 36). These advancements have also been reflected on the achievements of the security institutions. Since late 2014, Albanian security institutions have been able to detect and disrupt several terrorist plots.

First, in March 2014 Albanian authorities arrested 9 self-proclaimed imams of a mosque in the periphery of Tirana. These imams were responsible for motivating over 70 individuals to go fight against the Syrian regime (Sot News, 2016).<sup>7</sup> The incrimination of the imams was very effective as it discouraged other potential

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5 In its most recent country report, the EU Commission stated that the performance of the CVE Office is greatly affected by the limited resources at hand and that success will largely be determined by the amount of funding that the center will get (EU Commission Report, p. 36).

6 Some of the most prominent research and community resilience projects are: “Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism” – IDM Albania; “Opportunities for Preventing Violent Extremism through Intra-regional and Cross-regional Exchange” – IDM Albania (cross regional); “Reinforcing CVE efforts and Capacities” – IDM Albania; “Advancing School Boundaries Towards Resilient Communities” – IDM Albania; “Strengthening Civil Society to Build Youth Resilience to Counter Violent Extremism” – Terre des Hommes; “Civil Society Countering Violent Extremism” – Albanian Helsinki Committee; “Actions to Address Community Safety, Prevention of Violent Extremism, and Religious Radicalism” – Anttarc.

7 The imams were arrested on 12 March 2014, their penal cases were closed in 26 February 2015 and the final court decision was taken in 03 May 2016.

recruiters and possible foreign fighters from engaging in violent extremism activity, it made citizens aware of the gravity of the problem within our society, and it also helped send a strong message regarding the government's commitment to fight VE in the country. Second, in November 2016, through a well coordinated regional operation, Albanian police were able to uncover a plot and disrupt an attack on a football match between Albania and Israel (Telegrafi, 2016).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, throughout 2017, 5 successful counter-terrorism operations have led to the arrest of 12 individuals. Not much information is provided regarding any of these interventions but these data were also supported in the European Commission's report (European Commission, 2018).

On the other hand, one aspect of counter-VE efforts which the Albanian government seems to be lacking is tackling online radicalisation and propaganda of violent extremism. In fact, according to the latest European Commission report "online radicalisation content in Albanian is on the rise" (European Commission, 2018, p. 37). Similarly, a report conducted by the Balkans Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in early 2017 concluded that "the internet is a haven for Islamic extremists where they remain untouchable while spreading hate messages and recruit followers" (Qafmolla, et al., 2017). Another more recent report from the Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS) re-confirmed the high levels of violent extremism propaganda on Albanian speaking websites and social media and raised concerns about the constant re-appearance of these sites through different names (Kelmendi & Balaj, 2017, p. 8). Although online radicalisation does not pose a direct and imminent threat to security, it undoubtedly sows the seeds for undermining the future stability and peace within the country.

Radicalization in Albanian prisons might also be an upcoming battle for Albanian authorities. The government has recognized this particular issue as a potential threat to security and in January 2008, the Ministry of Justice and the General Directorate of Prisons, in cooperation with the OSCE presence in Albania, initiated a training project with prison staff in order "to equip them with the technical and operational capabilities for preventing violent extremism which leads to terrorism within prisons" (General Directorate of Prisons, 2018). This concern is also expressed in the 2018 EU Commission's country report (European Commission, 2018, p. 37). The threat of radicalisation in prisons is likely, given that 9 of the imams, who recruited over 70 FF to fight in Iraq and Syria, are currently serving their sentences in Albanian prisons. The threat becomes more credible when comparing it with similar cases of radicalisation with Muslim Albanians in Kosovo prisons (Zeri News, 2017).

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8 19 people were arrested under the suspicion of planning this terrorist plot. Currently 2 Albanian citizens have been jailed and 2 others are kept at house arrest.



## THE THREAT OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS TO ALBANIA AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR REINTEGRATION

The general level of threat coming to Albania from potential returning FF is rather low. Undoubtedly, Albania's battle against violent extremism and the foreign fighters phenomenon is ongoing; however as current Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces and former head of the Defence Intelligence and Security Agency states, the "situation is stable but the enabling environment remains fragile" (News Bomb, 2017).<sup>9</sup> Other reports coming from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs claim that the threat level is low (Koha Jone, 2015). Undoubtedly, returnees pose some degree of risk but as of this day, no attack has been carried out by former foreign fighters in the Balkans, and contrary to the general perceptions and popular belief, there are several pragmatic reasons why returning FF might not pose a great threat to the Albanian society at large.

The number of foreign fighters still remaining in Syria and Iraq is relatively low to effectively disturb peace and security in the country (approximately 32 fighters) and their prospective of return seems increasingly murkier. First, many might not be able to return due to fear of criminal prosecution, lack of travelling and identification documents, which make relocation very difficult, or even unwillingness to return after beginning of a 'new' life in Syria or Iraq (many foreign fighters have married, have children and are engaging in everyday life in the conflict areas where they settled) (Byman & Shapiro, 2014).

Second, many might be deterred due to fear of incurring punishment from their own terrorist organisations (Sarhan, 2016). Third, thanks to the effectiveness of the bombing campaign, FF networks have been disrupted, hence Albanian foreign fighters have been separated into smaller groups and their coordination will most probably be poor, thus limiting their capability to organize mass scale operations upon their hopeful return home (Byman & Shapiro, 2014). Fourth, for those few FFs who succeed in returning, many might be disillusioned and not interested in bringing the violence with them (Al Jazeera, 2016).

Finally, since the breakout of the FF phenomenon Albanian authorities have improved their capacities, increased cooperation with partner states and have increased the level of protection from VE; the dozen disrupted terrorist plots in the past years are a clear indication of this (European Commission, 2018, pp. 36-37). Therefore, unless the Western Balkans faces another uncontrolled wave of migrants, the 'mass return' of Albania's foreign fighters is highly questionable. Alternatively, the most likely threat to the country could come from possible returnees acting as "lone wolves," but it should be noted that such attack is not exclusive to returning FF but it can also be carried out by homegrown radicals and VE.

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9 Interview of the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces for News Bomb newspaper

Given the low potential of foreign fighters to seriously threaten the peace and security of Albanian citizens, it's important that the country channels its efforts towards preventive strategies by proactively engaging in programs which help strengthen community resilience. An excellent example of such effective strategy is the Aarhus model which provides a balance from both the top-down and bottom-up approach to countering and preventing VE. This model focuses on "institutionalized cooperation" to counter radicalisation and brings together a network of schools, social services, police and local government (Reed & Pohl, 2017).

Versions of the Aarhus model have recently found application in Albania as well. The first one of its kind is a project on *Advancing School Boundaries towards Resilient Communities*, which is being implemented by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation in four municipalities. The project aims to build stronger community cohesion with the long term purpose of strengthening its resilience against VE and radicalisation. In line with the Danish model, this project focuses on assessing individual risk, reintegration at a local level, and addressing the push factors (Metodieva, 2018, p. 14). Although this is certainly a step in the right direction and it promises good results, given that most feedback has been exceptionally positive, this project is, however, still in the early stages of being implemented and its long term impact remains to be seen.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO DECISION-MAKERS**

The 2012–2015 surge of Albanian Foreign Fighters to Syria and Iraq shaped the security apparatus of the country as it brought to light the dormant threat of radicalisation and Violent Extremism within the country, particularly Islamic radicalism. The phenomenon galvanized the efforts of all branches of the government, civil society, and international partners deterring the threat of VE and helping build a more resilient society to future forms of radicalisation. The Albanian government changed the legal framework, strengthened institutional capacities, devised a national strategy and established the Office of the National Coordinator against Violent Extremism (which has most recently become the Centre against VE). Many practices and policies have improved, yet more needs to be done towards enhancing the capacities of the current agencies, particularly when addressing issues of online radicalism, prison radicalisation, counter messaging campaigns and cooperation with civil society partners with the aim of strengthening community resilience.

Although the threat of returning foreign fighters might not be as grave as commonly perceived, it is important to take action for preventing potential "lone wolf" attacks in the country. Countering radicalisation can be a complex process, which is why preventing it should be the primary focus of the Albanian government. As the best form of prevention is undoubtedly avoidance, building community



resilience should become the focal point of its strategy against radicalisation and violent extremism. Such strategy can develop mechanisms which will serve as long term buffers against radicalisation and violent extremism. Furthermore, the strategy should focus at the local level to enable a targeted approach to the factors of radicalisation and it should seek to provide both a bottom-up and a top-down approach for guaranteeing greater cooperation among all various stakeholders.

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# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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## BACKGROUND

For centuries Muslims on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina lived together with members of different religious groups. There was a high level of tolerance in the society where there was a separation between religion and state. According to the census of 1991, 42.77% of the population were Muslims, 20.4% Orthodox and 13.57% Catholics (Zavod za statistiku Republike Bosne i Hercegovine, 1993). As a result of migration of population during and after the war in the '90s, the census of 2013 shows the religious groups live in relatively homogenous ethno-religious areas and that the majority of the population of BiH are Muslims (50.7%), Orthodox (30.75%) or Catholics (15.19%) (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2016). Internal population movements were not the only result of the war, as a great number of the population sought refuge all around the world, many of them did not return to Bosnia and Herzegovina, creating a widespread diaspora.

During the war, foreign fighters arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina from different countries of the world, joining different belligerent sides based on religious backgrounds. Some of them fought first in the battlegrounds in Croatia before arriving to BiH. Next to foreign fighters from countries such as Great Britain, France, Germany (Jadrijević Tomas, 2013), Greece, Russia, Romania and Ukraine (Halimović, 2014), were also Muslim foreign fighters, the mujahedeen (including fighters that fought in Afghanistan in the late '80s) that brought a different view, understanding and practice of Islam. After the war, some of them left and some stayed. In the period after 1995, the presence of this different relation to Islam, mainly manifested as Salafism, contrasted sharply with the widely renowned secular society and liberal attitude Bosnian Muslims harboured. This presence was supported by different post-war relief organisations and building of mosques through donations from Arab countries. The number of those that cohered to Salafism and other practices of Islam grew at a slow pace. Later on, this presence manifested itself through parajamaats, unofficial mosques, refusing to accept the authority of the Bosnian Islamic Community. These communities have been identified as fertile grounds for radicalisation and recruitment.

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After the 9/11 attacks in the US, BiH, aligning itself with the position of NATO, joins the global efforts to fight terrorism. In the following years an increase of religious radicalism and extremism is noticed with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, especially with the war in Syria. Even with success of BiH security forces in preventing terrorist attacks, e.g. the arrest of four persons in Sarajevo in 2005 (News.bbc.co.uk, 2006), these efforts have proven to be insufficient in sparing Bosnia and Herzegovina of terrorist attacks on its own territory. The first significant attack was in mid-2010, when a group of members of the Salafi movement activated an explosive device killing one police officer in front of a police station in the town of Bugojno. The following attack was at end of October 2011, when a member of the Salafi movement shot at the building of the US Embassy in Sarajevo. Material damage was done and one police officer was wounded (Muminović, 2011). Three and a half years later, an attacker who was considered to be an Islamist radical entered the police station in Zvornik and opened fire killing one and wounding two police officers (Klix.ba, 2015a). The last terrorist attack happened close to the Rajlovac military base in November 2015 when two members of the Armed Forces of BiH were killed (Klix.ba, 2015b).

## **FOREIGN FIGHTERS FROM BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

With the wars in Ukraine, Iraq and Syria, Bosnia and Herzegovina faced a new issue: BiH nationals going to fight for foreign armed groups in another country. This was not a big problem only for Bosnia and Herzegovina but for other countries in the region as well as throughout Europe and the world.

The number of foreign fighters from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Ukraine has been estimated to be 7. All of them have been identified and some of them have also fought in Syria. They travelled through Serbia being assisted by the Movement of Serbian Chetniks Ravna Gora in order to join pro-Russian paramilitary formations where they fought in the "Serbian Hussar Regiment". In October 2017, according to police agencies, there was only one BiH national fighting in Ukraine. (Avdić, 2017a)

It is very complicated to determine the number of persons from BiH that went to Syria and Iraq to fight, however, it is estimated that it is 50 times higher than those that left for Ukraine. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence suggests in its assessment that BiH gave between 300 and 340 foreign fighters (Radio Slobodna Evropa, n.d.). Although, the Minister of Security BiH in October 2017 stated that this number was around 230 (Ljubas, 2017). Whereas according to a local research until the end of 2015, 330 BiH nationals (188 men, 61 women, and 81 children) travelled to Syria and Iraq from BiH and diaspora, mostly from Austria and Germany, with 55% being non-combatant population (Azinović and Jusić, 2016). Among these 330 BiH nationals, there are some people who have dual-citizenship or long-term residence in other countries where they were recruited and from where they travelled to the warzones. The largest number of travels between Syria and BiH



was registered during 2013. (Azinović and Jusić, 2015) This estimated number for persons that left for Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters put Bosnia and Herzegovina among the top European countries from where foreign fighters come from; however, if the ratio of foreign fighter to the total Muslim population is taken into account, the ratio for Bosnia and Herzegovina is just below the ratio for the European Union. (Quercia, 2015)

The research by Azinovic and Jusic shows that 94% of them had registered residency in Federation of BiH and the most of them lived in Tuzla Canton, Zenica-Doboj Canton, and Sarajevo Canton. The average age of men was 31 but the most common age was 22. Also, the majority of men belonged to the age group between 19 and 27 years. As for women, their average age was 30 and the most common age was 24. The social background of these persons shows that a significant part of them came from dysfunctional families where they were often exposed to violence or growing up without one of the parents (most often without a father). Further, the results of this research show that some of these persons have different psychosocial and other disorders which affect mental health. In addition, more than a quarter of the men had had police and court records before travelling to Syria and Iraq. Most of them came from rural areas, low-income families, low education level and little work experience.

The motives for them joining the fight in Syria and Iraq are various. Some left because of bad marriages and violence in the family, others due to their drug addiction or debts. Furthermore, they went there to find partners for marriage, adventure or a sense of belonging, but also to fulfil what they deem their religious duties are. (Azinović and Jusić, 2016)

By the beginning of 2016, 47 men came back and 50 were killed – on the other side, 8 women came back and 1 was killed. Those that have returned may present a risk for further radicalisation, extremism and potential terrorist activities. A full list with circumstances of death of 76 persons with BiH citizenship (including five women and four children) being killed in Syria was published by the media in April 2018. (Avdić, 2018) Moreover, the whereabouts of around 50 persons is unknown; they may still be in Syria and Iraq, they may have been killed, or they might have returned to another country from which they left to fight.

In 2017, there were two arrests made upon attempts of leaving to fight in Syria. The first one was in June, when a known member of the Salafi movement, who was deemed as one of the most radical members by police agencies, was arrested. After being arrested in September 2014, in October 2016 he was sentenced to three years of prison for joining foreign armed groups in another country, however, at that time he was not sent to serve the sentence. (Sofradžija, 2017) Another individual was arrested in December 2017 on suspicion that he planned to go to Syria and join armed groups. (Avdić, 2017b)

## REACTION OF DIFFERENT ACTORS

Faced with terrorist threats, Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted multiple Strategies to prevent and fight terrorism, the most recent for the period 2015–2020 including measures related to the issues of foreign fighters. Due to the complex state system with multiple level institutions, a need to form a special Task Force for the fight against terrorism arose. The Task Force formed in 2006 comprises of more than 14 different police, security and prosecutorial institutions from the state, entity and Brcko District levels, with one of the aims being to ease coordination between the different security institutions.

As a measure against foreign fighters, in April 2014 the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted amendments to the Criminal Code, adding an article titled "Illegal formation and joining foreign paramilitary or parapolice formations" envisaging prison sentences for any activity related to organizing, joining, mobilizing and other. However, in case a member of a formation exposes it, before or after it has committed a crime, the law envisages full or partial amnesty, thus motivating members to expose the group for their own personal gain. (Parlamentarna skupština Bosne i Hercegovine, 2014) The amendments to the Criminal Code entered into force in June 2014 and had the effect of lowering the number of those leaving to fight in Syria.

Since the law enforcement agencies and judiciary effectively enforced the Law, by the end of 2017 the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina had sentenced 22 citizens of BiH for a total of 50 years of imprisonment for joining or attempting to join organisation of departures and similar acts regarding the fights in Syria and Iraq. The sentences are various and range from one up to seven years in prison, with some of the foreign fighters already serving the sentence or having commuted to pay a fine. Most of the charges were on terrorism, however, in many cases the new article was used due to the envisaged amnesty. (Jahić, 2017) Due to developments in Syria and Iraq, a greater number of nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina who joined the fights started leaving the war-affected areas for other countries where they were arrested. Further trials are expected, as Interpol warrants have been filed regarding several persons after being arrested will be extradited and available to the justice system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Tužilaštvo Bosne i Hercegovine, 2017)

A key non-state actor regarding this issue is the Bosnian Islamic Community. The first action worth mentioning is the Joint statement on the condemnation of terrorism and violent extremism of December 2015. (Nu., 2015) Namely, upon the initiative by the Grand Mufti (Reis ul-Ulema) of Bosnia and Herzegovina, thirty-seven Bosniak leaders agreed on and signed a joint statement where they condemned terrorism and violent extremism, expressing their determination to institutionally, intellectually, morally and politically stand against any form of radicalism, violent extremism and terrorism. Among the leaders there were the Bosniak member of the presidency, the representatives of the Islamic Community, renowned professors,



human rights activists and representatives of wartime victims. The statement also said that the threat of radicalism was not recognized in time and that wartime sufferings, injustice, unemployment and the setting up of Muslim communities outside the Bosnian Islamic Community all have created the dangerous combination leading to violent extremism.

Another step taken by the Bosnian Islamic Community was with regard to identifying jamaats that were organizing religious services outside of the organisational system of the Bosnian Islamic Community. These so-called parajamaats, in the view of the Bosnian Islamic Community, organized illegitimate religious services and were also deemed not only by the Islamic Community but also by the media and the public as possible places of radicalisation and recruitment. After identifying 64 parajamaats, (Vecernji.ba, 2016), they were called by the Bosnian Islamic Community to join the existing system by the end of February 2016. Further talks were held with 38 parajamaats and 20 of them did not agree to join the Bosnian Islamic Community. (N1 BA, 2016) Even though there were announcements made by the Bosnian Islamic Community and state institutions that these would be closed, there was no legal basis to implement this and thus they continued with their practices of organizing prayers. (Metaj, 2017)

The media's approach in Bosnia and Herzegovina to this topic has mostly been in regard to foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq with some rare coverage on foreign fighters in Ukraine. The foreign fighters were presented as a negative phenomenon and the media followed up and advocated for measures to be taken by state authorities. However, on the other hand the local media has created a link between salafism, terrorism and foreign fighters without making a differentiation. A research that conducted a monitoring of 19 media outlets (daily and weekly press; internet portals) under keywords Wahabis, Salafis, ISIL and terrorism in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that between November 2015 and March 2016 there were 1044 articles published with almost a third of them about foreign fighters. The analysis of all the articles shows, among others, that there were 53.6% neutral and 46.3% negative toned articles and one fifth of them had sensationalist titles. In the negative toned articles unnamed sources are used in regard to terrorist cells and camps which undermine state security and intelligence institutions. They are also portraying the Salafis stereotypically and often linking all Salafis with terrorism. This kind of reporting lead to creating fear, reducing trust and increasing suspicion of the Salafis. (Puhalo, 2016)

Foreign media when reporting on foreign fighters, terrorism, radicalisation and violent extremism in their own countries, if possible, do not hesitate to accent the origin or descent of the person(s), even though the person in question was born or spent most of their life in this country. One example is the two underage girls born in Austria to Bosnian immigrants that decided to leave for Syria. While reporting on this case, the Austrian media used phrases such as "shock for two Bosnian families from Vienna" (krone.at, 2014) or "According to earlier information from their parents, Bosnian

refugees,..." (derStandard.at, 2014) Another example is a profile article in a French portal on a Swiss national who was arrested in France on suspicion of planning attacks. The article says "The group's leader is Swiss. Long before being called Abd'al Muhaymin Al-Bosnie, 27-year-old (...) the CV of this Bosnian Croat who, born during the war in Bosnia, was forced to leave his country at the age of 3, accompanied by his younger brother and mother, and left to live in Switzerland" (Joahny, 2017). The article states that he is Swiss, but it also accentuates his Bosnian and Croat heritage, even though the individual has lived in Switzerland for 24 years. This kind of reporting might backfire, as it might create a further gap and spark animosity between immigrants or their descendants and the general population of the country. These gaps and negative reporting could then be used as an argument by the recruiters in their efforts to increase their numbers and radicalise.

The civil society organisations have also started implementing different projects regarding countering violent extremism. Among others, the activities range from research and studies, assistance to state and lower governance level institutions to working directly with youth, media and religious communities in raising awareness, mitigating external pressures that lead to violent extremism, providing skills to develop capacities to address violent extremism and radicalism. In September 2017, a first coordination meeting was organized by the International Organization for Migration and the Ministry of Security of BiH. This meeting had the aim to identify different efforts by different actors in regard to preventing/combating violent extremism in BiH in order to create a coordination of the different actors allowing them to complement their work and to avoid duplication or repetition of the same activities so that available resources could be used to yield more effects.

## **DE-RADICALISATION AND PREVENTION**

Religious radicalism and extremism can never be eradicated, but their influence and impact can be diminished. This is not something that can be achieved overnight, as it is a long-term process that necessitates the engagement of the whole society to prevent it from taking a violent form. Of course, prevention measures need to be set in place, however, a key issue that needs to be addressed is the re-socialization of persons who fought in Syria and Iraq, as these persons might be a threat for radicalisation and recruitment of others or to conduct violent acts, especially bearing in mind that conducting surveillance on these persons demands lots of funds and manpower and that these persons could be 'sleepers' waiting for the moment to strike. The measure of imprisoning them for some time delivers a message that their actions are not acceptable, but it does not solve the potential threat while they may be in prison or once they have served their sentence. One of the persons arrested and sentenced in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2005 that had Swedish and Serbian nationality serves as an example for this case. As a Swedish national, he requested to be transferred to Sweden for the remaining of his sentence. After serving the two thirds of his sentence and his release in 2011, he was convicted for



firearms violations in 2013 and Swedish media reported that he travelled to Syria to fight in 2014. In January 2016, he was arrested in Greece on suspicions on travelling to Syria, with knives and uniforms in his luggage trying to board a bus to Turkey. (Klix.ba, 2016a)

There is no individual de-radicalisation or re-socialization strategy in BiH. However, in the adopted Strategy of BiH for prevention and fight against terrorism for the period 2015 – 2020, for the first time de-radicalisation measures are included. (Klix.ba, 2016b)<sup>3</sup>

One of the guidelines for the implementation of priority objectives of the Strategy is to develop re-socialization programs for persons who are convicted of terrorism or participation in foreign paramilitary formations. Carriers of activities are judicial bodies and court police agencies with the support of the Ministry of Security BiH. Also, all levels of governance in BiH are obliged to develop action plans for the implementation of the Strategy at the level of their jurisdictions. As mentioned in the Strategy, the frame period for the development of the action plans is 60 days after the adoption of the Strategy in July 2015. However, the Government of Brcko District of BiH adopted its action plan in March 2016. (Bdcentral.net, 2016) The Government of Republic of Srpska (RS) adopted the action plan in May 2016 and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of RS was given one of the main roles. (Glas Srpske, 2016) At the state level, the Council of Ministers of BiH adopted the Action plan on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2016, more than 15 months after the adoption of the Strategy. (Klix.ba, 2016b) As for the Federation of BiH and ten cantons there is no available information concerning the adoption of any Action plans regarding the Strategy.

Most important activities conducted regarding de-radicalisation are by the Ministry of Security BiH which is implementing several local and regional projects. In these projects, in order to achieve the set objectives various civil society organisations, religious and local institutions will be engaged in their local communities. Focus is also set on prisons and families of those who have been convicted of terrorism and related crimes. (Ljubas, 2017) In the implementation of these projects, MS BiH receives support from international organisations and other countries, such as UNDP, Council of Europe in BiH and the Republic of Italy. Also, this institution agreed on implementing several de-radicalisation projects in cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the French Republic (Ministarstvo sigurnosti BiH, 2015), as well as sharing information and experiences with other countries, such as Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.<sup>4</sup> However, the lack of information on different projects, such as their objectives and activities, makes it impossible to follow their progress and assess the success rate.

In one preventive project, a team of 27 psychologists, pedagogues, social workers, criminologists and jurists from the whole territory of BiH have created a matrix for recognition of children at risk to be implemented in schools. The matrix has 44 different variables of behaviour and allows for teachers to keep records of behaviour every

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3 The strategy is available at: [www.msb.gov.ba/docs/BIH\\_2015\\_2020.doc](http://www.msb.gov.ba/docs/BIH_2015_2020.doc)

4 For more information about this topic, please visit: [www.msb.gov.ba](http://www.msb.gov.ba)

school child individually. In case of a high risk, social services centres, centres for mental health and other relevant institutions would be notified. In this way, children at risk of being radicalised might be identified in an early age when it is possible to work with them and lower this risk. The use of the matrix is currently in its second year of pilot testing in different areas of BiH. (Hantalasevic, 2016)

## **INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**

As this is a global threat, it is necessary to cooperate and share information with other countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina has been doing just that. E.g. the arrest of the 4 persons in Sarajevo in 2005 triggered police raids in the UK and Denmark and the arrest of multiple persons in these countries; one of them being a cyber-agitator for Al-Qaida. The need for cooperation of law enforcement agencies and intelligence services is not necessary only on the local level but also on the regional and on the international level.

Many regional and international meetings, conferences and other events have been organized in order to increase the cooperation on this topic. Bosnia and Herzegovina has joined many different initiatives regarding countering violent/radical extremism and in August 2016 an operational cooperation agreement with Europol was signed. This agreement allows a better cooperation in the prevention and fight against organised crime, terrorism and other forms of international crime. Even though the agreement specified the need to appoint a Liaison Officer to the Europol headquarters and to designate the national point of contact, the latter happened only in April 2018; this national contact point allows appointing a Liaison Officer. (Arnautović, 2018)

However, Bosnia and Herzegovina with all the efforts made has been accused by foreign media and foreign statesmen of becoming more and more Islamised. Croatian president Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic stated in December 2016 that „people should face the fact that there are thousands of fighters of the so-called Islamic State who are returning to Bosnia and Herzegovina“(Pavlić, 2016). In August 2017 Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria, Sebastian Kurz, stated that women are paid to wear the full veil in public in Sarajevo (Spaic and Isufi, 2017), and some days later the Czech president, Milos Zeman stated that BiH could become a new terrorist base (Sputniknews.com, 2017). These accusations have always been denied by officials and by the Bosnian Islamic Community as they were unsubstantiated. (INSIDE SARAJEVO, 2017)

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

All in all, a commitment from the state institutions and other key actors as well as from the whole society needs to exist. Such commitment are in existence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, even though they are more ad hoc reactions to developments. The constant political turmoil, poverty and other socio-economic factors as well as resulting issues are deemed bigger risks to human security in BiH, thus violent extremism is not the main security issue in BiH.



However, as violent extremism is a global threat that does not recognize borders, international cooperation remains highly important with a need of constant development and effective results. Thus, there is a demand of increased cooperation, especially regional by state institutions and other relevant actors.

In regard to institutions on all levels of governance, the adoption of all level complementary action plans and making them publicly accessible are necessary. This would allow monitoring of the implementation of the Strategy and the Action Plans by institutions and external actors (such as IOs and CSOs). Institutions also need to develop and adopt new methods of identifying potential terrorists, as not all radicalised persons are violent nor do all of them present a threat (Knight, 2017).

There should be amendments to the legislation in order not to allow commuting the prison sentence to a fine and the sentenced persons should be obliged to follow a re-socialisation program. This is especially important, since being imprisoned together allows networking and recruitment of others. However, the re-socialisation programs should first be set in place and adequate funding should be provided. Currently, most of the available funds go towards the training of staff for re-socialisation programs, without sufficient means to implement these programs.

The media needs to take a part in de-radicalisation and re-socialisation process as well as to become an important factor in prevention of hate speech. They should not only be covering news on these issues but also be more proactive through offering media space to discussions and reports that can assist in re-socialization and diminishing effects of possible radicalisation.

As prevention mechanisms, programs in educational and religious institutions need to be set in place in order to prevent extremism and future radicalisation. Mechanisms of early identification of behaviour patterns in people being susceptible to radicalisation need to be further developed. Through specialised programs, there is a possibility to prevent possible radicalisation in these persons. Involvement of formerly radicalised persons having been re-socialised in the meantime, in prevention programs but also in re-socialisation programs could be one measure to be taken. Their personal experience allows them to create a better link with the target group and can have better success in prevention and re-socialisation.

In general, as there are different measures already set in place, different projects are being implemented, and many more measures and projects are envisaged, it is necessary to have a better oversight of these measures and projects. This is inevitable in order to avoid funds being allocated to duplication or repetition of same activities and to allow funding to measures and projects that could yield more effects.

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# SOLVING FOREIGN FIGHTERS PROBLEM IN KOSOVO

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MENTOR VRAJOLLI<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Findings of this report show that so far 403 citizens from Kosovo joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Yet, more detailed data shows that although the Kosovo institutions take very seriously the issue of foreign fighters and violent extremism, in reality this phenomenon is considered to be an externally driven highly isolated threat which is affiliated with a very limited number of citizens. Respectively, the paper will argue that currently in Kosovo there are only 123 returned foreign fighters, the majority of whom returned prior to 2014. These individuals usually declare to have joined this conflict for humanitarian reasons, therefore cannot necessarily be considered to be radicalised. This means that currently there are no more than 40 to 60 adult males who are in the Middle East, some of whom may already have been captured by Iraqi, Syrian, Kurdish or Turkish forces. Which means that the prospect of these individuals returning to Kosovo and causing any security concern is highly unlikely. In addition, this is related also to the measures undertaken by Kosovo institutions.

Respectively, the report shows that Kosovo has made steady progress in developing and implementing policies to prevent and counter violent extremism. This progress has been especially noticeable when it comes to implementation of the early identification, prevention and intervention objective strategies. However, de-radicalisation and reintegration is considered to be a more complicated strategic objective, although there has been some important progress also in this field. The most prominent of these have been the efforts to develop a special programme which aims to socialise and reintegrate the returned foreign fighters and other radicalised individuals. For this purpose a new specific strategy has been adopted; however, this document is not yet made public. Likewise, also the implementation of this program is mainly kept away from the public, making it difficult to assess if there has been any progress.

Structurally, the report provides a brief analysis of numbers and profiles of Kosovo citizens who joined foreign conflict, context of radicalisation and rise of the foreign fighter phenomenon in Kosovo, including the institutional measures undertaken to tackle this phenomenon; and a brief analysis on the content and the level of implementation of the violent extremism strategy. It also contains recommendations

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which are based on the findings of the report and are mainly focused on the area of de-radicalisation and reintegration where progress was more difficult to be measured due to the limited transparent sources available.

### THE EXTENT OF THE FOREIGN FIGHTER PHENOMENON IN KOSOVO

The latest data published in 2017 show that since 2011 as much as 403 Kosovo citizens<sup>2</sup> have travelled to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq. ("95 fëmijë kosovarë në Siri - 41 u lindënatje – një ka vdekur," 2017) 259 of them are considered to be foreign fighters. The rest were women and children who followed their husbands/parents in the conflict zone.

Of individuals from Kosovo who have been involved in this conflict, around 75 have already been reportedly killed, the vast majority of whom were foreign fighters. ("Vritet edhe një Kosovar në Siri," 2017) So far only 1 woman and 1 child from Kosovo have been reportedly killed. ("95 fëmijë kosovarë në Siri," 2017)

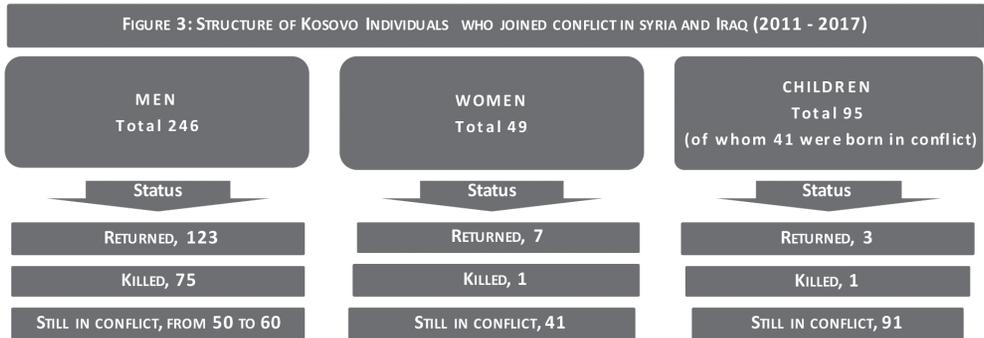
Around 133 individuals have already returned home ("95 fëmijë kosovarë në Siri," 2017) of whom 123 adult males (which represents almost ½ of total number of adult males who joined in this conflict), 7 were female, and the rest, 3 were children. They returned mainly during the 2013–2014 period. The reason pointed out for their return was that they joined the conflict in Syria to fight the Assad regime and that as soon as they found out that a sectarian war was going on there, they refused to take part in this conflict. Here it is important to mention that only a few of these returned individuals continued to be affiliated with the violent extremism related activities, indicating that the majority of these individuals may not be indoctrinated with violent extremist ideology and that they may not pose major security threat to Kosovo society. (Kursani, 2017)

Finally, 196 Kosovo citizens who joined conflict in Syria and Iraq are thought to still remain in the conflict zones, around 131 of whom are believed to be women (41) and children (91) who were left there alone after their husbands/fathers died in the battles. The rest 40 to 65 are believed to be male adults who potentially may still be serving as terrorist foreign fighters. Although reliable sources have recently indicated that many of these adult male individuals (the exact number is unknown) have already been captured by Iraqi, Kurdish, Syrian or Turkish forces during the late 2017 military offensive against Daesh forces.<sup>3</sup> There are also possibilities that some of them are unreported killed which means that the number of the remaining foreign fighters who may potentially return in Kosovo is relatively low.

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2 This number includes individuals who have been radicalised in Kosovo as well as those who have been living abroad and who were radicalised in the foreign countries.

3 Information collected by KCSS from field research interviews conducted with different family members of those who joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq.



SOURCE: "95 FËMIJË KOSOVARË NË SIRI - 41 U LINDËNATJE – NJË KA VDEKUR," 2017

## CONTEXT OF RADICALISATION AND THE RISE OF THE FOREIGN FIGHTERS THREAT IN KOSOVO

Up until now, Kosovo was considered a religiously very tolerant country. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo, 2017) Nevertheless, the developments in the Middle East and the involvement of Kosovo citizens in these conflicts show that Kosovo could not stay immune either to violent extremism as an externally driven phenomenon.

There are various assumptions about when this religiously motivated violent extremist ideology first entered Kosovo. Most agree that these ideologies came through some charity organisations which entered the country immediately after the 1999 conflict, many of which reportedly having religious agendas (either Sunni, Shia, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelist or other). (International Republican Institute, 2017, p. 14.) In particular, the most suspicious ones were those financed by Gulf States foundations<sup>4</sup> whose agendas was to invest in spreading a so-called more 'puritan' Islam<sup>5</sup> in Kosovo, which for its citizens represented a new way of preaching and practicing religion compared to traditional practices. (Kursani, 2015, p. 36). As a result, many consider these charities as the first entities which informed the individuals who later ended up in Syria and Iraq about the conflicts in the Middle East and also exposed them to more extreme religion-based ideological doctrines developed in that part of the world. (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2017) Nevertheless, although these connections have been made very often, it is evident that until late 2013 neither local nor international institutions in Kosovo listed religiously motivated violent extremism as a serious internal or external security threat.

4 Those who were very often suspected for financing various extremist and terrorist groups from around the world with religiously motivated violent extremist agenda.

5 Known by the public as 'Salafi' Islam.

This means that the possibility of the presence of this phenomenon in Kosovo has been highly overlooked. This resulted to be the case even after reports showed that a significant number of individuals from Kosovo joined the Syria conflict to support opposition forces against President Assad's regime. The reason for this is that back then there was no distinction between Anti-Assad opposition and the self-proclaimed Jihadi groups. Therefore, having in mind that anti-Assad opposition groups have been openly supported by US and other Western partners of Kosovo, participation of individuals from Kosovo in this conflict was not considered as a huge concern. (MFA of Kosovo, 2012)

However concerns gradually began to emerge after the Daesh started to come out publicly with its brutal propaganda videos. In 2013 also a terrorist foreign fighter from Kosovo who joined ISIS in Syria launched a brutal propaganda video inviting Albanian speaking audience to join Daesh in the so-called 'holy war'. ("Media reporting on Lavdim Muhaxheri," 2013) This represented a defining moment when Kosovo institutions started to understand that Kosovo is really affected by violent extremism and concrete measures against this phenomena should be taken. Therefore, the real efforts to combat this phenomenon started in 2014 when the Kosovo police started the process of arresting the suspected individuals for participating in the foreign conflicts or for presumably recruiting Kosovo citizens to join the terrorist organisations as foreign fighters. (Kursani, 2015) Hence, during the period May – November 2014 at least 66 suspected individuals were arrested by Kosovo police. The targets of these arrests were categories of individuals such as the returned foreign fighters, suspected recruiters as well as those suspected for preaching radicalising narratives. (Kursani, 2015) Parallel to it, the activities of many religious based suspected NGO's, charities and illegal mosques were suspended under threat of prosecution.

Nevertheless, these first measures were not only reactionary but also exposed Kosovo institutions to various problems. This includes gaps found in the legislation and strategic documents covering this topic.

Respectively, from a legal point of view the Criminal Code (Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2012, Chapter XIV on Criminal offenses against the constitutional order and security of the Republic of Kosovo) lacked provisions which would prohibit Kosovo citizens from joining the foreign conflicts. Therefore, the Kosovo institutions reacted quickly to cover this gap. In March 2015 the Assembly of Kosovo adopted the Law on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts outside State Territory introducing imprisonment sentences of up to 15 years for anyone who breaches it. (Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015)

The adoption of the law had an immediate psychological effect on the individuals who aimed to join the foreign conflicts. However, its impact was that it only limited those who wanted to join the Syrian conflict as part of opposition forces against Assad. Those who were radicalised with religious based violent ideology and wanted to live in the so-called "Islamic Caliphate" continued to join this conflict.



Therefore, to further foster Kosovo's institutional efforts against violent extremism and radicalisation, a new strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism was adopted in September 2015 covering the period 2015–2020 (CVE Strategy). (Government of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015) This strategy came despite the fact that Kosovo had already had a National Strategy on Countering the Terrorism - 2012-2017 (CT Strategy). (Government of Kosovo, 2015) However this existing strategy was considered to be mainly focused on hard measures, forcing limited or no measures at all when it comes to early identification, prevention, de-radicalisation and reintegration. Henceforth, the aim of the newly adopted strategy was to complement the existing strategies in these areas.

The CVE strategy includes four strategic objectives: 1) Early identification of the causes, factors and target groups; 2) Prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation; 3) Intervention with the aim of preventing the risk from violent radicalisation 4) De-radicalisation and reintegration of radicalised persons (CVE Strategy). The first two strategic objectives mainly focus on early identification and prevention of radicalisation and de-radicalisation/reintegration of the affected ones. The third strategic objective has to do with intervention measures and is closer with the content of the CT strategy. Whereas the fourth strategic objective focuses on post-disengagement. Below a brief overview will be provided on the content and the level of the implementation progress made in these three areas.

## 1. EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND PREVENTION MEASURES

These two strategic objectives mainly focus on awareness raising of institutions and citizens regarding the danger that the violent extremism phenomenon in Kosovo represents towards specific target groups and individuals (CVE Strategy). Their objective is to focus on identifying vulnerable population and factors which may potentially lead them towards radicalisation and to use this information as source to increase the awareness of institutions and foster the cooperation with the community (Ibid). Likewise, they also aim to ensure the coordination and increase the capacities of those who deal with implementation of these two strategic objectives.

Kosovo has been very active when it comes to undertaking necessary measures to implement these strategic objectives. The adoption of this strategy helped improving coordination among stakeholders engaged in the implementation of these objectives and likewise various capacity building activities helped improving the institutional capacities (KCSS Participatory Observation). Nevertheless, most importantly, various qualitative and quantitative researches were published, providing detailed analyses about the causes of foreign fighters problem in Kosovo.<sup>6</sup>

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6 During this period various organisations including Kosovo Centre for Security Studies, UNDP Kosovo, OSCE, FIN Church AID, US Institute for Peace have written qualitative and quantitative reports on pull and push factors which triggered Kosovo citizens joining foreign conflicts or being radicalised.

These reports brought better understanding of the threat posed by radicalisation and foreign fighters in Kosovo, highlighting that this phenomenon is not internally driven but rather imported from abroad. (Kursani, 2015, p. 36) They provided clear evidence that society in general continues to remain immune towards this phenomenon; nevertheless, they also noticed that in order to prevent further Kosovo citizens to get radicalised prevention and awareness raising efforts need to be continuous. Henceforth, indirectly these findings highlighted the importance of the awareness raising to increase the citizens' resilience against this phenomenon.

Thanks to this positive insight which came from these various reports, over the past two years, even on the regional level, Kosovo state institutions together with civil society and Islamic Community in Kosovo (locally known as BIK) have been most active when it comes to promoting counter-narratives against the violent extremism phenomenon. They together have organized hundreds of roundtables, lectures, workshops and trainings targeting the central and municipal stakeholders as well as groups of people which are considered vulnerable such as youth.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the impact of these awareness raising activities have been already evident considering that the radicalisation and foreign fighters' trends in Kosovo have gradually dropped.

## 2. INTERVENTION MEASURES

The aim of intervention policies contained by CVE strategy is to ensure better communication between community, law enforcement authorities and other institutions in order to address potential risks posed by radicalised individuals and groups.

Among others, the strategy requires establishing referring mechanisms (rapid response teams) in communities across Kosovo, composed of trained psychologists, social employees, religious clergy and law enforcement officers who can work with radicalised persons in attempts to prevent them from harming themselves and others. Likewise, it foresees establishing a special telephone line for the residents where they can call and report anonymously in relation to the organisations/individuals supporting extremist ideas in the community.

Overall actions foreseen by CVE strategy represents the missing link in relation to the CT strategy. Its aim is to intensify the inter-institutional cooperation and engagement of a wide range of state and non-state institutions, including the civil society, religious community and media, in identifying the threat posed by radicalised individuals. As a result, identification of the radicalised individuals and those affiliated with terrorism related activities improved resulting on the decrease of the foreign fighters and the increase of the arrests of those who attempted to join foreign conflicts or who were engaged in recruiting the Kosovo citizens.

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<sup>7</sup> Over these past 2 years only KCSS alone have organised more than 200 activities on the area of P/CVE involving central and municipal stakeholders, civil society, media, religious clerics, youth community, gender community etc.



Nevertheless, the increased efficiency should be attributed also to the improved cooperation between Kosovo Police and Kosovo Intelligence Agency. At the same time it can be attributed to the improved cooperation of these two Kosovo security institutions with the other foreign homologue institutions. The most successful case in this regards was the prevention of the terrorist plot ordered by Daesh terrorists against Israeli Football Team in an official football match hosted in Albania. This plot involved a network of at least 19 radicalised individuals from Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania. According to sources who requested to remain anonymous it was first intercepted by Kosovo Intelligence Agency and Kosovo Police who immediately shared the information with the homologue institutions of the affected countries allowing a broad mobilisation which resulted in the prevention of the terrorist attack and the arrest of all suspected individuals (Participatory observation of KCSS).

Currently in Kosovo there are around 120 detainees charged with violent extremism related activities. Among these individuals there are those who are returned foreign fighters as well as those who may have not joined foreign conflicts but are suspected of being involved in recruiting, pledging their loyalty or plotting terrorist attacks on behalf of Daesh. Those found guilty await prison sentences between 3 to 15 years .

Consequently, it must be stated that currently there are no known cases of radicalised individuals within Kosovo territory who are not under custody or who are not closely supervised by respective law enforcement institutions.

### **3. DE-RADICALISATION AND REINTEGRATION MEASURES**

De-radicalisation and reintegration represent the final stage of treatment of individuals affected by violent extremism in Kosovo.

The targets of this strategic objective are individuals who are convicted for terrorism related activities; returned foreign fighters; recruiters; preachers of violent extremist narratives; and other radicalised detainees who are perceived as threat for society. This means that de-radicalisation and reintegration not only represents a very important objective for Kosovo institutions, but also it represents one of the most sensitive and difficult objectives that they face when it comes to implementation of the CVE strategy. Henceforth, due to its sensitivity, the approach of Kosovo institutions in consultation with the international partners was that a new strategy on re-socialisation and reintegration programs needs to be adopted to address this strategic objective of the CVE strategy.

The process of drafting this new strategy started in early 2016. It was run by International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP) experts who acted on behalf of Kosovo's Correctional System and Ministry of Justice. Unlike the process of drafting the CVE Strategy which was very inclusive, the drafting of this new strategy happened in closed circles. Respectively, it included mainly the governmental institutions and BIK who according to CVE Strategy had a pivot role when it comes to implementation of de-radicalisation and reintegration strategic objective. International institutions

also participated in the process of drafting this strategy. However the local civil society representatives were excluded from this process. The Strategy is thought to have been adopted by Government of Kosovo in June 2017, however, the document itself has not been made publicly available yet.<sup>8</sup> Various officials have made references to the existence of this strategy. Based on these references, it is believed that the strategy is written by individuals with broad expertise worldwide on the re-socialisation and reintegration of the radicalised individuals with religious based violent extremist ideologies. According to them, the strategy is believed to have followed some of the most successful examples of the homologue programs. Nevertheless, due to the fact that the document is still unavailable to the public, it is very difficult to make a more detailed analysis to its content.

Similar confusion exists also when it comes to the implementation of this document. It is logical to believe that the strategy is in the early stage of implementation. The biggest achievement proclaimed until now is the clearance of the libraries within the prison facilities from religious books with violent content, which has been done in cooperation with BIK. ("Literature jo-tradicionale Islamike në Burgjet e Kosovës," 2017) Nevertheless, the program is also facing many obstacles which are in particular related to the limited professional capacities, including the limited number of psychologists, social workers and other qualified officials required by this strategy. Last year there had been a recruitment process of correctional system officials. Nevertheless, for an unknown reason the process of recruitment was cancelled. (Fejzullahu, 2018). However, recently again the Ministry of Justice called for a new position on Kosovo's Correctional System. Another thing is clear that the implementation of this strategy is done without envisaging any external oversight.<sup>9</sup> This way, it is very difficult to say anything regarding the progress made on implementation of de-radicalisation and reintegration policies in Kosovo.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The de-radicalisation and reintegration should be developed in a more transparent manner. Respectively, the document of the specific strategy adopted to implement this strategic objective should be accessible by the public.
- The strategy should ensure the public that the internal and external oversight mechanisms for implementation of this strategy are in place.
- Process of recruiting new staff in the Correctional Services in Kosovo should be transparent. These institutions should avoid any irregularity during the process of recruitment and should select the new staff purely based on the professionalism criteria.

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8 The existence of this Strategy is referred by CVE Strategy stakeholders, who also confirms their contribution of working groups.

9 Non-participatory observation of KCSS.



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# DEALING WITH FOREIGN FIGHTERS – RETURNEES THE CASE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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STEFANIJA AGROTOVA<sup>1</sup> AND STOJAN SLAVESKI<sup>2</sup>

## SALAFISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

After the Arab Spring and the beginning of the Syrian military conflict, the phenomenon of foreign fighters has become popular. Due to the characteristics of the phenomenon of foreign fighters (which has international dimension) the Republic of Macedonia didn't remain immune to it. Since 2012 till now, more than 150 people have left the Republic of Macedonia in order to join the terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq. Currently, in an interview with various security sources, the number of fighters has significantly decreased because of the characteristics of the conflict. Due to the development of the conflict, the largest wave of volunteers who were leaving Macedonia in order to join the battlefield in Syria was registered in 2015.

So far we have only inadequate policy approaches to this issue which are mixed with lack of knowledge and information, in other words, it is a phenomenon from which the political elites distant themselves and do not want to comment. In the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of reports of "Islamic terrorism", "terrorist training camps", "dangerous Salafists", "growing terrorist threats", etc. Most of these warnings come from the self-proclaimed "security experts" and the irresponsible politicians – who regularly present their security assessments in the media and various conferences. Several incidents related to the supporters of "Salafism" from the region have further contributed to the idea that the Western Balkans is under threat from religious radicalism. In a climate of unconfirmed information and irrelevant speculation, security services, through official statements, tried to mitigate the sense of insecurity among citizens.

In Macedonia, the proponents of "Salafism" are divided among several leaders in their own Jamaat or communities, and they are active outside the official Islamic Community also.<sup>3</sup> These communities' activities are organised by several Islamic

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3 But, generally speaking, the "Salafi" community is hidden and calm, and it does not attract much attention. However, the conflict in Syria brought new reality and revealed new structures of "Salafi" in the Balkans, which took the leading roles in propaganda production, streamlining new supporters and securing logistical support to extremists.



charity organisations and they are active in the distribution of humanitarian aid, the organisation of pilgrim lectures on Salafism, the production of content for Internet, radio and television. Like the other Balkan countries, the Republic of Macedonia has experienced direct security threats from Salafism.<sup>4</sup>

## THE ROAD TO THE BATTLEFIELD

What is it that motivates foreign fighters? So far, we have heard about radicalism, and it is not new in the Western Balkan region, but the Syrian conflict has acted as a special mobilising factor for a large number of young people.

Although great emphasis has been placed on data from recent years, however, the factual situation also indicates that we should be concerned even if only one citizen joins the battlefield. Macedonian authorities estimate that around 154 citizens travelled to Syria and Iraq, 33 of them died and about 80 of them have returned (not all returned fighters were convicted), some are on the run and are in Syria. (Ivanov, 2017). Most of them are men who are directly engaged in the conflict, and only few are women and children. There are women from Kosovo and Bosnia who took part in this conflict which is not the case with Macedonia. In general the number of foreign fighters from Macedonia is low compared to other Western Balkan countries. Furthermore, while other Balkan countries faced cases of forced migration, kidnapping or radicalisation of children, and engagement in combat, Macedonia has not registered such a case.

Most foreign fighters from Macedonia are of Albanian origin and, for the sake of linguistic or ethnic intimacy, were grouped with fighters from Kosovo and Albania in Syria and Iraq. The so-called Albanian units include people who quickly moved to the ranks of ISIL, such as Bekim Fidani from Gostivar, Macedonia; Ridvan Haki from Gnjilane, Kosovo; and Lavdri Muhaxheri from Kacanik, Kosovo ("Kush është "Ebu Usama", ekstremisti nga Maqedonia," 2015; and "Kush është shefi i terroristit Lavdrim, shqiptari Ridvan Haqifi?," 2014). Most Macedonian foreign fighters originate from Skopje, more specifically from Skopje municipalities with predominantly Albanian population as well as from the neighbouring suburban areas, Arachinovo and Saraj. Some even lived in the same street, near Jaya Pasha and Tutunzuz mosques in Cair (municipality in Skopje), and they were recruited in the same way ("Гази Баба и Чаир плодно тло за македонските џихадисти," 2014). Recruitment sometimes happens outside the country, organised by the members of the Albanian diaspora in Western Europe. As it is the case with most of the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, the

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4 Such as: 1. Creating of detachment Imri Elezi - a jihadi detachment within the terrorist group National Liberation Army (also known as Macedonian UÇK), 2. The killings near Smilkovo Lake. Macedonian Media relatively rarely provide information about religious radicalism.

Macedonian citizens traveling via Turkey exploit the freedom of stay for three months, and then return. As a result, there is no evidence that these fighters were in Syria, they only seem to be in Turkey.

In most cases, the families of foreign fighters have no knowledge that their relatives have gone to the battlefield, but often there are cases that the family supported their decision and they remained in contact. But there is another worrying fact in this context. The age of the recruited Macedonian foreign fighters highlights the vulnerability of young people. Most of those killed on the battlefield came from very poor families, were largely uneducated and had criminal background. Among older fighters, more people can be found with experience in armed conflicts in Kosovo. But most of them left to die as martyrs.

As it is true for foreign fighters from neighbouring countries, some Macedonian citizens are ranked within ISIL's command structures. The most famous one is Bekim Fidani, known as "Ebu Usama". In addition, some Macedonian citizens have become senior members of Yabakhat Fatah al-Sham, also known as the Nusra Front. In 2014, for example, Abdul Jashari from Skopje, also known as "Abu Kadadah" or "Al-Alabani" was appointed by Abu Muhammad al-Jilani<sup>5</sup> as the leader of the group's military operations. Sometimes, the notoriety of these foreign fighters is a powerful tool for recruitment, especially among youth, and in some cases the radicalisation of young people happened extremely quickly. There is an example of Stefan Stefanovski, known as "Su-fiyān", a Macedonian Orthodox Christian, a doctor of medicine from a well-respected family who accepted Salafism after multiple visits to the Tutunzuz mosque, and then left for Syria where he treated the wounded fighters of ISIL ("МАКЕДОНЕЦОТ СТЕФАН КОНВЕРТИРАЛ ВО ИСЛАМ И РЕГРУТИРАЛ БОРЦИ ЗА ИСИС," 2015). This case changed the public's perception of the radicalisation process and served as a warning that everyone was subject to radicalisation. Primarily on the territory of Macedonia, recruitment occurs in small, closed environments, through neighbourhood acquaintances, who have authority in the given community. But it was mentioned in an interview with various security sources that recruitment is also the task of imams of Salafism supported by the propaganda of social media and the internet. Through the internet, they use the "bait" method through standard valid Islamic content. The picture shows that currently there are almost 25,000 trackers subscribed to this channel.<sup>6</sup>

The most radical influential figure of the Macedonian "Salafi" movement was Redjep Memishi who was arrested in 2015. Through his radical terminology, he preached jihad in the mosques of Yaya Pasha and Tutunzuz, and was also active online.

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5 Ahmed Hussein al-Shar'a, known by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammad al-Julani, is the commander-in-chief of the Syrian militant group Tahrir al-Sham; he was also the emir of its predecessor organisation al-Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda.

6 On the following link a video content can be found that was followed by 25,000 trackers. Accessed 7 December 2017.



In his lectures Memishi invited his religious followers to join jihad in Syria and Iraq. He enjoyed respect not only across the region (such as in Kosovo, where he often taught), but also from the Albanian diaspora in Germany and Scandinavia. Another preacher who recruited foreign fighters was Omer Bayrami, the head of Islamic Youth from Saraj. However, the radicalisation process is very complex and depends on the interaction of personal, socio-economic and global events, so it is difficult to emphasise one factor. Online recruitment can be very powerful, as in the case of an 18 year old student from Kumanovo. Z. K. left for Iraq in March 2015, and married a foreign fighter. The agent recruited Z. K. from her family to the extent that she did not realize what had happened until she disappeared (“Kumanove, 18-vjecarja rekrutohet nga ISIS, prinderit: Eshte ne Irak,” 2015). Cases like this one can help to understand the seriousness of online radicalisation, and contribute to the development of effective responses.

### **LIMITING THE PHENOMENON OF FOREIGN FIGHTER**

Macedonia amended its Criminal Code (Article 322) so various activities related to the phenomenon of foreign fighters became punishable. For example, the creation, organisation, recruitment, training or other form of preparation, funding or assistance for a person or group in a foreign army or paramilitary unit outside Macedonia can be punished with 5 years in prison. (“Изгласани измените на Кривичниот законик,” 2014) There were other legal mechanisms before this change. Almost every Criminal Code prohibits incitement to ethnic or religious hatred, but these laws have never been used against incitement of Salafi-jihadism.

However, the changes to the Criminal Code did not stop the radicalisation and the recruitment process, but they have a preventive effect, which was confirmed by the decreasing number of departures of the fighters. The future recruits are fully aware that joining the military forces in Syria and Iraq is a criminal act which is subject to law regulations. These regulations are also applicable to their recruiters, facilitators and propagandists. But there are cases where these laws had the opposite effect by encouraging potential fighters to leave as quickly as possible and avoid arrest.

After the laws in the region have been amended, two key issues have opened up. One is about collecting concrete evidence of a committed crime that is, proving that someone was and took part in the battlefields in Syria and Iraq. The other question is what the states should do against radicalisation and how they should deal with returnees. In the Republic of Macedonia, the new legal mechanisms of the police enabled special investigative measures to obtain evidence. Wider intelligence was undertaken, such as monitoring aiming at gathering information about those activities, which facilitated the launch of an operation of the Macedonian policy in August 2015 in several cities in the country (Skopje, Ku-

manovo, Struga and Gostivar).<sup>7</sup> The “Cell” operation was not taken in response to the impending state threat, but to suppress / terminate the network for recruiting foreign fighters in the country. The affected persons were convicted according to the then new legal provisions. Recep Memishi, a leading Salafi ideologist and recruiter, was sentenced to 7 years in prison (“Six of the “Cell” defendants admitted they were recruiting for ISIS, seeking an agreement with the Prosecution,” 2016). In the summer of 2016, the operation continued as “Cell 2”.<sup>8</sup> A few months later, a third part of this operation was conducted in cooperation with Turkey’s police.<sup>9</sup> All arrested persons confessed guilty in order to amicably reduce the prison sentence. Various security sources and lawyers of the detainees claim that the shortest sentence in prison was 1 year. How did the policymakers and security actors started to respond to the phenomenon of foreign fighters? The Islamic Community of Macedonia denies the religious reasons for traveling to Syria, and also avoids recognition of the high level of religious radicalisation. As a religious community, they were mostly passive in the past period. Over time their statements could be heard in condemnation of the phenomenon of foreign fighters, claiming that recruits are indoctrinated from manipulation in religion. The Islamic community supported the operation that was conducted by the Macedonian police and mainly emphasized the need for public debate on preventive actions led by the political institutions and supported by the religious institutions (“ИВЗ е против учество на македонски граѓани во војната во Сирија,” 2014). In 2014, the Islamic community has developed its own project called “stop radicalisation and involvement in terrorism” aimed at preventing further departures of potential combatants and support of resettlement of returnees, even in prisons. This project was designed to include 700 mosques in Macedonia and the diaspora into public awareness campaigns, workshops and meetings about radicalism, and the inclusion of relevant subjects in the curricula of religious schools. But so far this project has not been revived.

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7 According to interviews with police officers and lawyers of the imprisoned, the operation called “Cell” resulted in 9 arrests, mainly of foreign fighters returned. A total of 36 people between 19 and 49 years of age, but 27 remained in Syria (among them arrested Recep Memishi). Total of 21 houses were raided, Internet cafe, Yaya Pasha Tutunzuz mosques, and 2 non-governmental organisations were searched and 38 desktop computers, 18 laptops, 18 tablets and 119 mobile phones were confiscated.

8 Operation in which four former foreign fighters, aged 23 to 38 years, were arrested. Police seized computers, phones, memory cards, USB sticks and passports, but found no explosives or weapons. These returnees were followed for a few months.

9 5 Macedonian citizens from Kumanovo (3) and Skopje (2) were caught in Istanbul on their way to Syria. They were recruited by returnees and previously attended the lectures of Salafi preachers in their hometowns. According to new Criminal Code all were accused for “membership in a foreign army or paramilitary or paramilitary unit.”



## **THE COMPLEX SOCIAL SITUATION IN MACEDONIA AND THE DIFFICULTIES OF COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

In Macedonia and in the neighboring countries, the multi-ethnic nature of the society is given another bigger challenge in the fight against radicalism and terrorism. If it is determined that most Macedonian foreign fighters are of ethnic Albanian origin and this is emphasized by the media or researchers, it can be considered as an attack against all Albanian communities.

Macedonian authorities, especially the police and the security forces are aware of this and that is the reason why sometimes they seem reluctant to interfere in the religious sphere even in the early stages of radicalisation and recruitment. Bad experience from the past, when the police actions were seen as targeting the Albanian community as a whole, contributes to the careful decision-making at the police. It's one of the reasons why the Macedonian police used their forces with mixed ethnic origin in almost all of its actions.

It should be noted as well that the Macedonian lawmakers and the media are also aware that collective blaming of ethnic groups should be avoided (Marusic, 2016). Many lawmakers pointed out that the laws adopted against the foreign fighters' phenomenon in Macedonia target not only the Albanians or only the fighters in Syria and Iraq, but any citizen of Macedonia in any international conflicts (as is the case of Ukraine). During the operation "Cell", the media focused attention on Stefan Stefanovski, and emphasised that not all the detainees were of Albanian origin. But Stefan Stefanovski is not the only Orthodox Macedonian who converted to radical Islam. According to the interview with security sources there are thirty, formerly Orthodox persons, among whom there are girls too ("КАКО СТЕФАН СТАНАЛ СУФИЈАН-СВЕДОШТВО НА ТАТКОТО НА ПРЕОБРАТЕНИОТ МАКЕДОНЕЦ," 2015). This highlights the complexity of the problem of religious radicalisation and the phenomenon of foreign fighter in Macedonia and beyond.

However, many policymakers neglected the issue of radicalisation until the peak of the migration and refugee crisis. Since the beginning of 2016 they started to consider it legitimately as a threat.<sup>10</sup> With the return of foreign fighters, increasing the efforts to de-radicalisation is becoming the most imperative task.

## **LEGAL PROVISIONS FOR COUNTERING RADICALISATION AND TERRORISM**

Macedonia is trying to de-radicalise these 90 returnees, but this has not yet been achieved. Other Balkan countries are facing similar challenges in launching prevention and de-radicalisation programs. Specific projects and measures for this

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<sup>10</sup> Linking terrorism with religious radicalism, extremism, nationalism and transnational crime is a dangerous phenomenon that has a regional and international dimension. More on this in the National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Combating Terrorism in 2016.

type of policy are still being considered and planned. From the above, it can be noted that great efforts have been made to prevent the threat of terrorism originating from religious radicalism, but security measures are not enough. Religious and local communities, families, non-governmental organisations and the media must be involved in efforts to de-radicalise foreign fighters.

The Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups at the State Level could be more active in this partnership. From an interview with various security sources media as a key factor could contribute to these efforts through stories based on research and investigation. We can use this case as an alarm for other Macedonian families who see reflections on their own stories, the way of recruitment and radicalisation. There is currently no NGO focusing on intervening in the process of de-radicalisation. More attention is needed to the preventive function of the institutions. It is necessary to encourage tolerance and coexistence of politicians, religious figures and independent academics.

The phenomenon of foreign fighters has actualised the mutual trust of the countries in the region, which has affected the exchange of information. For that purpose, the Macedonian Ministry of Interior has announced intensive cooperation at the national and international level, to facilitate the exchange of information and joint activities and the identification of foreign fighters and the prevention of terrorist attacks (Stojanchova, 2016).

Currently, there is no program for de-radicalisation of Islamic radicals in prisons in the Republic of Macedonia. In practice, prisons are a kind of incubator for the further radicalisation of persons who were members of radical groups. So far, Macedonia has made no efforts in the area of prevention and de-radicalisation of foreign fighters. From an interview with various security sources, it is known that the Islamic Religious Community was also passive in the past, which is the most competent institution along civil society. As a result, neither the state institutions nor the civil society have taken concrete steps to support the process of de-radicalisation.

The need for drafting new National Strategic Documents is due to the need to transfer activities in the prevention of violent extremism, and to apply a comprehensive social and institutional approach to dealing with these security phenomena. National Strategic Documents were prepared by the National Committee for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism, which is managed by the National Coordinator for Preventing Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism, Deputy National Coordinator for the Prevention of Violent Extremism, Deputy National Coordinator for Combating Terrorism, and 22 members and 22 deputy members participate in the committee, who are permanently employed in 21 ministries and institutions of the Republic of Macedonia.

A new plan was prepared for the Government of the Republic of Macedonia for urgent reform priorities, called 3-6-9 (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2017), among which was the preparation of the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism



and the National Strategy for the Fight against Violent Extremism, completed by the end of March 2018. The general strategic goal of Macedonia consists of prevention, and – if it does not succeed – prosecution (in a regulated and progressive manner) (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2018).

The strategy consists of action plans that are distributed to all state institutions where they need to develop specific measures to prevent and combat the aftermath of terrorism and violent extremism.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Republic of Macedonia mainly needs to find the reasons why young people are opting for extremism as a way to express themselves. Studies have shown that young people through social networks come into contact with potential recruiters. As a multi-ethnic society it needs to work on preventive measures to prevent radicalisation and the program of resettlement and reintegration of returnees, especially after completing prison sentences. A broader systemic approach is needed that would direct and define social spots that give rise of develop and violent extremism. The strategy that Macedonia has adopted relies on repressive measures, and shall be implemented by the executive and judicial powers. It would be crucial to involve the civil society, the non-governmental sector, the religious communities, and the political parties into strengthening the existing national strategy, or to make a brand new National Strategy for de-radicalisation and resettlement of foreign combatants. Such a strategy should also foresee enhanced surveillance by the security services on persons returning from battlefields.

## **CONCLUSION**

Security challenges arising from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have become intertwined with security threats of the Western Balkans. A few years ago, these regions felt as distant places and had nothing in common with Macedonia. Today, it represents a new security environment and security requires new approaches for preventing and combating extremism. Salafism encouraged state and religious institutions of each country in the region to take actions, but in a different way. The teachings of Salafism and some Salafi preachers were initially underestimated, and police and legal mechanisms have proved inadequate. . What radicals preached became clear with the emergence of the phenomenon of foreign fighter. ISIL supported this phenomenon by developing sophisticated propaganda, and through dissemination of modern forms of communication that do radicalisation, mobilising and recruiting in a very easy way.

As a first step, it is necessary to find a suitable terminology that would make a clear distinction between militant Islamic structures and other Muslims. The threat should be clearly and unambiguously identified by the intelligence services

which should also carry out a new security assessment of the magnitude of the threat. As part of the new security assessment on the situation in the Republic of Macedonia, it is necessary to identify and to locate these threats, their composition, connection, program and platform of action, material equipment, forms and methods of action, relationship with foreign factors, paramilitary organisation, grouping and identification of infiltration followers involved in the security, political and religious structures of the state system. It is vital to prevent the “source of recruitment”, which is the initial connection to a global network of jihad. Radical imams pose threats for the Muslim stimulation process of European liberal-democratic societies. This phenomenon requires a policy of “zero tolerance” from the state institutions, which will not only prevent recruitment, but will send a strong and consistent message that it will not tolerate religious extremism and incitement to violence in European democracies. Strategy for prevention and measures supporting de-radicalisation and resettlement must be durable and long lasting, imperative for security services, and also part of the national strategy.

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# RETURNING FROM VIOLENCE: MONTENEGRO

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MILICA KOVAČEVIĆ<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Montenegro has a comprehensive strategic and legislative framework for countering violent extremism, but its implementation is hindered due to insufficient capacity and resources. In comparison with the other Western Balkan countries, the terrorist threat is low, and there is a relatively small number of foreign fighters and returnees. Effective preventive, de-radicalisation and reintegration measures are yet to be developed and implemented. Policies countering violent extremism should be incorporated in other national policies and measures, in order to achieve more interdisciplinary approach.

## STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Montenegro has adopted its strategic framework for countering violent extremism (CVE) in 2015, by adoption of the Strategy for Prevention and Countering Terrorism, Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism 2015-2018 (Government of Montenegro, National Commission for Prevention and Countering Terrorism, Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism, 2015) and the Countering Violent Extremism Strategy 2016-2018 (Government of Montenegro, Ministry of Justice, 2015).

The Strategy for Prevention and Countering Terrorism, Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism 2015-2018 is the basic document in this area, and the Action plan accompanying the Strategy defines 14 goals, where two are directly related to the prevention and countering of violent extremism (PCVE) – strengthening of cooperation between the police and local community in PCVE and improvement of mechanisms for oversight over proliferation of religious radicalism and extremist behavior.

Countering Violent Extremism Strategy 2016-2018 (hereinafter: CVE Strategy) builds on and complements the national Strategy for Prevention and Countering Terrorism, Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism, with a specific focus at countering violent extremism. It has been developed in line with the United Nations' guidelines, EU priorities, and the priorities of the South-East European

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Cooperation Process (SEECP), and based on the good practices developed within the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN).

The CVE Strategy defines four strategic goals:

1. Adequate understanding of the drivers of radicalisation in order to prevent radicalisation;
2. Establishment of effective coordination mechanisms among relevant institutions at the national and international level;
3. Implementation of activities in response to the drivers of radicalisation - combating radicalism and violent extremism;
4. Implementation of monitoring and evaluation in order to eliminate the consequences of violent extremism and terrorism and to plan for future activities.

The CVE Strategy is comprehensive, encompassing many different aspects of the problem. It also envisages the need for interdisciplinary approach, involving civil society, media, business community, religious communities, but also a wide spectrum of public authorities in charge of education, health, social welfare, culture, media etc. Also, a new national Assessment on Serious and Organized Crime Threat was adopted in December 2017, identifying 6 priority areas for 2018–2019 including terrorism and religious extremism.

There is no official information about the state of the implementation of the CVE Strategy, since the report about the first year of its implementation has never been prepared or published. However, the research done by the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) in 2017 showed that the implementation is being far from satisfactory. Implementation gaps are very visible when it comes to activities aimed at understanding of drivers of radicalisation, prevention of radicalisation and exit strategies to help individuals to leave violent extremism. Some of the problems are a lack of effective coordination over implementation of the measures, vaguely defined responsible authorities, unrealistic deadlines, and absence of evaluation and reporting. This all lead to a situation where only security authorities are dealing with CVE, while other institutions and sectors are not even aware of their roles and tasks. (Koprivica & Kovačević, 2017)

In 2018 the European Commission's report on Montenegro notes that the implementation of the 2016–2018 strategy to combat violent extremism is delayed due to insufficient capacity and resources. The report concludes that the number of investigations and prosecutions remains very low in this area, and that this type of crime is not the most prominent in the work of law-enforcement agencies, as the country has been only marginally affected by the phenomenon of radicalisation and foreign fighters so far. Despite the relatively low visibility of the terrorist threat, especially relating to radicalisation and the return of foreign fighters, the Commission stresses that the institutional awareness needs to be

increased to monitor possible terrorist threats. Preventive anti-radicalisation activities in this area need to be developed, as well as reintegration measures when radicals return, as provided for in the strategy to combat violent extremism. Montenegro was also recommended to appoint a national focal point for preventing and countering violent extremism. (European Commission, 2018)

## **FIGHTERS AND RETURNEES**

According to the report of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) a total of 27 Montenegrin citizens – 18 men, 5 women and 4 children – are known to have been in Syria and Iraq, along with 3 children. As of September 2017, 6 men have been killed in the conflict zone; 3 men, 4 women, and 2 children remain in ISIL/Daesh-held territory while 1 man is detained in Turkey; and 8 men, 1 woman, and 1 child have returned to Montenegro. (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017)

Investigative articles done by some Montenegrin media show slight discrepancies, largely thanks to the fact that some of those that travelled to Syria or Iraq have more than one citizenship or residence, while some are presumed dead, but their deaths were not officially confirmed. RCC also reports, based on the information from the security sources in Montenegro that 5 Montenegrins fought in Eastern Ukraine on the side of pro-Russian separatists. All five have returned from Ukraine. (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017, p. 41)

Little information on the fighters and returnees is publicly available. While the CVE Strategy and Action Plan proscribes obligation to identify drivers of violent extremism and radicalisation and identify vulnerability factors for individuals, groups and communities, such analysis has never been done. Also, there is no official information on individual risk assessments, the individual motivations to join foreign armed forces, motivations to return, or the commitment and risks posed by returnees.

One of the very few analyses of the background of these killed Montenegrin foreign fighters, as well as the push and pull factors that impacted them, and the routes to Syria or Iraq they took supports the view that there is no universal or stereotypical foreign fighter. ("Montenegro and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon," 2017, p. 12)

Media report that some of the fighters did join the armed forces in order to fight, but some of those who left for Syria and Iraq and took their families were actually moving to the state where they believed they can live in accordance with their worldview. The experience of the women that followed their husbands is different, from those who were disappointed and wanted to escape, to those who established a sense of belonging and stayed even after they were widowed. Kerima Emina, a domestic partner of prosecuted Hamid Beharovic testified during the trial that she wanted to come back since the moment they arrived to



Syria (Higher Court Podgorica, 2018). On the other hand, Almina Kurpejovic, who moved to Syria with her husband Mirza Haklaj and two daughters and decided to stay after her husband's death, and reportedly took a prominent role in the ISIL/ Daesh ("Za ISIL ratuju četiri Crnogorke," 2016)

## TREATMENT OF RETURNEES

The Montenegrin Criminal Code recognises various crimes related to terrorism, including supporting terrorism through recruitment, agitation and financing. In March 2015, the Montenegrin Parliament amended the Criminal Code to introduce a new criminal offense "Participation in foreign armed formations/conflicts", thus addressing the foreign fighter problem and aligning legislation with 2014 UNSC Resolution on foreign fighters.

The law criminalises persons who "organize, recruit, finance, encourage, lead or train people or groups of people" with the goal of joining or participating in foreign conflict. Those found guilty face a jail term of 2 to 10 years. Those who travel to a combat zone to join or participate in foreign armed conflicts can be sentenced to 6 months to 5 years of imprisonment. Financial supporters of these activities can face a jail term of 1 to 8 years, and those who publicly call or encourage others to commit the offences from 6 months to 5 years.

Only one of the returnees from Syria/Iraq has faced prosecution – Hamid Beharović. Beharović is from the Montenegrin coastal town Ulcinj, and he fled to Syria together with his domestic partner and a toddler. He was invited to Syria by ISIL fighter from Podgorica Mirza Haklaj, who was later killed in combat, and maintained contacts with a number of fighters from Montenegro there. (Lakić, 2017) Beharović was arrested in September 2016, upon arrival from Turkey to a Montenegrin airport together with his wife and daughter. He has been charged with participating in a foreign armed conflict. In the initial phases of the trial, he pleaded innocent, claiming that he travelled to Syria in a quest for a lifestyle that is in accordance with his religious views. However, in the closing arguments phase, he pleaded guilty for participating in ISIL, yet maintaining that he wasn't participating in combat (Bojanić, 2017). He was sentenced to 6 months of imprisonment (Lakić, 2018).

One returnee from Ukraine – Marko Barovic – was prosecuted and convicted for his participation in a foreign armed conflict. Barovic participated in the militia of Donetsk Peoples' Republic from March to October 2015. In April 2017 he was sentenced to 6 months of imprisonment for participation in foreign armed conflict, and to 3 years for other unrelated crimes. As of now, he is serving his sentence. Barovic's activities in Ukraine were known to the widest audiences, as he was posting photos and writing about his fight on social media. Media reported that he had problems with the law since his teenage years. (Ristic, 2017)

The other four fighters who were in Ukraine departed before the Criminal Code was amended to include prosecution of foreign fighters. According to RCC, the other returnees from Syria are being monitored by security and police actors, and are not deemed to be a threat.

### **DE-RADICALISATION STRATEGY**

While envisaged by the CVE Strategy, no de-radicalisation and reintegration programs currently exist in Montenegro. CVE Strategy does include obligation to develop a plan for reintegration and de-radicalisation of individuals in prison institutions (provision of psychological and/ or religious counseling for individuals and social support for their family members). Nevertheless, measures that should lead to establishment of these programs were not executed by responsible authorities, and the implementation deadline expired in June 2017.

The Directorate for Execution of Criminal Sanctions confirmed to the CDT that there is no special treatment in place now, as only two persons were imprisoned or detained so far. They say that Montenegro got the de-radicalisation program that is being used in Bavaria, which will be used in the prison facilities once there is a need for a bigger group of people. (Center for Democratic Transition, 2017)

The CVE Strategy and accompanying Action Plan also envisage the development of a plan for de-radicalisation of individuals at risk of radicalisation through comprehensive social, psychological and educational activities. Yet, there is no information that this plan has been developed.

### **PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS**

Montenegro is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state. When it comes to ethnicity, 44.98% of the inhabitants declared themselves Montenegrins, 28.73% are self-declared Serbs, 8.65% are Bosniaks, 4.97% are Albanians, 3.31% Muslims, and 0.97% declared their ethnicity as Croatian. (MONSTAT, 2011) Three major religious groups in the country are Orthodox Christians (72.07%) – who are divided between two opposed churches – the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC); Muslims (19.41%) and Catholics (3.44%), while the remaining 5.4% of the population belong to other religious groups, are atheists/agnostics or did not declare their religious affiliation. (MONSTAT, 2017)

Recent International Republican Institute's (IRI) poll has shown that the vast majority of Montenegrin citizens (81%) have a negative opinion of their fellow citizens who are leaving the country to participate in foreign conflicts, i.e. Syria and Ukraine, 54% recognize returnees as a security threat and 56% support legal consequences including prison terms for them. (IRI, 2017)



However, many analysts agree that some Montenegrins justify or even support foreign fighters in Ukraine, for being participants in a sacred war for pan-Slavism and Orthodox brotherhood. Such empathy doesn't apply to ISIL fighters and their culturally distant ideology, which is rather seen as a threat. Part of the explanation of this situation lies in the fact that the majority of Montenegrins are orthodox Christians, Slavs, feeling a historic allegiance to Russia. Yet, the factor that shouldn't be underestimated is the media campaign, and narratives that come from Russian sources and their proxies, which depict militias in Ukraine as just formations, while using ISIL to spread the fear from Islam and underline regional differences.

Yet, the recent developments have shown that the pan-Slavic extremism and right-wing Serbian nationalism may represent bigger security threat to Montenegro. Montenegro never conducted de-radicalisation programs for participants of the wars of the 1990s in ex-Yugoslavia, or meaningfully pursued reconciliation and transitional justice. Therefore, there are audiences where messages coming from Russian propaganda or Orthodox extremists resonate well and have a radicalising effect. Unfortunately, these threats are being underestimated in the public discourse.

One illustrative example that causes security concerns is the 2016 alleged coup attempt. On 16 October 2016 when parliamentary elections took place, Montenegrin security services arrested a group of Serbian nationals who had allegedly plotted a coup to prevent the election of a pro-NATO government, and possibly assassinate Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic. The indictment (Special State Prosecutor's Office, 2017) includes 14 persons, including two Russian nationals reportedly linked to Russia's intelligence ("Russia 'linked' to election-day coup plot in Montenegro," 2017), former commander of the Serbian Gendarmerie, as well as two leading Montenegrin politicians and MPs from the Democratic Front. While the majority of defendants have allegiance to some of the right-wing organisations from Serbia, direct link to the Ukrainian fighters is seen through the biography of the witness-associate Aleksandar Sindjelic, leader of the paramilitary Serbian Wolves, who allegedly earlier fought on the side of Russian nationalists in Ukraine, and there he got in touch with indicted Russians (Wilson, 2017).

Another example is the February 2018 attack on the United States Embassy in Podgorica, when Dalibor Jaukovic threw a grenade at the Embassy, before blowing himself up with a second device. The investigation has shown that the perpetrator of this terrorist act didn't act as a part of an organised group, but was a veteran from the 1990s wars with strong anti-NATO and anti-US views. (RFE/RL's Balkans Service, 2018). However, this event was severely downplayed in the mainstream media, and very few entities dared to name it violent extremism.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO DECISION-MAKERS

Several key policy recommendations have been identified in the different analysis of CVE strategic and institutional framework in Montenegro:

- Establishment of the national CVE platform, based on the good comparative practices, such as Slovenia's National Radicalization Awareness Network, which will improve inter-agency cooperation and support cooperation with the civil society;
- Revisit the CVE Strategy and the Action plan, in order to better define responsibilities and adjust deadlines;
- Establishment of the efficient system of coordination and evaluation of the implementation of the CVE Strategy;
- Mainstreaming CVE policies in all policies and measures, in order to achieve more interdisciplinary approach.

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# VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SERBIA

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MARIJA IGNJATIJEVIĆ<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Radicalisation and violent extremism have not become burning issues in Serbia until a considerable number of individuals from the region fled to Syria and Iraq and joined different militant Islamic groups. However, the problem itself goes beyond the matter of foreign fighters and different exterior sources of radicalisation. The phenomenon represents a manifestation of deeply ingrained internal fragilities which initially enabled the proliferation of radical religious interpretations across the entire region. The success of external propaganda aimed at disseminating radical beliefs largely depends on the local conditions and the level of resilience to cope with the threat. The so called “push” factors like growing inequality, high unemployment rates or poor educational system have additionally bolstered the extremists’ narrative and recruitment success. Serbia, as well as the rest of the Western Balkans, has dominantly approached the issue with a robust security-based response, without any comprehensive prevention and de-radicalisation programs in place.

## NUMBERS

Between 2012 and 2016 roughly 50 Serbian citizens headed towards the Middle Eastern battlefields in Syria and Iraq. (BIRN, 2016) These developments came as a surprise and were sensationally covered in the local media, even though the phenomenon of foreign fighters is not unknown in the country or the region of the Western Balkans.

The outflow of the Islamic extremists reached its peak in 2013 and 2014. As in the rest of the Western Balkans, the number of foreign fighters originating from Serbia has afterwards significantly dropped and eventually stopped due to a mix of reasons. Firstly, Serbia has amended its Criminal Code, in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2178, in order to criminalise the act of foreign fighting. Secondly, the “enthusiasm” for going to Syria and Iraq has declined with the realisation of actual state of play and media coverage often showing the brutality of the conflict and Daesh actions. Another factor has influenced the decline in the numbers of foreign fighters globally. Namely, a noticeable swing in the Daesh propaganda can be identified lately, with it losing the battle on the ground in Syria and Iraq. Hence, the focus of its propaganda

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has mostly shifted from recruiting fighters to come to the “utopian caliphate” from all over the world, towards inciting them to commit different acts in the countries of their origin. (Winter, 2017)

Although the stemmed outflow of foreign fighters originating from Serbia certainly represents a positive development, it does not imply the threat of violent extremism in the country has been utterly eliminated. On the contrary, Serbia still has to face and address a set of various issues regarding the problem of Islamic radicalisation. Namely, the mere criminalisation and imposition of repressive measures is not sufficient in countering violent extremism; moreover, it could prove to have counterproductive effects. Hence, greater attention needs to be devoted to the eradication of root causes, the so called “push” factors which incited radicalisation and involvement in foreign battlefields in the first place.

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN SERBIA**

Similar to other countries in the region, radical versions of Islam have never been an inherent characteristic of the Islamic community in Serbia. Historically, hard-line Islam interpretations were never in line with the moderate Muslim traditions fostered in the Balkans. (Petrović, 2016) For centuries, Muslim communities in the region have practiced their faith in accordance with the moderate Hanafi jurisprudence of Sunni Islam inherited from the period of Ottoman rule. However, there is a set of both internal and external contributing factors which stimulated the expansion of radical Islamic tides upon the ending of violent conflicts.

The specificity of Serbia in this regard is the parallel existence and action of two different official Islamic affairs communities which certainly created a rift within the Islamic public. Namely, since 2007 on the one hand there has been the Islamic community in Serbia based in Novi Pazar and more inclined towards Sarajevo and on the other hand, the Islamic community of Serbia based in Belgrade. Turkey has intervened and tried to take the mediating role between the split communities, however without major progress. (Barlovac, 2001) Not only does the divide between the two religious institutions make it difficult to reconcile the Islamic public, but it also additionally hampers efforts to tackle radicalisation and violent extremism. The absence of a united Islamic community creates a vacuum susceptible to exploitation by alternative religious facilities, i.e. underground mosques.

By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a network of charity organisations based in or aided by the Gulf States, such as Saudi Arabia, started spreading across the Balkans and Serbia was not an exception. Besides financially supporting mosques and educational facilities, these foundations often granted scholarships for young Muslims to study in Middle Eastern universities. Controversial organisations have started disseminating the conservative Salafi version of Islam through multiple channels. Over the years, entire networks of underground mosques have been developed across the

region. Out of the jurisdiction and reach of official Islamic Communities, these places have become meeting points for radical indoctrination and recruitment of potential foreign fighters.

### **RECRUITMENT – IN PERSON AND VIA ONLINE PROPAGANDA CHANNELS**

Even though Internet propaganda targeting Serbia and the Western Balkans was quite developed<sup>2</sup> it did not plant as much seeds as in the Western European countries. In Serbia, foreign fighters were rather radicalised in person, through illegal mosques, humanitarian organisations, and religious schools or via friends and community members.

Hotspots of radical Islamic beliefs dissemination in Serbia were mostly located in the majority Bosniak Muslim region of Sandzak in the south-west of the country and in areas with a high percentage of Roma population such as the city of Smederevo or the Belgrade suburb of Zemun. (BIRN, 2016) Islamic radicals were linked and spread their extreme interpretations of Islam through a series of underground mosques or “parajamaats” throughout the country, the most prominent ones being in the aforementioned areas.

One of the organisations which served as a cover for radicalisation and recruitment is the Islamic youth organisation “Furkan” in Novi Pazar. Established in 2009 and registered as an NGO, this youth religious organisation has attracted a number of dissatisfied youth in the deprived Sandzak region. (Vlatkovic Odavic, 2017) Followers of this association were tightly connected to hard-line Wahhabi structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the jihadist network, whose members were part of the Furkan organisation, was clamped down in 2014, the organisation disappeared, but it is considered to be still working underground. (The Arab Weekly, 2016) Five Furkan members have been charged for recruiting and facilitating volunteers to go to the conflict zone in Syria. According to media reports and indictments, besides being a radicalisation and recruitment point for Serbian nationals, Furkan served as a place to rest for individuals from other countries as well, on their path to Syria. (Komarčević, 2015) Community gathered around Furkan has maintained close relationship with the well-known radical clusters in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as Gornja Maoca and Osve. They have kept connections with their prominent leaders, like Nusret Imamovic, and some have spent certain periods living and preparing for the battlefield in the Bosnian “jihadi hotbeds”. (Komarčević, 2015) Besides being well-connected on the national and regional level, Serbian radicals have also

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2 Among other radical Islamic propaganda channels, mostly via social media accounts, there is even a website spreading online content in Bosnian - “Vijesti Ummeta”. For more details see: Mejdini, F., M. Ristic, D. Dzidic, E. Qafmolla, S. J. Marusic, N. Zaba. (2017, February 2). Balkan Jihadi Warriors Remain Safe on the net. Balkan Insight. Retrieved 2018, January 19 from <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/balkan-jihadi-warriors-remain-safe-on-the-netj-01-27-2017>.



retained good relations with diaspora in Western European countries. Moreover, imams from Germany or Austria were often invited to give lectures and sermons in underground mosques in Serbia. (BIRN, 2016)

Besides radicalisation and recruitment in person, online platforms and social networks were misused to spread radical views and attract volunteers to go to Syria and Iraq. The biggest obstacle in tackling online propaganda was that most of the websites were not registered in the countries of Western Balkans but usually in Gulf States, which made it impossible for national authorities to clamp them down. Efforts to curb online propaganda in Serbia are still weak; namely, there were no indictments so far aimed at curtailing extreme content and Internet websites or online extremists. (Mejdini, Ristic, Dzidic, Qafmolla, Marusic, & Zaba, 2017)

Likewise, endeavours to create and promote an alternative narrative are even scarcer and have come down to individual attempts rather than systemic response to the problem. For example, Belgrade mufti, Mustafa Jusufspahić has used his social media accounts to promote religious tolerance and prevent extremism. (Mejdini, Dzidic, Rudic, Tomovic, Marusic, & Ristic, 2017) Moreover, in the entire Western Balkans, the problem of violent extremism is used for daily political purposes. Continuous tensions in the region are frequently incited by inflammatory rhetoric used by politicians to collect political points.

## **FOREIGN FIGHTERS' PROFILE**

Nevertheless, rigid Islam teachings coming from the Middle East would have never exerted significant influence if the area itself was not already a breeding ground for extremism due to a blend of internal fragilities.

A uniform profile of foreign fighters or a single common driver of radicalisation is difficult to distinguish, however, a certain list of the "push" factors can be identified. Taking into account the demographic characteristics such as gender, education, geographic area etc., a socio-economic pattern necessary for the identification of root causes of violent extremism and radicalisation can be outlined.

Firstly, most of those who decided to depart to Syria and Iraq were young, around 29 years in average. Around one-third of the departed were women. (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017) Inherent to the country but even more evident in the Sandzak region, it is the poor economic situation and low living standard. In Serbia, youth unemployment rate reached up to 40% in 2016 and is generally twice as high as the overall unemployment rate. (World Bank Group, 2017) Very high youth unemployment rate reflects the lack of life perspectives for those young people who hence search for the alternative ways offered by the extremist Islamists and promises of the Daesh caliphate. Hence, the poor and deprived can be identified as susceptible to violent extremist ideas.

Secondly, bulk of the foreign fighters have a very poor educational background, both general and religious. Lack of religious education and general educational

system which does not encourage critical and analytical thinking leaves space for exploitation and makes these individuals vulnerable to malign influence of extremism. (Petrović & Qehaja, 2017)

Moreover, as already highlighted, Serbian foreign fighters mostly came from areas populated with highly marginalised minority groups, namely Roma and Muslim communities. These communities are alienated and dissatisfied with the governance and treatment they receive from the central level. (Cultural Centre DamaD, 2015) Lack of trust in state and split religious institutions and the sense of injustice have also taken part in pushing these individuals towards violent extremist networks who offered them different kinds of support.

Previous criminal records are also a common characteristic of many Serbian foreign fighters. They were mostly involved in criminal activities such as tax evasion, illegal narcotics possession, smuggling etc.

## STATE RESPONSE

Foreign fighting was criminalised in Serbia in 2014, as a result of a considerable number of Serbian citizens departing to Syria and Iraq to fight within the ranks of ISIS and Al Nusra front. A new provision (Article 386 a/b) was added in the Serbian Criminal Code in order to address the act of foreign fighting i.e. participation in a war or armed conflict abroad, as well as recruitment, mobilising and incitement. This article also envisages punishment for provision of financial means or equipment necessary for the execution of these acts. Moreover, Article 391 of the Criminal Code envisages sanctions for different types of terrorist acts. Hence, depending on the gravity of the criminal act, the punishments for foreign fighting and terrorism range from 6 months to 40 years. Activities related to foreign fighting can result in a 10-year-long imprisonment, whereas the highest punishment of 40 years is reserved for committing a serious terrorist act. Besides the Criminal Code, in December 2017 Serbia passed a new law in order to tackle the issue of money laundering and terrorism financing and amended the law which enables freezing of assets for the purpose of terrorism prevention. (European Commission, 2018)

Among the Serbian foreign fighters around 10 have returned to Europe but only 4 to Serbia. It is considered that 11 were killed in the conflict zone, whereas the rest are still in the battlefield or on the run. (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017) The four returnees have been charged with terrorism-related offenses, while 3 more foreign fighters are being tried in absentia, however, none of these processes have ended so far. Judicial capacities in Serbia are not strong enough to ensure efficient prosecution of terrorist cases.

Prosecution of foreign fighters itself turned out to be problematic and the implementation of modified legislation to be challenging. For instance, according to some media sources, Serbian citizens travel to foreign battlefields under the facade of education in order to avoid prison sentences awaiting them upon return.



According to the Security Services Control Committee announcement in November 2016, 11 jihadists have recently returned from Syria and Iraq with educational certificates. Notwithstanding the existing evidence and operative data on their involvement in the battlefields, it is difficult to prove it through judicial procedure. (Bojović, 2016) Social media posts were the most effective source of evidence for the prosecution, Facebook profiles were often used to prove illegal activity of Serbian citizens (YouTube videos and FB photos are crucial evidence in certain cases).

Serbia was the last country in the Western Balkans to adopt the National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism in the fall of 2017, along with an Action Plan for its operationalization. (European Commission, 2018). The newly adopted strategy recognizes terrorism as a security threat as well as the risk of foreign fighters' return. It highlights the importance of establishing de-radicalisation and reintegration mechanisms as well as determined engagement in prevention actions. Adoption of strategies and complementary action plans are necessary preconditions for long-term systemic counterterrorism and violent extremism policies, however, in Serbia its adequate implementation is absent. Prevention or reintegration efforts are limited to isolated cases and attempts, rather than a comprehensive and systemic approach coming from the central level.

### **RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS AND FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN UKRAINE**

Not only does the emergence of foreign fighters in the region date back to the 1990s and violent conflicts which followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia, but there is a recent flow of foreign fighters originating mostly from Serbia. Namely, following the breakout of the conflict in Ukraine around 100 people have decided to join the battlefield, either on the pro-Russian or Ukrainian side (Beslin & Ignjatijević, 2017). Nevertheless, this phenomenon has not received as much negative attention in the media and the official discourse as the Islamic foreign fighters. Ukrainian foreign fighters were perceived as "regular" extremists, whereas Syrian were considered terrorists. Thus, not only they were labelled differently but were also given a different treatment from the state. Even though around 24 foreign fighters have returned to Serbia in the preceding period, no trials have been organised, namely, they all entered guilty pleas.

Certain common characteristics exist regarding the profiles of these two types of extremists, however, motivation for departure differs to a great extent. Ukrainian foreign fighters can rather be labelled as mercenaries than volunteers going to the battlefield with an ideological goal or to help the "oppressed brothers" in Ukraine, as they present themselves. Unlike Syrian fighters, Serbian nationals in Ukraine have extensive battlefield experience and many of them have been engaged via private military companies. Moreover, many of the Serbian mercenaries, paid to fight on the side of pro-Moscow rebels in Ukraine, continued their way in Syria, also helping Russian troops.

One such company, recruiting for participation in conflicts Russia is involved in, is the “Wagner” company registered in Argentina, since Russian legislation outlaws private military companies. (Ristic, 2016) Most of those contracted fighters in Wagner are registered in Moscow as temporary workers, exactly to avoid prosecution in countries of their origin. Nevertheless, one of the linking points with Syrian foreign fighters is their criminal past. Many Ukrainian fighters have actually engaged in the conflict in order to escape prosecution for criminal acts.

Among the Western Balkan countries, Serbia certainly has provided the greatest number of fighters in Ukraine, and the right-wing extremist tide is most widespread among Serbian citizens. The parallel existence of the two types of extremism, if treated inappropriately or differently, could end up reinforcing each other.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the scale of the issue of violent extremism and foreign fighters, the official policies should be balanced between a security-based and preventive approach. Several recommendations can be highlighted accordingly:

- Serbia needs to develop an overarching, comprehensive approach including both repressive and preventive action and measures, directed against extremism and foreign fighting. Holistic approach needs to include all relevant institutions from the law enforcement actors to the religious and educational facilities and civil society organisations.
- Prosecution and punishment should be more thoroughly approached and a detailed categorisation of foreign fighters and methodology for the assessment of already scarce evidence needs to be developed. Different categories of returnees based on motivation for departure, gender, age etc. need to be distinguished and prosecuted accordingly. It is necessary to strengthen judicial capacities in order to ensure efficient and fair prosecution of terrorism-related cases.
- The process of prevention needs to be as decentralised as possible, to involve local authorities and actors. Inclusion of municipalities, religious facilities, schools and local NGOs which are familiar with the situation on the ground and have better connection with the local population can be a constructive approach to tackling root causes of extremism. For instance, the work of Municipal Safety Councils, forums gathering different relevant actors at the municipal level, needs to be further promoted and bolstered, since it proved to be a good channel for discussion and information exchange.
- Instead of explicitly designing them as directed against violent extremism, programs aimed at reducing the effects of radicalisation drivers should be part of regular activities, so as to avoid labelling and further deepening of already widespread misperceptions and polarisation of local population. Along with prevention, programs for re-integration and re-socialisation of returnees should be put



in place with the help of local actors. Returnees themselves could be involved in counter-extremism campaigns and by sharing their negative experience, help in deterring potential extremists.

- Better protection of minority rights needs to be ensured and a strategy aimed at decreasing the level of social inequality developed.
- Educational system should be reformed so as to promote and incite critical and analytical thinking. Also, qualitative religious education needs to be provided e.g. by developing Islamic studies program.
- Right-wing and Islamic foreign fighters and extremists should be treated in an equal manner. Different perception and treatment can lead towards mutual reinforcement of these two types of extremist set of beliefs.
- Promotion of religious tolerance by engaging religious actors to create an alternative narrative can be a very effective way of preventing extremism.
- Increased radicalisation is not only a matter of national security, but it also threatens regional stability by further polarising divides in a region already marred by ethnic divisions. Therefore, regional cooperation in terms of intelligence exchange and law enforcement agencies mutual support but also joint efforts in implementing prevention strategies, are of crucial importance.

Nevertheless, sustainability of suggested measures cannot be guaranteed without a prior comprehensive socio-economic program aimed at decreasing social inequalities and enhancing life perspectives for the citizens. Reforms focused on tackling corruption and politicisation of institutions need to be enforced in order to ensure effective preventive mechanisms and increase the level of citizens' trust in the institutions. Low level of public trust in institutions, caused by the inability to provide for the basic citizens' needs and perception of widespread corruption, certainly represent a caveat in implementing the recommended measures. The entire process and application of the abovementioned systemic steps need to be tailored to the local needs and specific context. Without the local ownership over the design and implementation of prevention and de-radicalisation mechanisms, the success of the process cannot be reckoned with. Poor communication and cooperation among relevant actors and even different sectors and levels within the institutions themselves, hamper the comprehensive response to the challenge of radicalisation and violent extremism.

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