

Drivers to Violent Extremism in South Eastern Europe – the North Macedonian Context

Güney Doğu Avrupa’da Şiddet İçeren Aşırılığa İten Güçler – Kuzey Makedonya Bağlamı

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ABSTRACT

The Balkans are usually unjustly overlooked when discussing terrorism and violent extremism in the world today. Although not a region where many terrorist incidents occur, the Balkans are the main ‘suppliers’ of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF-s) who fight in the Middle East. International statistics rank Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania as the biggest sources of FTF-s as per capita of state population. North Macedonia is a part of this reality.

This article aims to analyse the drivers to violent extremism in this region. It will try to establish that weak state institutions as well as failure to deal with hate crimes, marginalization and discrimination contribute decisively in the rates of FTF-s coming from this region. It will correlate with the poverty, lack of perspective for the youth, and poor educational systems as a separate category of drivers, as well as try to explain the importance of the conflict history as a very important driver to violent extremism. Most of the Balkan countries updated their legislation criminalizing any kind of involvement with foreign armies; however, not all of them have developed comprehensive and transparent strategies for implementation of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) policies. The article will provide recommendations for developing such strategies.

Keywords: Violent extremism, Drivers, South Eastern Europe, Macedonia

ÖZ

Bugün dünyada terörizm ve şiddet içeren radikalizm tartışılırken Balkanlar genellikle hakettiği ilgiyi görememektedir. Pek çok terör olayının yaşandığı bir yer olmasa da, Balkanlar Orta Doğu’da savaşıyan Yabancı Terörist Savaşçıların (FTF) geldikleri bölge itibarıyla önemli konumunda bulunmaktadır. İstatistiklere göre uluslararası sıralamada, Kosova, Bosna-Hersek ve Arnavutluk’u kişi başına düşen en büyük FTF kaynağı olarak yer almaktadırlar. Kuzey Makedonya Cumhuriyeti de bu gerçeğin dışında değildir.

Bu makale, bölgedeki şiddet içeren radikalizme neden olan itici güçleri incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Devlet kurumlarının etkisizleşmesinin yanı sıra nefret suçlarıyla başa çıkamama, ötekileştirme ve ayrımcılığın bu bölgeden gelen FTF’lerin oranlarıyla alakalı olduğunu ve belirleyici bir katkıda bulunduğunu öngörmekteyim. Bunun yanında şiddet içeren radikalizm yoksulluk, genç nüfusun gelecekte ümitsiz olmayışı, ve ayrı bir kategori olarak başarısız eğitim sistemleriyle ilgili olduğunu ve şiddet içeren çatışma tarihinin radikalleşme için çok önemli bir itici güç olduğunu açıklamaya çalışacağım. Balkan ülkelerinin çoğu, vatandaşlarının yabancı devletlerin ordusuna katılımının her türlüünü suç olarak niteleyen yasal düzenlemeyi güncelledi ancak, şiddet içeren radikalizmle mücadele ve radikalizmi önleme politikalarının uygulanması için kapsamlı ve şeffaf stratejileri henüz geliştirmediler. Makale, bu tür stratejilerin geliştirilmesi için öneriler sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Şiddet aşırılıkçılık-radikalleşme, İtici güçler, Güneydoğu Avrupa, Makedonya

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1. Introduction

Terrorism and violent extremism are global problems that affect all countries, sparing no victims. The damage done to different societies by persons who are involved in recruiting mostly young people to violent extremist movements and luring them to conflict zones is very large and serious. It is even more so in countries where the population is small and where the problems of migration and brain-drain are a threat to the existence of the state itself. Therefore, radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism should be studied carefully and treated seriously by state institutions, religious communities, civil society organization (CSO-s), the media and other stakeholders. Counter-terrorism strategies usually involve exclusively the institutions of intelligence and interior affairs of a state. However, dealing with radicalization, identifying and preventing violent extremism involves many other stakeholders apart from the state institutions, thus their voices need to be heard when decisions and strategies on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) are reached.

The Western Balkan countries are tackled with the problem of radicalization and violent extremism in many ways. The number of Foreign Terrorist Fighters coming from these countries cannot be ignored. In 2015 the *Soufan Group* has found that: ‘At least 875 fighters have travelled to Syria from the Balkans, with fighters coming from at least seven different countries in the region. Almost 800 of these fighters come from just four countries—Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia—all located in the western Balkans.’ (The Soufan Group, 2015, p.17). The difference of ideologies of radicalization is also to be taken into consideration. Foreign fighters coming from this region are involved in different conflict zones depending on the radicalizing ideology. Therefore, dealing with this problem in the Western Balkan region requires a serious undertaking involving many institutions and also regional and international assistance.

North Macedonia has had different approaches to the problem of violent extremism through the past years. It has mostly treated terrorism and violent extremism under the same standards without creating any separate strategies and methods of intervention. Under these circumstances, the International Community has made important efforts to raise awareness about the seriousness of the problem and the importance of tackling it properly referring to the sensitivity of the issue. The OSCE Mission to Skopje, The United States Embassy in Skopje and USAID, the British Embassy and other international organizations and representatives have provided

important assistance to local institutions, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), religious communities and academia aiming to conduct research about this problem or develop strategies and policies for dealing with it.

In February 2018, the newly established National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (NCCVECT) and the Office of the National Coordinator for CVE and CT (NCoCVECT), with the support of the USAID involved into developing two new strategies: The National Strategy for CT and The National Strategy for CVE. In this regard, the OSCE Mission to Skopje and the British Embassy in Skopje, through the logistical support of the National Youth Council of Macedonia organized two round table discussions (in Skopje and in Tetovo) with different stake-holders aiming to discuss the forms of identification of radicalization and violent extremism, as well as the forms of preventing it through different programs involving different state institutions and CSO-s.

For the first time in history North Macedonia has established separate Strategies for Counter Terrorism (CT) and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) as well as separate action plans for their implementation.

The findings of this research article are based on desk research as well as on the recommendations that derived from the previously mentioned round tables which served as an input to the development of the strategies and action plans.

2. Defining Radicalization, Radicalism, Violent Extremism, Political Violence and Terrorism

A distinction should be made between the terms ‘radicalization’ and ‘violent extremism’. Although there is no universally accepted definition in academia or government (Schmid, 2013, p. 5), a general understanding of these concepts deriving from theoretical and empirical research is already established. *Schmid* in his paper “Radicalization, De-radicalization and Counter-radicalization” offers comprehensive understanding and support to the thesis that radicalization and violent extremism are not the same concepts as well as that not all forms of radicalization lead to use of violence and extremism. He offers a re-conceptualized definition on ‘**radicalisation**’ and describes it as:

‘An individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarization, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by

one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging. These can include either (i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes (Schmid, 2013, p. 17).’

Schmid explains that radicals are not *per se* violent and while they might share certain characteristics (e.g. alienation from the state, anger over a country’s foreign policy, feelings of discrimination) with (violent) extremists, there are also important differences (such as the willingness to engage in critical thinking). According to this author, it does not follow that a radical attitude must result in violent behaviour (Schmid, 2013, p. 8).

On the other hand, the same author characterizes **violent extremists** as political actors who tend to disregard the rule of law and reject pluralism in society, and strive to create a homogeneous society based on rigid, dogmatic ideological tenets; emphasizing that they seek to make society conformist by suppressing all opposition and subjugating minorities. That distinguishes them from mere radicals who accept diversity and believe in the power of reason rather than dogma. Always according to *Schmid*, in the context of democratic societies, (violent) extremist groups, movements and parties tend to have a political program that contains many of the following elements:

1. Anti-constitutional, anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, authoritarian;
2. Fanatical, intolerant, non-compromising, single-minded black-or-white thinkers;
3. Rejecting the rule of law while adhering to an ends-justify-means philosophy;
4. Aiming to realize their goals by any means, including, when the opportunity offers itself, the use of massive political violence against opponents.

This is a very important observation which is crucial to the way how Countering Violent Extremism needs to be developed, having in mind that de-radicalizing a violent extremist is a much more serious and difficult task in comparison to de-radicalizing a radical. *Schmid* emphasizes that it makes sense to distinguish between (open-minded) radicals and (closed-mind) extremists (Schmid, 2013, p. 10).

This distinction is also important for another reason. Violent extremism and terrorism are nowadays most of the time directly linked to Islamist Violent Extremism.

However, it should be clearly stated that violent extremism is related not only to the radicalized interpretation of one religion (since it also appears in other religions thus not only in Islam, as well as in armed conflicts that involve non-Muslims: thus, there are FTF-s who fight in Syria and Iraq (Igric, 2016) and in the Ukraine Beslin & Ignjatijevic, 2017)), as well as other radical political ideologies of far-right or far-left movements. What is important for these developments is that as *Schmid* observes, extremists in power tend towards totalitarianism. He cites *Jeffrey Bale* who noted that:

‘[...] despite their seemingly absolute rejection of Western values and their claims to be purely Islamic in inspiration, several Islamist leaders and thinkers were strongly influenced by and indeed borrowed considerably from modern Western political ideologies and movements such as nationalism, communism and fascism, in particular their techniques of organization (the establishment of front groups and parallel hierarchies), propaganda, ideological indoctrination and mass mobilization (Schmid, 2013, p. 9-10).’

Thus, it is important to establish that all forms of violent extremism in history and those that are relevant today have common characteristics which relate to the use of ideology and propaganda to achieve indoctrination and mass mobilization.

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between terrorism and other forms of **political violence**. As *Schmid* indicates, ‘We should also acknowledge that there are certain forms of violent resistance to political oppression that, while illegal under national law, are accepted by international humanitarian law (Schmid, 2013, p. 13).’

On the other hand, **terrorism**, as well as torture, war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide belong to a special category of violence that cannot be justified under any circumstance. The European Union’s Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism of 2002 defines terrorism as:

‘Criminal offences against persons and property that, given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or international organization where committed with the aim of: seriously intimidating a population; or unduly compelling a Government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, economic or social structure of a country or an international organization (European Union, 2002)’.

The concept of radicalization as a source of confusion is also analyzed by *Sedgwick* (2010), whereas *Borum* (2011) has offered a review of conceptual models and empirical research on radicalization into violent extremism.

Thus, it is important to distinguish between the terms radicalization, violent extremism, political violence and terrorism. As *Schmid* indicates:

‘The relationship between radicalism, radicalization and terrorism is a complex one. John Horgan has noted correctly that ‘the relationship between radicalization and terrorism is poorly understood’ – ‘[n]ot every radical becomes a terrorist’ and ‘[n]ot every terrorist holds radical views’ (Schmid, 2013, p. 17).’

Making these distinctions is crucial to developing effective CVE tools.

3. Defining Drivers to Violent Extremism

The USAID has developed a Summary of Factors Affecting Violent Extremism (regarding mostly the Islamist type of Violent Extremism) and has divided these factors into three major groups (USAID, 2009):

- I. Enabling environment factors
- II. Pull factors
- III. Push factors

Under Enabling Environment Factors the USAID has identified the following:

- 1) Weak states with ineffective security services and problems in implementing rule of law;
- 2) Existence of poorly governed or ungoverned areas inside the state;
- 3) State support of violent extremist groups; and
- 4) Pro-active religious agendas where “Pro-active,” refers to groups that are pressing cultural demands on others.

Under Pull Factors the USAID has identified the following:

- 1) Existence of VE groups with a compelling narrative and attractive objectives;
- 2) Existence of radical institutions or venues (mosques, madrasas) which may be uncontrolled by the state;

- 3) Social networks and group dynamics which play a critical role in radicalization and recruitment. Individuals may drift into VE groups with friends or as a result of the influence of relatives, neighbors or a charismatic local preacher;
- 4) Provision of services (responding to unmet expectations and needs) and
- 5) Greed or the proliferation of illegal economic activities.

USAID has identified three groups of Push Factors: socioeconomic, political and cultural drivers:

Under Socioeconomic Drivers the USAID enumerates:

- 1) Social exclusion and marginality;
- 2) Societal discrimination and
- 3) Frustrated expectations and relative deprivation;

Under Political Drivers the USAID enumerates:

- 1) Denial of political rights and civil liberties;
- 2) Harsh government repression and gross violations of human rights;
- 3) Foreign occupation;
- 4) Political and/or military encroachment;
- 5) Endemic corruption and impunity for well-connected elites;
- 6) Local conflicts;
- 7) Discredited governments and missing or co-opted legal oppositions;
- 8) Intimidation or coercion by VE groups and
- 9) Perception that the international system is fundamentally unfair and hostile to Muslim societies and peoples.

Under Cultural Drivers the USAID enumerates:

- 1) Islam under siege: A strong correlation exists between VE success and the perception that the West is attacking Islam and Muslims.
- 2) Broader cultural threats: Population may perceive a broader cultural threat – to traditions, customs, values and sense of collective/individual honor & dignity.

This represents an inclusive system of depicting drivers to violent extremism which occur in many parts of the world and can be applicable not only to Islamist type of violent extremism.

When the SEE region is analyzed, *Perry* (2016), indicates that in South East Europe, with the exception of Turkey, violent extremism is primarily viewed through the prism the threat of the ISIL/*Daesh*. Other forms of extremism, such as domestic right-wing extremism, are noted as a secondary concern, if acknowledged at all. *Perry* and other authors note that small countries like Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania provide for a large number per capita of FTFs that when compared to the rate of other states, clearly indicates the seriousness of the problem in this region.

In regard to the question why these small countries have become so deeply involved in violent extremism and what exactly lures these mainly young persons to the battlefields in Syria and Iraq, it is important to emphasize the following findings.

Shtuni (2015) indicates the following factors that contribute to involvement in violent extremism:

- history of violent mainly ethnic conflicts with sharp religious undertones,
- lack of economic development and very high unemployment rates,
- weak institutions,
- persistent ethnic tensions and
- lingering territorial disputes.

Other authors such as *Kursani* (2015), indicate the importance of integration in the community as well as the problem of marginalization of rural areas through lack of investments by the central government. Moreover, he tackles the problem of the weak educational system which does not meet the requirements of the market, therefore, the gained knowledge shows to be unuseful for the graduated students who also show a high drop off rate in schools (*Kursani*, 2015, p. 10).

It is very important to indicate marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities as a driver to violent extremism. This is mostly evident in Republic of North Macedonia and other countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina that experience difficult issues in regard to discrimination and marginalization of ethnic and religious groups. Severe forms of discrimination and bias attacks towards the marginalized group can develop in hate crimes. Most of the countries in the region, North Macedonia in particular, have experienced yet another important problem of highly politicized state institutions that have shown strong elements of discriminatory operation, which makes the marginalized groups feel intimidated and not trusting towards them (*Selimi & Stojkovski*, 2016). Many men and women who join terrorist

groups in the Middle East or elsewhere are in search for Utopia. As *Shabani and Kadri* (2018) indicate, it is understandable that a person living in a state that functions with policies of double standards may become disappointed on the weak and not functioning institutions, hence prone to extremist preaching which has also been available directly in communities, filling the gaps left empty by corrupt religious and political leaders (Shabani & Kadri, 2018). If the importance and availability of online preaching and spreading of propaganda is added, it becomes evident that a person who has nothing to lose can become lured to such a ‘religious idealism’. However, one must also have in mind that there are also exceptional cases where persons who do not experience any kind of violence, intimidation, marginalization or poverty, still become involved in violent extremism. Thus the deep impact of online propaganda needs to be seriously considered and reflected by effective counter-narratives.

4. Defining Countering Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism and Prevention of Violent Extremism

There are many different definitions of Countering Violent Extremism and Preventing Violent Extremism. As *Davis* (2018) indicates, sometimes the terms are used interchangeably, and sometimes CVE is directed more to counter-narratives, identifying and deterring those at risk or even already radicalized, while PVE goes further back to lay foundations for building resilience to extremism across a wide spectrum of people. PVE is sometimes seen as the ‘softer’ side of counter-terrorism (CT), involving non-traditional security actors such as teachers, social workers, community leaders, youth and women in addition to the traditional CT actors such as policymakers, senior government officials, police officers and intelligence officials (Davies, 2018, p.4).

Zeiger and Ali combine CVE and PVE in their definition of CVE as:

‘... programs and policies for countering and preventing radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism and terrorism as part of an overall counter-terrorism strategy and framework. This definition is inclusive of strategic, non-coercive counterterrorism programs and policies including those involving education and broad-based community engagement; more targeted narrative/messaging programs and counter-recruitment strategies; disengagement and targeted intervention programs for individuals engaging in radicalization; as well as de-radicalization, disengagement and rehabilitation programs for former violent extremist offenders (Zeiger & Aly, 2015, p.2)’.

These authors explain that traditional counter-terrorism focuses on the denial of opportunities for terrorist activity by disrupting recognized terrorist groups. PVE, by contrast, aims to get to the root of violent extremism by challenging the ‘push’ and ‘pull factors’ that can lead to radicalization and violence. It aims to prevent the recruitment of individuals into violent extremist groups by providing positive alternatives to engagement or reengagement in violent extremism (Zeiger & Aly, 2015, p.2).

Therefore, the Strategies for CT and CVE in North Macedonia need to establish distinctive measures that refer to Counter Terrorism (which are to be implemented by state officials and intelligence services), Countering Violent Extremism (developing counter-narratives to VE) as well as establishing a comprehensive system of soft measures of Preventing Violent Extremism through a broad-based community engagement.

5. Institutions and Stakeholders involved in CT, CVE and PVE in North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) shares most of the problems with the remaining Balkan countries in regard to violent extremism. Hence, the high rates of unemployment, poverty, evident discrepancy of urban and rural areas, the weak and politicized state institutions, a weak and often changed educational system which has been concentrated on quantitative rather than qualitative approaches, extremist preaching and parallel religious communities, exposure to online propaganda, etc. all contribute to the threat of becoming involved in violent extremism. Moreover, there is very few conducted research in regard to this issue, hence, very few empirical data that would suggest qualitative and comprehensive information in this regard. Moreover, the security and intelligence state institutions should consider sharing of unclassified information with citizens, hence informing them and raising the awareness on the accurate situation with CVE in RNM (Bogdanovski, 2014, p.8).

On the other hand, an important issue in regard to RNM is the fact that state institutions have misused their competences in the past to disguise unrelated incidents as terrorism, therefore, the lack of trust towards these institutions is evident.

An important development in regard to CVE in RNM was the criminalization of the participation in foreign armies in order to prevent and punish the citizens of this country to join the ISIL, the minimal sentence being 5 years imprisonment (Criminal

Code of RM, Article 322-a). In this regard two major cases of arrest and conviction of Islamist radicals who consequently pleaded guilty are known as the operations called “Cell 1” and “Cell 2”.

Unfortunately, the mere incrimination of fighting in foreign armies or by any means helping their cause will not address the complete problem of radicalization and violent extremism, therefore, it is very important that national strategies are developed in consultation with the civil sector and the researchers to produce a comprehensive system of de-radicalization and prevention of violent extremism. In this regard, developing a rehabilitation and re-socialization program is crucial in order to prevent both recidivism and further radicalization in prisons. In this regard, the state institutions in RNM should consider developing mechanisms of trust and confidence with citizens, since violent extremism is best prevented through working closely with communities. In this regard, state institutions should once and for all detach from using the threat of violent extremism as a means to justify the arbitrary state control and overruling of checks and balances mechanisms or even the annulment of rule of law, as this has often occurred in the past.

In the Round-Table Discussions in Skopje and Tetovo representatives from the National Committee for CVE and CT were present. An important note of the National Coordinator for CVE and CT (NCoCVECTOR) was that Violent Extremism and Terrorism are not only security problems, rather, they represent wider sociological problems. The NCoCVECTOR indicated that a priority to this state institution is to establish inter-institutional and international cooperation in regard to CVE, PVE and CT.

Until recently, there were no separate programs or strategies on CT and CVE in RNM. The position of National Coordinator for CT was established in 2014 whereas the first Strategy for Counter-Terrorism was adopted in 2011, however, as the current NCoCVECTOR indicated, the strategy was never effectively implemented since the action plan and other tools of implementation were not adopted by the government. Therefore, the Establishment of the National Committee for CVE and CT is a major step forward. The NCoCVECTOR was established on July 2017. The Committee is responsible directly to the Prime Minister, whereas functionally it operates within the General Secretariat of the Government of RM. The committee is constituted by 22+22 representatives of state institutions. Two separate Strategies were developed, one for CT and the other for CVE. The National Coordinator has two Deputies, respectively, one for CVE and one for CT.

The aim of the Strategies according to the NCoCTECT is to:

- 1) Distinguish between prevention and repression of extremism
- 2) Develop and strengthen the coordination between the state institutions represented in the NCCVECT.
- 3) Develop the Strategies on CVE and CT and the Action Plans in parallel
- 4) Establishing a good coordination in the international, regional, national and local level

The strategic priorities of the NCCVECT include:

- 1) PREVENT flows of FTF and militants and root causes of radicalization and extremism
- 2) PROTECT the people, their property, key and critical infrastructure from all threats, that are clear and present as well as potential and growing
- 3) PURSUE threats of VE and T at their root in safe havens and where ever they pose clear danger to people and infrastructure
- 4) RESPOND actively, aggressively, but always in ways that are transparent and consistent to the rule of law (EU refers to spirit of solidarity, to manage and minimise the consequences of a terrorist attack, by improving capabilities to deal with the aftermath, the coordination of the response and the needs of victims)

When it comes to developing strategic aims in regard to CVE and PVE, it is important to take into consideration that the involvement of non-state actors is crucial. Soft measures of PVE can only be implemented successfully through an essential and constant cooperation between the state institutions, education workers (teachers, professors and academics), the religious communities, representatives of youth and women, CSO-s and the media. Representatives from all these important stakeholders were present in both Round-Table Discussions. Their findings and recommendations will be presented in the following subtitles.

6. Discussion of the results

The following findings were presented at the end of the Round-Table Discussions in Skopje and Tetovo.

6.1. Findings regarding the theoretical approach on radicalization and VE

Radicalization should be perceived as a process in which a marginalized group tents

to express their attitude in a way which gradually becomes aggressive. Radicalization can take many forms, and not always is identified as something negative. There are forms of radicalization which can be healthy for the development of the society. However, some forms of radicalization can lead to Violent Extremism (VE).

VE is a point in that process when the group decides that the use of violence to achieve certain goals is legitimate and acceptable. That is the point when the use of violence becomes perceived as a normal and natural reaction to the sources of radicalization in the first place.

Violent extremists use ideologically motivated violence. The ideology can be political (extreme rightist or leftist political views), religious (where the misinterpretation of religions becomes essential) or driven by a certain campaign (such as protection off the environment, animal rights, etc.). Therefore, the general condemnation of violence is a very important task to be perceived by all society stake-holders.

6.2. Findings regarding Push and pull factors

Push factors are conditions of the person or situations in their life that push them away from mainstream society and cause them to be more susceptible to radicalization whereas pull factors draw the individual towards the acceptance of violent extremism with positive incentives. If the push and pull factors are identified on time, chances of de-radicalization are better. Research shows that more than 60% of the process of radicalization can be turned back and the person can be de-radicalized and rehabilitated.

6.3. Push and pull factors in the North Macedonian context

When dealing with CVE and PVE in North Macedonia, the local context of push and pull factors needs to be taken into consideration.

Numerous push factors can be identified in the country. The echo of the surrounding armed conflicts in the 1990ties was deeply felt in Macedonia, furthermore, there have been persons who actively participated in the conflicts related to the disintegration of the former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. Moreover, the country had a conflict of its own in 2001 and not all persons who participated in it managed to become integrated in the society afterwards. The existence of conflict-situations makes separations in society more vivid and therefore, the de-humanization of

potential victims is easier. The country and the citizens have suffered from continuous non-functional rule of law and lack of good governance which makes the struggle against terrorism particularly difficult. The country has also a history and still a reality of ethnic, national religious discrimination. Groups of people feel politically or socio-economically marginalized. Other push factors that can be identified in the country include: searching for identity or difficulties in combining two different identities (usually the struggle is between the national and religious identity or the ethnic and national identity), difficult or destructive family relations, searching for purpose, as well as a will to make a difference.

The factors that pull persons from North Macedonia to join violent extremist groups include: a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, significance, respect or status in the group, feeling of power and control, community and friendship, clear rule of life to adhere to, security, attractive ideological arguments, confidence that one stands for good and fights evil. The persons involved in extremist groups usually do so because the group offers them an organized and effective entity with clear rules that function in practice, a sense of solidarity, belonging, purpose, significance and respect. These are usually things they lack in their everyday life in the country where they encounter many of the push factors enumerated above.

6.4. Challenges perceived in regard to CVE in North Macedonia

One of the main challenges in regard to the approach towards CVE in RNM is related to the manner how the profile of a terrorist is usually perceived. The stereotypization of the profile of the terrorist as a young man, from a rural background, with a beard, most often represents a serious impediment to correctly define a terrorist and distinguish such behaviour from practicing religion or participating in a certain ideology movement.

The round-table discussions revealed that psychologists also feel challenged and are unsure if they have an authority to deal with the primary and high school students that might show signs of radicalization. There isn't a roadmap for profiling a violent extremist nor is there a set of mechanisms for the process of reaction once the profiling has been completed.

Another important challenge is the lack of or very limited credible research within the local communities in order to determine the contributing factors towards radicalization of the community.

Furthermore, one of the main problems is the islamization of terrorism which contributes in the radical structures to use such narratives to create divisions in the society and further radicalize the members of the Muslim community. Profiling of the terrorist with a race, religion, ethnic group makes that group more susceptible to radicalization.

The radicalization in prison also consists an important challenge in dealing with VE. The re-socialization and re-integration of prisoners is a general challenge for the penitentiary system in Macedonia, and because re-socialization programs do not work properly, it becomes very challenging to organize de-radicalization programs in prison. The imprisoned persons share their radical view with the inmates, especially given that they possess communication devices such as telephones that can be used for further recruitment. No clear de-radicalization re-integration programs exist for the prisoners that have been involved in foreign wars.

6.5. Identification of future steps

Strengthening rule of law institutions is crucial to establishing effective institutions that will deal with CVE and PVE. For the citizens to have trust in state institutions they need to have proof that they provide service and protection to all citizens equally. Developing a culture of dialogue between state institutions and society is therefore crucial. Thus, state institutions must promote and guarantee human rights and acceptance of diversity. They must take effective and prominent measures against discrimination and develop mechanisms of peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The state institutions involved in CVE need to be locally present especially in areas tackled with more VE cases. When police and security actions need to take place, it is crucial that these state institutions take care about human rights and building trust with the local community.

A close cooperation of the state institutions with CSO-s who work in this field is therefore very needed. A special emphasis should be given to CSO-s that involve actively women and children in the process of identifying signs of radicalization and later also in the process of de-radicalization. CSO-s can be very helpful in developing and implementing campaigns of raising awareness on VE.

It should be clear that there is not an only way to deal with VE, therefore the entire society must be included. The use of a holistic approach towards CVE is crucial.

7. Recommendations

The following recommendations can be drawn from the desk research and the results of the Round-Table Discussions held in Skopje and Tetovo.

7.1. Definitions

It is important to distinguish clearly between radicalization, violent extremism, political violence and terrorism. Research shows that not all forms of radicalization lead to violent extremism, however, radicalization is a strong root to the VE phenomenon. The moment when a radical movement becomes supportive of use of violence must be perceived as a crucial point of radicalization.

In regard to violent extremism it is important to distinguish between ideologies behind it, it can be religion, it can be nationalism, it can be a certain social attitude. A holistic approach towards defining violent extremism tends to include all forms of extremism that use violence regardless of their nature. In the Balkans and in Macedonia, religious and nationalistic and extremism are more common, however, it must be kept in mind that other forms of extremism exist, such as left-wing or right wing political extremism, environmental extremism, etc.

When violent extremism is analysed, it is important to make a distinction between forms of radicalization since not all forms of radicalization are bad. Being radical in relation to an issue does not mean that one becomes automatically a violent extremist or a terrorist. There are major social movements that have become radical in part of their history, however their results have been in general positive. It is the use of violence that usually makes the distinction between acceptable and non-acceptable undertakings.

Therefore, the use of violence should be closely tackled in CVE and PVE approaches. Sometimes there are social narratives that tend to create the attitude that violence is acceptable in certain occasions. It is very dangerous when the society itself builds a narrative that certain forms of violence are acceptable. Therefore, a general condemnation of violence as a narrative should be developed and supported.

7.2. Rule of Law

North Macedonia as well as other countries in the region often have found that establishing effective rule of law is a major challenge. Establishing accountability for crimes committed regardless of the status of their perpetrator is an essential part of

rule of law. North Macedonia has struggled for long to establish effective accountability, especially when it comes to crimes committed by persons of power. Lack of accountability provides security to perpetrators of crimes that they will not be held responsible for wrongdoing. In that way, lack of accountability makes countering violent extremism additionally difficult as it empowers extremists to come back as heroes in the communities.

Violent extremism flourishes in areas where inequality, discrimination and hate crimes are not effectively dealt with. Serious efforts are needed to decrease inequality and discrimination in society. Persons, communities and groups of people should feel safe in their state and should be able to trust the institutions and the rule of law. The dissatisfaction in the treatment of the communities that are minority, particularly the Roma community, has the potential of bringing the community to the danger of being involved in radicalized groups.

Hate speech and hate crimes should be addressed properly by state institutions. Failure to address them properly decreases the trust in these institutions and contributes to the marginalization of persons, communities and groups. Macedonia still struggles to establish an effective system of prosecuting hate crimes. The incriminations found in the Criminal Code of RM in this regard are still not effectively implemented in reality, thus, there is not yet a court verdict that punishes hate crimes, nor is there a system of identifying these crimes in the police and prosecution authorities. This situation contributes to the marginalization of groups and communities and further decreases their trust towards the state institutions.

7.3. Police and security institutions

It is important to build an intimate cooperation between the state institutions: first of all, between the police officers and local communities. The most important goal for this cooperation should not be gathering of information, it should be building trust and partnership.

Proportional representation of communities in police forces is a very important step to build the trust towards the police. Good practices have developed in this regard after the Ohrid Framework Agreement and trust towards the police has been ameliorated in regard to ethnic communities.

Barriers of inter-institutional communication and coordination in regard to violent extremism need to be overcome. Good coordination between prosecuting authorities

as well as between the police and other CVE and CPE authorities is crucial for early identification of signs of extremism and for effective prevention and countering of VE.

7.4. Prevention vs. repression

Prevention of VE has lately gained in importance in regard to establishing strategies and action plans of CVE. Taking the CVE from repression to prevention is a major step forward that needs to continue developing in the future.

However, for the moment the criminal law is repressive and the sentences imposed in the CCRM are draconic in regard to cases of violent extremism. Forms of intervention prior to opening an investigation and prosecution should be considered in the future amendments of the law in order to stimulate and motivate the radicalized persons who have withdrawn from extremism in early stages to become an important part of prevention and de-radicalization policies. Developing such policies of de-radicalization is crucial to the overall success of CVE and PVE.

7.5. Re-socialization, rehabilitation and reintegration

Re-socialization, rehabilitation and reintegration of radicalized persons and participants in extremist groups remains a major challenge in North Macedonia having in mind the poor conditions in penitentiary institutions and the lack of effective re-socialization programs. Radicalization in prisons continues to be a major problem in North Macedonia.

Therefore, it is crucial that the penitentiary institution distinguishes between recruiters and recruits, and develops separate re-socialization policies for both categories. Training of the staff that works with re-socialization of this part of prison population is essential for the success of programs of de-radicalization.

While in prison, persons convicted for crimes related to VE have the right to practice faith. This is essentially their only encounter with the religious clerks. It is not sufficient to allow prisoners to practice their faith only, but the religious communities need to be involved in the process of de-radicalization. For an effective re-socialization project, the religious clerics should be allowed to have access to prisons as to have more contacts with such persons. Spaces of worship within prisons should be opened in consultation with the IRC in order not to allow such spaces to be misused in further radicalization of the inmates or be in service of radical groups outside of the prison.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, social affairs officers as well as probation officers also require special trainings to develop de-radicalization programs aimed as post-penal assistance for the incarcerated persons released on probation or released after end of sentence.

7.6. Local Community Units

Local Community Units can play a major role in identifying cases of radicalization and extremism. For this purpose, the government should work on revitalizing Local Community Units since they can play an important role in CVE. Local centres for prevention of crime have been established in 2008 by municipalities, however, most of them are dysfunctional since there are no financial means for their maintenance. They should become functional and furthermore, a good coordination between the Local Community Units, Centres for Crime Prevention, police officials, schools, local religious communities and local CSOs should be developed.

7.7. Education

High school teachers and managers of high schools need to be trained for identifying early signs of radicalization in high schools. The most important signs of radicalization become evident in high schools. However, the raising of awareness for CVE should not only be focused on high schools (secondary schools), it should also include primary schools, since intervening only in high schools could be a belated intervention for the problem. There is need to strengthen education and training of teachers as well as social affairs officers in order for them to identify early signs of radicalization through investing in programs for their continuous training and support.

The family and the preschool age children should be involved in the education against violence. Curriculums that will inform students on the terminology and the process of radicalization should be introduced in schools and universities.

Schools and universities should consider the development of critical thinking as a preventive measure for a young person to be able to identify the consequences of extremist views and have more critical approach towards any content or information they encounter.

Radicalization and involvement in extremist groups often develops among young people who have a lot of spare time. Most of young people in North Macedonia are not involved in many extra-curricular activities in their schools. Therefore, they

spend a lot of time on the internet and social networks that can lead to their involvement in extremist groups. This is why developing extra-curricular activities with students is essential.

Investing in the education of parents is also essential, because they have a big impact on the development of their children's attitude. The state and the society need to invest in creating role models and heroes, sport activities, cultural, artistic activities, etc. through developing comprehensive and sustainable models of active use of the spare time of the students. Parents should be educated in order to apply parenting control and other monitoring mechanisms to the use of internet by children.

7.8. Parents/Women/Children

Working in the triangle parent-student-teacher is crucial to the implementation of CVE and PVE programmes. It is also important that religious clerks, the police officers and CSOs are also included in that pedagogical triangle.

A general perception of professionals who work with the young population shows that children and young people show signs of accumulated aggression. Forms of dealing with it should be developed and institutionalized in educational programmes.

Women have a very important role in identifying early signs of radicalization. Therefore, it is crucial that programmes that have created good practices such as the project Mothers' School to further be developed and continue to raise awareness of women and mothers in regard to early signs of radicalization. A form of that development could be the creation of counselling institutions that would develop programs of support for the families and a better coordination between the parents and the teachers.

7.9. Building dialogue and understanding between different communities

It is important to build an integrated society as opposed to ethnical division. Knowing and trusting each other helps prevent the spread of violent extremism. It is important to build a culture of accepting diversity as an advantage, not as a handicap, through developing critical thinking in schools, as well as a culture of debate and acceptance of different opinions and disagreements among each other. Disagreements should not regularly lead people to conflicts.

Such aims can be fulfilled by investing in programs of integrated studies where the students can get to know the diversity around them. The political will to make

dealing with diversity a priority issue is essential, and it can be developed through investing in making the integrated studies an essential part of the educative curriculum.

7.10. Religious communities

An online platform of communication and joint messages from different religious communities should be created. All religions that are practiced in North Macedonia have many common aspects that should be enhanced through spreading messages of proactive unity rather than separation.

Representatives of religious communities have complained that dubious financing of certain organizations has been continuously ignored by the state institutions. Better control of the finances of charity organizations and an institutionalized communication between the religious communities and the state institutions is needed. There is a need for coordination and cooperation between the Islamic Religious Community and the relevant state institutions as to prevent certain radical groups to create parallel structures to those of the IRC (mosques, schools, kindergartens).

When a community has issues with radicalization, it is of utmost importance that the community deals with the topic and solves the issue, for the benefit of the community itself. Hiding the problem and considering it as something remote to the community does not help dealing with it. Therefore, the community should involve proactively into finding ways to help the CVE and PVE programs.

The role of the Committee for Inter-Religious Relations is crucial and it should be taken very seriously. The Committee has been passive and counter-productive until now.

The reforming of the Preacher's Glossary should be supported. The most prevalent online presence of Islam is the radicalized interpretation of it. Therefore, there is immanent need to develop a better counter-narrative system as an answer to the radicalized version of Islam most commonly preached on internet. The role of the IRC in creating such counter narratives is crucial, thus preventing such narratives to be used in recruiting, radicalizing and sending young people in foreign wars.

7.11. Raising awareness, media, social networks

Brainwashing is the cornerstone of extremist radicalization. Lack of education and the financial factor play major roles in the recruitment process. Therefore, the state should invest in a serious campaign on raising awareness about violent extremism as a general social problem. It should also invest in developing a comprehensive counter-narrative

system. At the moment, only the extremist narrative is present in the social media and the internet. It is good to involve also CSO-s in the process of raising awareness.

The state needs to also deal more effectively with hate speech. Use of hate speech and incitement of violence in social media should be carefully followed and effectively prosecuted by the eligible institutions (public prosecution and anti-discrimination bodies).

7.12. Role of CSO-s:

Reorganization and inclusion of the informal local communities would help in the prevention of the radicalization by providing local responses and information. Strengthen the human capacities within CSOs, there is a lack of expertise in the field of prevention of radicalization. State institutions should work towards funding the work of the CSOs at least partially as to allow for proper development of the civil sector. Community centres should be opened in every community, alternative spaces for the community members to spend time together and to feel more as part of the community.

The lack of social activities both for young people and for others is a major problem in the country. Besides the activities offered by the CSOs there are no activities for young people to be involved with. If institutions do not find mechanisms that would accumulate the energy of the students towards more beneficial activities, they can be easily become a target of radical groups.

The CSOs can be more helpful within the framework of developing soft measures of CVE and PVE. Without the support from the other factors such as CSOs, religious communities, local communities, and every group that is outside of the state apparatus, there cannot be viable and effective results in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism.

7.13. Specific issues for the RNM Strategies for CVE and CT:

The strategy should use a holistic approach in regard to CVE and present it as a general problem. All forms of appearance of violent extremism should be addressed as well as the motivation and ideology behind them. Extremism in the context of Macedonia has appeared in several forms, often misused from the government by labelling one group as extremist.

The Strategy should consider establishing Local coordinators for CVE who will work with the Local Units and the Local Centres for Prevention. The strategy should also develop a platform on counter-narratives in social networks.

Effective supervision of the implementation of the strategy should be planned and implemented. Its implementation has to be supervised by international actors. Effective state budgeting on CT and CVE issues should be established.

Good practices from other states should be included. Neighbouring states such as Kosovo have achieved great accomplishment in regard to CVE and PVE strategies. A good regional cooperation and coordination would be very helpful in this regard.

Composition of the National Committee on CT and CVE should reflect the ethnic-religious and gender composition of the country. The National Committee should include within its membership other actors such as the civil sector and the religious groups, not only state institutions. The roles and responsibilities of the ministries and institutions that are part of the National Committee should be clearly divided so that each and everyone knows what should be done.

8. Conclusion

This paper has aimed to analyse the concept of radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism. It has offered a research analysis of these concepts based on a literature review and findings of authors who have developed theoretical definitions. On the other hand, this article has thoroughly analysed the data gathered from the empirical analysis of the push and pull factors offered in two round table discussions held in Skopje and Tetovo, in Republic of North Macedonia. The findings offer comprehensive analysis of these factors in the context of South East Europe and in particular in the local context of RNM. The recommendations deriving from the empirical analysis of this article can be used in a broader context while developing state strategies to counter and prevent violent extremism.

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