

PAVE

Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism
through Community Resilience



Policy Brief for North Macedonia



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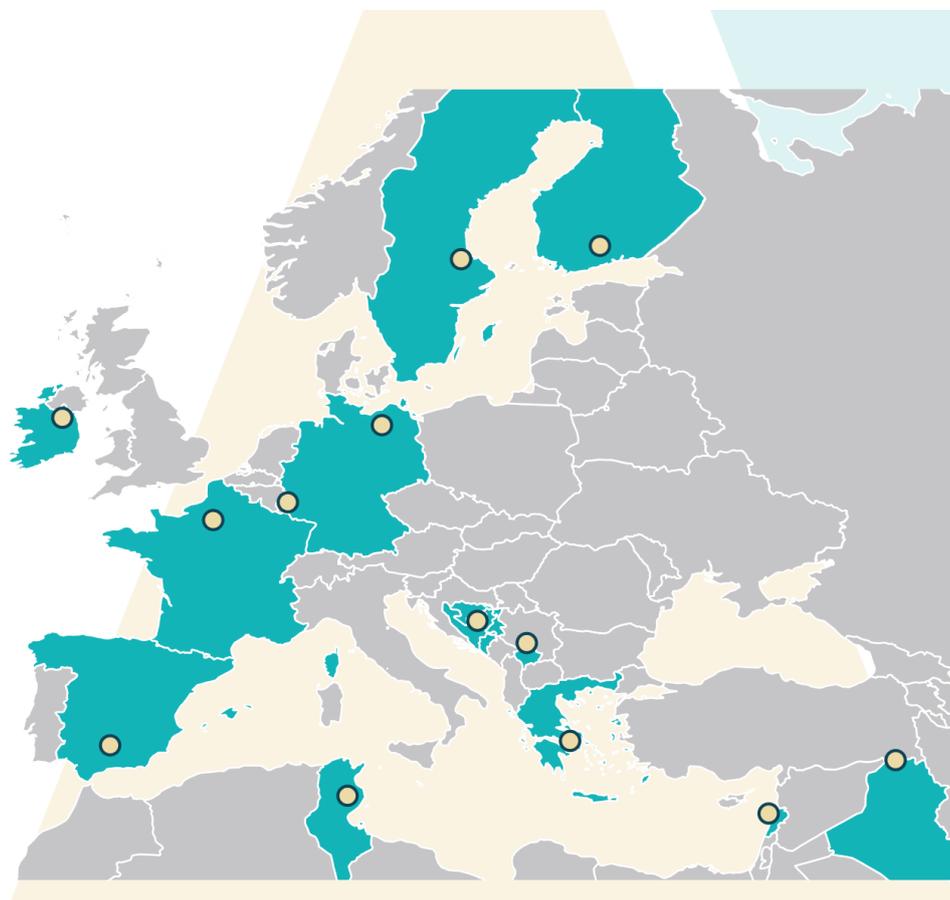


Introduction to the PAVE project

The PAVE research project (2020-23) collects evidence-based knowledge on trends in radicalisation and violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Western Balkans. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and community leaders for the development of an effective prevention strategy between the European Union and its neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, innovative training tools for stakeholders are developed based on the project's findings.

The PAVE consortium consists of 13 partner organisations based in 12 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development. In all countries, community leaders such as local state representatives, religious leaders, educators, youth organisations and women's organisations were consulted to validate first the research plans and later the research findings.

Empirical data was gathered in seven case study countries through a variety of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method approaches and compared across selected communities (e.g. municipalities) which are unevenly affected by violent extremism. Factors of vulnerability and resilience were identified at the meso level of community dynamics and actors, based on three thematic clusters: the interface between religious, political and ethnic/sectarian extremisms; the interaction between religious and public institutions; and the interplay between online and offline narratives on (de)radicalisation.





Introduction to PAVE research in North Macedonia

During the implementation of the PAVE project, the research team from ELIAMEP's South-East Europe Programme, namely Ioannis Armakolas, Bledar Feta, Yorgos Christidis, Ana Krstinovska and Julianne Funk with the support of ZIP Institute, conducted research at two field sites in the municipalities of Tetovo and Kumanovo in North Macedonia in July 2021. In accordance with the thematic clusters identified for PAVE, the team collected data on the main drivers, factors and explanations of cumulative extremism in both municipalities. They focused on identifying the narratives that fuel cumulative extremism, the conditions under which one form of extremism increases the other, the influence of religiously inspired extremism and ethno-political extremism in both communities, and the impact of the war legacy on extremism. The team also collected empirical data on drivers of online and offline radicalisation in the two municipalities by identifying the narratives that fuel forms of radicalisation and are circulated and propagated online through social media, as well as offline through peer-group socialisation and social networks.

During the 25 days of **fieldwork** in Tetovo and Kumanovo, the team organised four focus group discussions, conducted 29 key informant interviews with civil society activists/members, politicians, religious community leaders, public sector employees working in the police, security departments, education and social services, journalists and other media professionals, academics and other experts. For the analysis, the research team adopted a comparative research method based on cross-municipal trends. It relied on both desk research and the analysis of fieldwork data through an interpretative approach. This approach was chosen to identify, analyse and explain similarities and differences across the two local contexts. In parallel to the analysis of the data from the field, the research team conducted a discourse analysis of **online content**. In total, the team analysed 61 Facebook pages, groups and YouTube channels, 29 of them in the Macedonian language and 32 in the Albanian language. The online content supporting violent extremism underwent a structured content analysis. Special attention was given to the interaction of content in an effort to measure the appeal to users of online social networking platforms.

The **research results** reveal that radicalisation and violent extremism, in their many forms, remain challenges for North Macedonia. The state has managed to avert some of the more acute threats, such as the threat of internal attacks by foreign fighters and radical figures who have been released from prison. Yet these and other phenomena, such as a growing trend of violent right-wing extremism, ethno-nationalism and sport hooliganism, appear to be challenges at both the macro (societal) and micro (individual) levels throughout the country and in specific municipalities, among them Tetovo and Kumanovo. All forms of extremism exist in both main communities in North Macedonia, but they are manifested with different intensities. Religious radicalisation is more salient in Kumanovo, while radicalisation in Tetovo mainly takes the forms of ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian nationalism. Ethno-nationalism and right-wing populism are overlapping with political extremism on the basis of ethnic affiliation, leading to occasional tensions and, more rarely, violent incidents. In terms of resilience to radicalisation, Tetovo is considered to be more resilient than Kumanovo for a number of reasons which are analysed in the project's outputs.

The fieldwork revealed important **drivers of radicalisation** in both Tetovo and Kumanovo. Radicalisation appears to be a combination of different pull and push factors – situational, individual, cultural, political and socio-economic – that make some sections of the communities vulnerable to extremist narratives, enabling the different extremist groups to recruit sympathisers and followers. Prevention of radicalisation in prisons is a key challenge in North Macedonia. The extremist online space is another important driver of radicalisation in North Macedonia. For jihadist groups, but also for ethno-nationalist and far-right extremists, the Internet has become the most important communication, mobilisation and propaganda tool. Extremists have strengthened their advantage in the digital space using a variety of narratives in order to convince their target audiences and communities. Social media and social networks play an important role in fostering counter-narratives but their potential seems to be underused by all relevant actors, who are not well-suited to act as counter-narrative producers. Corruption is also a major driver of radicalisation and potentially violent extremism. The empirical research revealed contradictory views and positions on the role of diaspora as a vulnerability or resilience factor. This does not mean that the one necessarily excludes the other; it seems that both arguments have some merit.

With regard to **resilience**, the most significant outcome of the fieldwork is that building community resilience is a multi-faceted effort that requires the inclusion of diverse stakeholders, such as state institutions and actors, representatives from the religious communities, in-country missions and representatives of the international community, and members of CSOs and think tanks actively engaged in P/CVE in a coordinated way. In terms of resilience factors, economic development is a factor contributing to community resilience. Education and online media literacy are also crucial contributors to resilience, both on the individual and on the group level. As regards community actors, local official institutions and civil society organisations contribute to resilience through programming for CVE and PVE. Local-level stakeholders have played a role in early warning of the emergence of radical narratives in their communities. Local communities demonstrate resilience and often manage to identify extremism early on; however, the national-level authorities often fail to recognise the problem identified at the communal level and to react accordingly. The contribution of civil society actors in building resilience among youth populations is also significant. The community centres for young people created by local NGOs have emerged as important places for building resilience, covering the gap left by the country's segregated education. Official religious communities play an important role, especially the Muslim communities as they represent an authoritative alternative to radicals and radical narratives; conversely, when these official religious communities are not sufficiently proactive, space for radical actors opens up.

All in all, violent extremism and radicalisation are complex and multi-faceted challenges. As such, their prevention requires a **multi-agency mechanism and a well-coordinated response** among all actors involved in the process. We therefore argue that the prevention of radicalisation at the community level requires the involvement of a wide range of actors in a multi-agency mechanism. Coordination and cooperation of all actors involved in the P/CVE mechanism play a key role in making North Macedonia's national plan for the prevention of violent extremism more responsive to the needs of society.



1. Recommendations for the government

- The government should **address the de facto segregation between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians** in primary and secondary education; the current situation undermines inter-ethnic relations and efforts to build trust between national communities and national cohesion. Local authorities should find ways to bring populations from both national groups together through joint community activities as the only way to fight the misconceptions and the stereotypes of the past.
- In order to **fight extremism in prisons**, the government should **reformulate its rehabilitation strategy** and enhance cooperation with stakeholders such as religious practitioners. The development of re-socialisation programmes and the training of staff to implement re-socialisation and reintegration programmes are essential. Special attention should be given to the post-prison chapter of the rehabilitation strategy in order to avoid the ‘infection’ of communities through violent individuals and former foreign fighters who have been released from prison.
- The government should **build the capacities of frontline practitioners, including teachers, social workers, psychologists and religious leaders**, in order to understand and identify the different types of violent extremism in both communities. It should train them on how to map these violent extremist cases through the use of **innovative technologies**.
- The government should examine the possibility of making Internet literacy and civics part of the school curricula. **Media literacy programmes** can enhance students’ critical thinking and awareness of the tactics of online ideological propaganda and recruitment.
- The government should **develop an effective counter-messaging strategy**, training its local and state-level actors on how to produce persuasive counter-narratives. A **cross-departmental entity** tasked with coordinating all actors engaged in the counter-narrative strategy could boost the effectiveness of the government’s strategic communications in countering violent extremist discourse.
- The government should sponsor **community-based counter-narratives** by building the capacity of local NGOs. Communities and civil society actors have the potential to play a significant role in developing alternative narratives to those disseminated by violent extremists, because these populations are unlikely to trust messaging coming directly from the government. In this context, state authorities should stop treating extremism in a highly securitised way and should allow civil society actors to function as a bridge between them and the communities, especially in relation to the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) programmes for former foreign fighters.
- Municipal authorities should **involve the local neighbourhood administrative units in P/CVE efforts**; their good knowledge of the realities on the ground is useful and should be employed in P/CVE efforts. Municipal authorities should be paying more attention to neighbourhoods and localities that are affected by poverty and social

marginalisation, since these are factors that make them vulnerable to the spread of radicalism and violent extremism.

- The government should couple P/CVE actions with community- and relationship-building. **Community-building programmes** can strengthen communities' resilience, capacity and leadership. The creation of referral programmes, together with training for social service providers, school counsellors, teachers and psychologists, law enforcement providers and clergy on how to identify individuals susceptible to violent extremism, could contribute to the effectiveness of these programmes.
- The government should develop **local monitoring tools and evaluation frameworks** based on specific indicators that would allow relevant local authorities to monitor the impact of P/CVE projects and assess whether violent extremism has declined or increased.
- The government should design activities for better operationalisation of local P/CVE structures by investing in the participation of all local stakeholders, thus ensuring inclusivity. Better **coordination between the local community administrative units, police officials, religious communities, school authorities and NGOs** is necessary.
- The government should increase the capacities of local authorities to deal with the **reintegration of former foreign fighters**. Employment, housing and financing projects should be formulated by the authorities and the involvement of the private sector should be considered.
- The government should develop special programmes for **subsidising businesses to recruit** former foreign fighters after their release from prison. They should also develop programmes to subsidise the self-employment of these (former) radicals. In addition, the development of special programmes which subsidise and support religious communities' efforts in the reintegration processes for this category of individuals is more necessary than ever.
- The government should **improve the capacities of community police** by organising **mixed group training** (ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians), particularly in the area of online prevention. Community police officers need more capacities to deal with the online space, especially with chat rooms, gaming platforms, and other open and dark online spaces which enable extremist groups to radicalise individuals.
- **Local authorities should enhance their cooperation** with police, other P/CVE authorities and the civil society sector in an effort to overcome all barriers to inter-institutional communication and coordination concerning violent extremism.
- Local authorities need to do more to prevent radicalisation in North Macedonia's schools by taking a **gender-sensitive P/CVE approach** with young people. The production of a manual on gender sensitivity in P/CVE for education professionals is necessary. The fieldwork research underlined school teachers' and psychologists' need for a common understanding of gender, based on which their awareness, skills and capacities can be further developed.



2. Recommendations for the international community

- The EU must put an end to the ambivalence around the region's prospects of EU membership, closing the 'vacuum' created by the stagnation in the **EU accession process**. Research has shown that political limbo and uncertainty about the future provide fertile ground for radical and extremist groups to gain influence in North Macedonia. Stagnation in the EU accession process is mobilising radical forces from all sides.
- Islamist extremism is not the only type of extremism in North Macedonia that requires the international community's attention. **The need to address violent right-wing extremism, ethnic nationalism or even political and sports violence** should be taken into consideration in future activities and interventions implemented by international actors.
- The agenda of the international community (international organisations, foreign embassies, EU delegation, international donors and NGOs) needs to reflect the true nature of the problem of extremism as it is understood by local stakeholders and as it manifests at the local level. Accordingly, the **international solutions to extremism should be tailored primarily to local needs**.
- The international community should provide funding for non-governmental community-based actors to **develop grassroots programmes in a more structured way** and in longer-term funding cycles in order to ensure effectiveness and continuity. Community-based CSOs are the most appropriate agents of CVE messaging and other activities.
- The current capacities of CSOs and state, local and central institutions are insufficient to deal with specific issues, including the implementation of R&R programmes. The international community can address the needs of frontline workers such as psychologists, sociologists, social workers, teachers, prison and probation staff, as well as local government officials responsible for providing training in specific areas such as the deradicalisation of prisoners, the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes and psycho-social support to children and women returnees. The **professionalisation of frontline practitioners** in certain fields will allow long-term capacity-building among staff, associates and networks, leading to better tailored and evidence-based P/CVE interventions.
- Lack of coordination among all stakeholders involved in P/CVE is evident and there is no national consensus over P/CVE priorities in North Macedonia. In order to provide a coordinated and more effective response to violent extremism, the international community must encourage and **facilitate the engagement of all stakeholders in a comprehensive public discussion**. This will allow a common understanding of the problem, action plans and division of labour to emerge so that a coordinated effort can produce the best results for the nation as a whole.

- The international community should train civil society members as well as key state actors to **improve the monitoring and evaluation of P/CVE initiatives** in order to avoid duplication of efforts.
- The international community should **bridge the capacity gaps of practitioners involved in R&R work with former foreign fighters and their family members**. At the same time, it should facilitate the formulation of a more adequate government strategy for the prevention of violent extremism in prisons. Prisons currently function as a breeding ground for the spread of radical ideas. The international community, especially the Council of Europe, which has been engaged actively in this area, should encourage the government to adopt measures to address this situation.
- The international community should continue to **support projects which promote community inclusion and resilience**, particularly projects involving inter-ethnic understanding and cultural awareness, targeting the young population. The design of these projects should include more local input, with longer funding cycles to improve their sustainability.
- The international community should **encourage the government to reconsider the present ethnic segregation in school education** in North Macedonia.
- The international community should be more resolute in **fighting corruption**, which is a major driver of radicalisation and potentially violent extremism. In particular, EU actors should avoid any activities that are perceived by the public in North Macedonia to be 'rewarding' corrupt politicians, thus harming credibility.



3. Recommendations for civil society

- With regard to the involvement of CSOs in P/CVE, there is a need to **strengthen formats for cooperation with state and public institutions**, increasing both quantity and quality. Broadening the scope of collaboration and coordination would create the critical mass necessary to establish networked governance of CVE activities.
- **Violent right-wing extremism, ethnic nationalism and sport-related violence** are some of the most under-recognised challenges in North Macedonia. Civil society organisations should raise awareness of these issues.
- Civil society organisations should **implement diaspora-focused projects** in an effort to increase diaspora networks through community dialogue and trust-building activities with the host societies. This kind of interaction is important to counter experiences of marginalisation, which is considered to be one of the main drivers of radicalisation among the Albanian diaspora.
- **Local CSOs should take ownership of P/CVE projects** and develop capacities needed for this endeavour. Once local NGOs enhance the ownership of their projects and

initiatives, they can influence donors to align their programmes and funding criteria to real community needs with better sustainability and long-term viability.

- The vast majority of P/CVE projects implemented by local CSOs are focused on the youth. While this is indeed a major field, other important areas and actors such as the elderly, parents and religious practitioners should not be neglected. Local NGOs should **focus on the parent-student-teacher** triangle for the implementation of their P/CVE projects.
- The establishment of a **trustful dialogue between religious groups, secular CSOs and state authorities** is necessary for the harmonisation of strategies, activities and approaches in P/CVE. CSOs can bring together practitioners who can address the issue of inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue, both on the local and on the national levels, to improve existing P/CVE approaches.
- **Religious communities should have a more active role in P/CVE actions**, including their presence in **online platforms** where religious practitioners can spread messages of inter-ethnic unity. The engagement of religious practitioners in raising awareness and dispelling myths and misconceptions about ethno-national and religious radicalisation using technology and the online space is more necessary than ever.
- The **Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia** should enhance its cooperation with national institutions and NGOs to prevent the expansion of extremist ideas through the misinterpretation of Islam. It should also work to establish a unified approach among its practitioners on the issues of radicalisation and extremism. In cooperation with specific state authorities, it should prevent the creation of parallel structures, such as madrasas, schools or kindergartens, by radical groups. The Orthodox Church should also start engaging more actively in this area.
- CSOs and academia should pay more attention to two salient issues. On the one hand, **more research should be done on the spread of ethno-political extremism**, particularly by far-right groups. Although far-right groups do not currently pose a serious political challenge in North Macedonia, there is no doubt that their ideas, and the ease with which they can spread them through the Internet and social media, are issues of serious concern for the future. Secondly, there is a clear need for more research on the overall **role of women in CVE efforts and in building community resilience**.



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