

Community Perspectives on Violent Extremism

Strengthening local factors of social resilience

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What is the policy brief about?

This policy brief highlights recommendations to improve programming aiming to prevent violent extremism (PVE), and emphasises the need for all programming to begin work with locally-grounded analysis and planning. It also highlights sets of factors and actors who can contribute to social resilience against violent extremisms. The brief draws mainly on the extensive report *Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from the Western Balkans*, which concludes a two-year project spanning research, community dialogue and policy advice in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

Why is the topic relevant?

Dealing with violent extremism (VE) has emerged as a central framework of analysis and policy-making in most Western and non-Western government agencies. It is also heavily shaping the programming of non-governmental agencies and research institutions. While there is an undeniable need to address the phenomenon, more often than not analysis and programming fall short in understanding and tackling its root causes, factors, actors and systemic dynamics. Most interventions in the area of Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE) also focused on top-down security approaches, with little community involvement.

For whom is it important?

The policy brief reaches out to policy-makers and agenda-setters at the local community level, the national governmental level and the international level. It is also of interest to researchers and students interested in violent extrem-

ism, radicalisation, violence prevention and the Western Balkans region.

Conclusions

Viewing the prevention of violent extremism through a peacebuilding lens implies the need to invest in systemic conflict analysis tools specifically tailored to the phenomenon and its locally-contextualised manifestations. The following recommendations for programming aimed at preventing violent extremism, in the region and elsewhere, stand out based on this research:

- ≡ Strengthen and increase cooperation among community leaders and actors who can play a role in preventing violent extremism, with the municipality (or local administration) establishing community relations committees.
- ≡ Involve cross-sections of local-level actors and community leaders in analysing the state of community vulnerability and resilience and in setting policy priorities. Co-create and co-design new objectives and fine-tune existing objectives to respond to the current context.
- ≡ Improve and strengthen institutional performance and collaborative policy-making in the areas of education, youth and social affairs.
- ≡ Acknowledge religious institutions and religious leaders at the central and local level as influential actors with close ties to their communities and ensure their engagement in preventing violent extremism from the beginning.
- ≡ Invest in identifying and strengthening factors of community resilience and social cohesion (i.e. inclusive socio-economic development, inter-faith tolerance and civic education) as much as in measures of deterrence and punishment.

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1 Introduction

As the Balkans are currently back in the international spotlight, attention has returned to peacebuilding in the region. This is an opportunity to link peacebuilding with a topic high on the international agenda: violent extremism.

The Western Balkan countries have been seen, in the early 2010s, as Europe's top exporters per capita of volunteers fighting for Salafi Jihadi armed organisations such as ISIS and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (previously known as Jabhal al-Nusra) (Shtuni 2016, 2). Yet, the reasons why some communities are more vulnerable than others to the appeal of ISIS or Al Qaida-affiliated groups in a region that is not known to be particularly prone to religious extremist tendencies – in comparison with conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia – have not been investigated sufficiently. Disentangling myth and stigma from robust observations is a necessity. And although the actual number of foreign fighters has decreased in the years since 2016, a new challenge arises for the nations and communities in the region as some of those who left, and their children who were born abroad, return.

Local and regional stakeholders and affected communities are also grappling with finding effective responses and preventive measures to tackle this phenomenon. Thus, there is a strong need to develop inclusive and targeted programmes, which can help to build resilient states and communities against violent extremism.

In this context, the Berghof Foundation, together with local partners, set out to understand what makes certain communities resilient to violent extremism, while others are less so despite similar socio-economic, ideological and political contexts (Morina et al. 2019).

This policy brief highlights the main findings of the study, which in turn wraps up a two-year research and dialogue project funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented together with local research institutions in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia from 2017 to 2019.

The project combined comparative research and practice-oriented local and intra-regional exchange in these countries. Local outreach and dialogue activities with stakeholders and affected communities as well as public authorities aim to develop and strengthen collaborative ways to improve PVE programming at the local, national and regional level. International dissemination further advocates the uptake of key insights.

2 Background and methodology

Arguably, the four Western Balkan countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia scrutinised in the study have many similarities rooted in shared historical grievances, but also linked to underperforming economies, bad governance and administrative dysfunctionality, national and ethnic tensions and unresolved identity issues. In three out of four cases, unfinished peacebuilding and reconciliation processes compound the picture.

Finding a unique angle between the extensively studied micro-level of individual push and pull factors and the macro level of structural causes, for example state repression, relative deprivation, poverty and globalisation, the research informing this policy brief focused on the meso-level. It sought to identify factors of *community* vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism, and to formulate and test recommendations drawn from bottom-up peacebuilding for the effective prevention of violent extremism.

Table 1: Selected Affected and Unaffected Communities/Municipalities by Country

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

In order to identify and understand what makes communities resilient to violent extremism, researchers analysed communities’ characteristics in a given socio-economic, ideological and political context. Affected and unaffected communities were the main ‘target’ of the research (see [Table 1](#)), which aimed to explore and identify what makes a certain community able (by “chance” or “choice”) to prevent or resist the threats of violent extremism, or be influenced by ideological and/or physical forms of violent extremism. The main indicator used to determine whether a community is affected or not was the number of foreign fighters (individual departures to Syria and Iraq from the community) per capita. A secondary indicator was the number of recruiters and preachers prosecuted.

Several features set this research apart. It was (1) participatory and action-oriented in that the communities under study were invited to engage in dialogue on the findings and recommendations and to identify entry-points for their implementation.

It (2) focused on communities’ subjective perceptions through interviews and focus groups with single or mixed-group representatives (religious or non-religious, mixed gender, youth, leaders of local government and civil society, etc.).

It quickly became clear that communities are neither fully affected nor completely unaffected – an unaffected community might still share the same ‘breeding ground’ traits as affected municipalities and an affected community could still display some features of a resilient community.

On terminology

In this policy brief, we use terminology that is generally marked by a lack of shared understanding and, occasionally, marred by being politicized, securitized or jargonized. We therefore want to share our working understanding of these widely used terms here.

Radicalisation | A process of increasing ideological and/or behavioural change that leads to espousing more extreme and potentially violent worldviews and actions.

(Violent) Extremism | Any ideology that opposes a society's core values and principles. Many distinguish political from religious extremism. Although extremists do not necessarily engage in violence, the phrase violent extremism is used in contexts where extremist worldviews are accompanied by the justification and use of extreme violence (such as atrocity crimes) against those who do not share the same belief or ideology. Violent extremism may be expressed by individuals or groups through speeches or media posts, by carrying out isolated acts of violence in the name of extremist ideologies, or by physically joining violent groups.²

Cumulative | Reciprocal Radicalisation | The terms “cumulative” extremism and “reciprocal” radicalisation express the observation that current political polarisation does not happen in a vacuum but more often than not is a response to the actions and discourse of another group, for example, right-wing nationalistic groups. This is of great importance in a public debate that is still prone to considering radicalism and extremism as innate characteristics of a specific religion (often Islam).

Resilience (Unaffectedness) | Resilience assumes an awareness of the problem by various stakeholders in a community and their aggregated action to act against a certain phenomenon. It also includes the community's attitude toward such a phenomenon and their reaction in the wake of the emergence of the violent extremist activity, or even perceived as leading up to its appearance. It is never an absolute quality, but rather a systemic and changeable characteristic.³

Vulnerability (Affectedness) | An affected community is one that has been influenced by ideological and/or physical forms of violent extremism such as pervasive radical ideology, ideologically motivated acts of violence, the incidence of foreign fighters originating from the community, and presence of actors that cultivate vulnerability towards violent extremism.

For an in-depth discussion, see Aroua 2018 and Morina et al. 2019.

3 Findings

Factors of Community Vulnerability or Resilience to Violent Extremism

Several factors and actors shaping affected communities in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia stand out across the cases. The main factor is deep societal polarisation, whether on social, political, ethno-political or religious, grounds. This is followed by a considerable degree of mistrust in both political and religious institutions, which are mainly seen to be unresponsive, ineffective and biased. With respect to these

² While violent extremism can be associated with any political or religious ideology, the term is usually equated with religiously-inspired, and especially Islamist-based, non-state violence. In a way, this research falls into the same trap, since it placed a particular focus on the patterns through which certain individuals become radicalised into espousing Salafi/Wahhabi-inspired Islamist ideologies and joining jihadi organisations as foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. However, throughout the research process we explicitly recognised, and sought to uncover, the mutual interactions between Islamist violent extremism and other forms of political (e.g. far-right, nationalist) extremism, which contribute to their reciprocal radicalisation.

³ The researchers furthermore agreed to distinguish between affected and unaffected communities. This terminology was chosen in order not to presuppose that communities that display symptoms of violent extremism are automatically deemed to be vulnerable, or that communities that do not display any (outward) symptoms of violent extremism are automatically declared to be resilient. An unaffected community is understood as one that does not display visible signs of radicalisation or violent extremism.

two dimensions, Albania proves to be something of an outlier, as the standing of the religious authorities and the ethno-political cleavages are historically less marked. Not surprisingly, socio-economic conditions were not found to be a decisive factor in and of themselves, although they do play a role in creating a more conducive environment in some cases. Further, the low quality of religious education and the need to strengthen critical thinking are highlighted in all four country cases as areas in urgent need of improvement. Finally, the country studies point to the important influence that a pronounced feeling of marginalisation (be it on the basis of belonging to a minority identity or belonging to a politically/economically neglected constituency) has on the likelihood of a community becoming prone to recruitment, radicalisation and affectedness by violent extremism.

In terms of characteristic groups of actors, or, even more important, characteristic actions by these actors, we can draw the significant conclusion that in the affected communities, there is a general sense that no proactive and unified alliance of actors (local government and/or religious institutions) exists. Instead, there is an unoccupied and unguarded space into which – mostly exogenous – recruiters could enter and in which they could establish unregulated places of preaching and proselytising. The gatekeepers in such communities – school teachers, parents, etc. – are often described as either largely unaware of the problem or uninterested (in some cases, the parents may also have been condoning the actions of their youngsters, sometimes unaware of the consequences). However, it also becomes clear that no black and white delineations exist.

The Albania case study summarises this well: “[A]ffectedness is not so much determined by the mere presence of factors and actors conducive to vulnerability towards VE, but rather by the level, dynamics and compounding of factors and actors within a given community” (Qirjazi & Shehu 2018, 1). Affected communities should thus be seen as without a clear continuum (i.e. without linearity, meaning that there are no clear lines or starting points). Rather, we are looking at a blurred and complex system, which can be exploited more successfully by certain actors when the conditions are right. Great care must therefore be taken in assessing communities’ innate vulnerability (or resilience), as these might fluctuate and change rather quickly.

In the cases of the unaffected communities, we were interested in the social distinctiveness of some municipalities in the Western Balkans which are seemingly unaffected by violent extremism in spite of providing ‘fertile ground’, for example in terms of the prevailing socio-economic conditions, which could have made them easy prey for recruiters.

Based on the empirical findings, one can conclude that these six communities benefitted both from a favourable context enhancing their social resilience against external threats, and from the leadership capacity exhibited by state, religious and civil society actors. Some of the key factors identified as favourable conditions for unaffectedness include the role of perceived social harmony and multiculturalism, the inclusive sense of national identity binding citizens and overriding the appeal of neo-fundamentalist ideologies (such as Salafism), and the specific history and geography of these municipalities.

Our investigation highlighted that agency does matter a great deal, from the role of educators and teachers equipping young people with critical thinking, self-confidence and theological knowledge, to CSOs fostering civic engagement among community members, and finally the coordinated and cohesive actions taken by local religious and institutional authorities. Unaffected communities are led by imams and mayors who keep a close eye on their constituency in order to monitor the ‘pulse’ of the community; who take a stance to encourage tolerance and progressive interpretations of religious texts in order to prevent the development of extremist discourses; who take proactive measures to regulate the spread of extremist ideas by preventing hostile exogenous influences from taking root in the community, or by pushing back on hate speeches that would have increased the communities’ vulnerability.

However, as in the case of the affected communities, the evidence is not sufficient to designate these unaffected communities as being fully or strongly resilient to the threat of violent extremism. Exploring the complexity of applying the concept of community resilience to the study of violent extremism, the research did find across all case study countries that the combined awareness, action and attitude of local leaders contribute positively to community resilience.

In sum, comparing communities’ characteristics of vulnerability and resilience in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia led to the following key findings:

- ≡ Polarisation, dysfunctional institutions, perceived marginalisation of communities based on their identity and geographic and historical specificities are the main factors conducive to the rise of violent extremism.
- ≡ Both local and exogenous actors, such as religious non-state actors, and reciprocal extremism play a key enabling role.
- ≡ Unaffected communities can be either resilient by chance (social and historical factors) or by choice (proactive/reactive community leadership).
- ≡ Awareness of the risks, an attitude of tolerance towards others and action for proactive prevention are the three key ingredients for effective prevention of violent extremism in communities.

From PVE to Peacebuilding: Policy Responses

The research also assessed the relevance and appropriateness of national and international policy responses, in the form of PVE programmes. Rather than more narrowly security-focused and hard-power oriented programmes on countering violent extremism (CVE), programmes aimed at preventing violent extremism put greater emphasis on addressing a host of different political and sociological factors: for example, identifying and tackling the push and pull factors, addressing structural root causes and strengthening individual and community resilience (Austin & Giessmann 2018, iv).

Our local researchers found that, in many cases, community perceptions of PVE programmes were quite patchy. Communities are rarely consulted or made aware of national plans. In the case of Kosovo, the researchers furthermore found that there was a mismatch between the identified factors of resilience (for example strong cooperative relationships between local religious and political actors) and the nature of PVE activities (predominantly awareness raising and income generation) (Jakupi & Kraja 2018, 24-25). Finally, capacity and resources are lacking in the areas of (secular and religious) education, social work or the creation of civic spaces.

We propose that a peacebuilding approach to PVE can be truly beneficial, despite not being without setbacks. Our research found, on the one hand, that post-war peacebuilding activities (defined as inter-community dialogue and reconciliation) are seen as ineffective by a substantive number of people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example. Not all normative expectations (for example, that peacebuilding will address structural and individual root causes in a more holistic way) have been realised ‘on the ground’ in the Western Balkans. In several cases, peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives furthermore have been subject to political exploitation and manipulation (see for example Turcalo & Veljan 2018, 21). Consequently, the populations often view them with a large measure of cynicism and pessimism.

On the other hand, our research does underline that what one might call the essence of peacebuilding does contribute to resilience: inter-ethnic encounter, inter-faith dialogue, religious tolerance and multiculturalism, active bonds and links in a community across group identities, the fostering of inclusive and multidimensional identities stand out as important factors contributing to resilience.

As the case study authors from Macedonia point out: “In Gostivar and Struga ... there have been notable efforts to promote multiculturalism, diversity and the values of an inter-ethnic society. Respondents suggested that members of these municipalities are well-informed about the values of diversity. Struga, moreover, noted that a concerted effort is placed upon the creation and promotion of activities and programmes fostering inter-ethnic integration and collaboration, thus further strengthening municipality-wide resilience toward the factors which contribute to an extremism-enabling environment” (Stojkovski & Kalajdziovski 2018, 27).

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

Successful PVE programming requires contextualisation and cannot be rolled out by blueprint. The following selected recommendations (see Morina et al. 2019, 61ff. for the comprehensive set) therefore build on the recommendations of each of the four country case studies, without replacing their independent and situated assessments and suggestions. However, they highlight insights that emerged as highly relevant for a majority of the country case studies. We believe that these will need to be addressed – in a contextualised manner – in most settings aiming to prevent radicalisation towards violent extremism.

The recommendations are clustered in two sections: strengthening factors and actors conducive to community resilience, and building strong and efficient PVE programmes.

The community angle at the meso-level has been borne out to be both novel and relevant by researchers. We recommend adopting it, for example by focusing on the role of communities in the reintegration and rehabilitation of returnee foreign fighters and their families. More investments need to be made into better understanding the dynamics of cumulative extremism, the similarities and differences between drivers of conflict and drivers of violent extremism, as well as systematically evaluating the effectiveness of PVE programming. Finally, viewing the prevention of violent extremism through a peacebuilding lens also implies the need to invest in systemic conflict analysis tools specifically tailored to transforming violent extremism.

Strengthening the factors and actors enhancing community resilience

Local institutions

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

National governments and stakeholders

- ≡ *Involve cross-sections of local-level actors and community leaders in analysing the state of community vulnerability and resilience and in setting policy priorities.* This way, community perspectives can inform policy development from an early stage, as well as ensure awareness at the local level about policy measures at the national governmental level.
- ≡ *Acknowledge religious institutions and religious leaders at the central and local level as influential actors with close ties to their communities.* Ensure their engagement in assessing the dangers of, and acting on, violent extremism from the beginning, rather than bringing them in at late stages in order to implement actions designed without their input. This will counteract a sense of being instrumentalised on the part of religious actors.

International Donors, NGOs and government agencies

- ≡ *Invest in identifying and strengthening factors of community resilience and social cohesion* (such as inclusive socio-economic development, inter-faith tolerance and civic education) as much as in measures of deterrence and punishment.
- ≡ *Co-create and co-design new intervention objectives and fine-tune existing intervention objectives together with local community representatives* in order to strengthen institutional capacity and stakeholder cooperation (religious and government), both at the national policy-making and at the community level, to improve communication, coordination and collaboration. Ensure the inclusion of genuine representatives of different groups in the community (religious representatives, youth, women).

Building strong and efficient PVE programmes

Local institutions

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

National governments and stakeholders

- ≡ *Analyse and engage in both affected and unaffected communities, recognising that the two categories are not neatly separable.* Such side-by-side engagement may start with creating collaborative spaces for peer-to-peer learning. Community relations committees within municipalities could serve as safe spaces for these exchanges. From both types of communities, identify and consult key community-level influencers to conduct locally-led threat and needs assessments to inform PVE programming. Complementing top-down with bottom-up approaches by co-designing PVE activities with local institutions will allow more nuanced programming and enhance local awareness and buy-in.
- ≡ *Include forms of ethno-nationalist and right-wing extremism that are on the rise in the discourse, strategies and action plans on preventing and combating violent extremism.* This will help address the counter-productive “Islamisation” of violent extremism and help ensure engagement by actors who might otherwise feel unjustly and singularly stigmatised.

International donors, NGOs and government agencies

- ≡ *Ensure that new PVE programming is based on sound peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity principles* and that lessons and learning from prior peacebuilding work feed into PVE programming. Such lessons-learning must include the refinement of PVE-specific monitoring and evaluation methodologies in order to more systematically assess the effectiveness and impact of PVE programming.
- ≡ *Invest in programmes that are tailored and adapted to the specific needs of each locality.* Programmes cannot be duplicated without community context-specific design. This design must involve local representatives with diverse perspectives.

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