Working Paper 5: Online and Offline (De)radicalisation in the Balkans

PUBLICATIONS

PAVE Consortium

Table of Contents

Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
ELIAMEP	The Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy
EU	European Union
FF	Foreign Fighter
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighter
ICJ	International Court of Justice
KCSS	Kosovar Centre for Security Studies
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MIA	Ministry of Internal Affairs
NMK	North Macedonia
OFA	Ohrid Framework Agreement
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
UNMIK	United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
WB	Western Balkans

1 Introduction

This paper examines factors of community vulnerability and community resilience to religiously inspired and ethno-political radicalisation in the Western Balkans, with a focus on Kosovo and North Macedonia. In the context of this paper, radicalisation is understood first and foremost as a process that involves a cognitive trajectory, and is influenced by different dynamics and factors whereby an individual incrementally adopts extremist ideas, views or interpretations. This paper discusses online and offline (de)radicalisation patterns by examining the respective roles of online narratives disseminated primarily through social media platforms and peer-group socialisation dynamics in Kosovo and North Macedonia. Specifically, this paper seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that have shaped trends and developments in both countries with respect to ethno-political and religious radicalisation.

The findings of this paper draw from six focus group discussions and 61 semi-structured interviews conducted during 2021 in Kosovo and North Macedonia. The field research included two field sites or municipalities per country, with KCSS leading the research in Kosovo, and ELIAMEP leading the research in North Macedonia. The field sites were selected on the basis of their sharing sufficient similarities to enable a comparative analysis, such as similar socio-economic indicators, while exhibiting different levels of radicalisation. Specifically, based on manifestation levels of radicalisation, one selected field site per country was considered as more resilient whereas the other was considered more vulnerable to ethno-political and religious radicalisation. Accordingly, the research examines the factors which make one locality resilient and the other locality vulnerable to radicalisation, with the comparative insights being incorporated throughout the paper. In Kosovo, the municipality of Podujeva and the municipalities of Mitrovica South and North were chosen as field sites. In North Macedonia, the municipality of Tetovo and the municipality of Kumanovo were selected. In addition to this, the researchers analysed official documents, existing research and online content. This included an analysis of the online content of social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.

Some of the main findings from this paper concerning online and offline (de)radicalisation are:

- Communities in both Kosovo and North Macedonia perceive that **ethno-political radicalisation poses a higher risk for societal peace compared to religiously inspired radicalisation**. However, they are not mutually exclusive and religious identity is utilised by ethno-political radical discourses to strengthen a sense of "othering".
- **Online media** are a potent mechanism for radicalisation; however, the **traditional media** channels such as the regular evening news and TV debates remain highly influential in shaping public opinion, often inadvertently contributing to radicalisation. Both in Kosovo and in North Macedonia, cases of national media discussing an issue of public interest from the perspective of all communities remain rare.
- Although **governments** in both countries have adopted a securitised response to radicalisation, they lack the know-how and understanding to deal effectively with online (de)radicalisation.
- **Civil society** in both countries plays a crucial role in fostering community resilience to ethno-political and religious radicalisation.

- Government policies against radicalisation and campaigns for deradicalisation must be decentralised in order to give more competence and authority to municipalities. There should be greater **cooperation and coordination between central government, local government and civil society**.
- In both Kosovo and North Macedonia, **education**, including **media literacy**, is seen as a pillar for community resilience while the lack of good programmes for developing **critical thinking skills** among school students is regarded as a major factor of vulnerability to radicalisation.
- **Religious leaders** are respected and seen as essential to countering radicalisation and violent extremism. Imams and priests have an important responsibility in promoting resilience to radicalisation by becoming positive examples for the community, as in the municipality of Ferizaj; however, in the case of NMK, religious leaders have not fully understood their role in the community. They lack knowledge on how to deal with radicalisation and issues related to extremism.
- The **unregulated online media environment**, which allows unverified content to be disseminated, including hate speech, is seen in both Kosovo and North Macedonia as a key factor of community vulnerability.
- Initiatives by local religious leaders to counter radicalisation elements are usually ignored by the international community and government in favour of the more elaborate project proposals submitted by well-established think tanks. The government and the international community should increase their **support to grassroots NGOs and community leaders**.
- The **international community** plays a role in building resilience by exerting pressure on local authorities; however, international actors tend to mistake the types of extremism by misreading its forms in a way that fits their own agendas, resulting in a misapplication of tools to combat radicalisation.

This paper is organised into six main sections. The next section provides a country background for Kosovo and North Macedonia and a profile of the selected field sites in both countries. The third section starts with the analysis of the fieldwork data on community vulnerability to radicalisation in the Western Balkans, while section four examines the factors of community resilience. Section five discusses gender dynamics in relation to offline and online (de)radicalisation. Section six provides a synthesis of the analysis from Kosovo and North Macedonia, and section seven outlines key recommendations for governments, civil society and the international community. The section and the information on Kosovo were prepared by KCSS; for North Macedonia they were produced by the ELIAMEP research team.

2   Country background and profile of the selected field sites

This section provides some context on Kosovo and North Macedonia and a profile of the selected field sites in both countries. It also offers an analysis of major events that have shaped developments in the two countries.

2.1 Kosovo

In the context of the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, Kosovo experienced a brutal war when the Milošević regime in Serbia unleashed an ethnic cleansing campaign against the majority Albanian population. The war ended with NATO's humanitarian intervention and in July 1999 Kosovo was placed under international administration. The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) was established by the Security Council in its Resolution 1244. In accordance with Resolution 1244, which required a "political process designed to determine Kosovo's future status", in November 2005, the UN Secretary-General appointed former President of Finland Martti Ahtisaari as his Special Envoy for the future status process for Kosovo. Following two years of negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia, President Ahtisaari presented to the UN Security Council the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement – commonly referred to as the Ahtisaari Plan – which recommended that Kosovo's status should be independence, supervised by the international community for a period of time (UN Security-Council, 2007). President Ahtisaari's proposal was opposed by Serbia, as well as by Russia and China, which prevented a vote in the UN Security Council.

In an effort to secure a compromise, three mediators from the International Contact Group, the US envoy Frank Wisner, Russia's Aleksander Botsan-Kharchenko and the EU's representative Wolfgang Ischinger, travelled to Serbia and Kosovo, but failed to negotiate a deal, after – in Ischinger's words – they "did everything 'humanly possible'" (DW, 2007). Following the failures to reach a compromise agreement, on 17 February 2008, Kosovo declared its independence and committed to implement the Ahtisaari Plan. Accordingly, Kosovo's independence was recognised by the United States and almost all of the EU Member States on the grounds that it would integrate the Ahtisaari Plan into its constitution. In 2010, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) also ruled that Kosovo's independence did not violate international law (ICJ, 2010), and the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) adopted a resolution that acknowledged the Court's Advisory Opinion and asked the European Union (EU) to facilitate a dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia in order to normalise the relations between the two (UN General Assembly, 2010). The EU initiated the dialogue for normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia in 2011; however, a decade later, the conclusion of the process with a comprehensive and legally binding agreement between the two countries remains a highly unlikely outcome (Stanicek, 2021). The absence of normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia is a major source of instability and tension in the Western Balkans.

Kosovo is a multi-ethnic society, and the national state symbols are designed to represent all communities living in the country. According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, the total population of the country is around 1.8 million and the two largest ethnic groups are the Kosovo Albanians (92%) and Kosovo Serbs (1.5%) (ASK, 2013).[1] Over 90% of the population is considered to be Muslim, 2.2% are Catholic and 1.5% are Orthodox Christians. The Kosovo Albanian community is internally diverse when it comes to religion. Although the absolute majority are Muslims, there are Albanian Catholics and Albanian Protestants, while the Serbian community is predominantly Orthodox Christian (U.S. Department of State, 2021). Religion for the Albanians does not play a central role in their identity compared to other nations in the region.

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[1] The 2011 census was widely boycotted by Kosovar Serbs, especially in the north of Kosovo.

Although Kosovo experienced extreme violence during the conflict in the 1990s, in line with the international security threat landscape, discussions around radicalisation mainly refer to the relatively recent foreign fighter phenomenon, observed from 2011 with the onset of the war in Syria. Current research suggests that around 403 Kosovars travelled to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, and 250 of them are considered to be foreign fighters who joined transnational terrorist groups, including IS (Islamic State) (Jakupi & Kraja, 2018). However, as Jakupi and Kraja (2018) note, the majority of them left Kosovo between 2012 and 2014, before the Islamic State was established. The Kosovo government responded to the phenomenon of foreign fighters and violent extremism in a number of ways. In 2015, the Kosovo Assembly adopted a Law on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory (No. 05/L-002) (Official Gazette, 2015). In addition, in 2014, the government implemented a large-scale operation against violent extremism which resulted in the arrest of around 60 individuals for promoting radicalisation and/or actively recruiting individuals as foreign fighters. Partly as a result of concerted government efforts, the recruitment of foreign fighters in Kosovo is thought to have "decreased by 50%" (USAID, 2015, p. 8). In 2014, the government also closed approximately 16 non-government organisations suspected of having connections with extremist networks and of funding and supporting radicalisation and recruitment of foreign fighters under the guise of humanitarian assistance.

Following the collapse of IS, however, the majority of Kosovars who were in Syrian camps have returned in Kosovo through various official and unofficial channels; the number is estimated at 242 (Ilazi & Perteshi, Unpacking Kosovo's response to returnees from the war zones in Syria and Iraq, 2020). It is important to mention that with the support of the US government, the government of Kosovo repatriated 110 individuals in 2019 and 11 individuals in 2021.The government of Kosovo established a special unit in the Ministry of Internal Affairs to lead and coordinate de-radicalisation efforts in the correctional service system and the reintegration of formerly radicalised individuals into society. The Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Persons (DPRRI) focuses on reintegration of radicalised individuals and foreign fighters into society to "make them a useful part of it" and states that "in order for the reintegration process to succeed, it is essential to create a community-based and local-level platform" (DPRRI, 2020, para. 4-5). Civil society or non-government organisations have an important role in de-radicalisation and reintegration efforts. In Kosovo, they also complement government services, such as providing support to returnees from Syria and Iraq to treat lingering trauma.

The current government efforts in tackling radicalisation and violent extremism are heavily focused on religious-based radicalisation, leaving other, equally menacing forms of extremism, such as ethno-political radicalisation, largely unexplored. This paper's exploration of radicalisation is therefore based on a broader and more inclusive understanding of the threat, encompassing not only religious-based but also ethno-political radicalisation.

For this study, two municipalities were selected by the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) as field sites for the research. The selection was based on the criteria established by the PAVE project, namely that sites should be chosen "which share common socio-economic features (e.g. divided/polarised social space, high social cleavages, or high level of economic deprivation) but are affected differently by the phenomenon of violent extremism" (PAVE project, p. 44). Two municipalities were selected as field sites for Kosovo: the municipality of Mitrovica (North and South) and the municipality

of Podujeva[2]. The municipality of Mitrovica is in fact divided into two municipalities: Mitrovica-South[3] and Mitrovica-North[4]. The field sites (municipalities) selected are generally similar in terms of socio-economic context; however, they differ with respect to the extent of manifestation of radicalisation and violent extremism. For instance, Mitrovica has witnessed ethno-political tensions, as well as religious radicalisation, over the years.

Mitrovica municipality is divided along ethnic lines, with the Iber river marking the dividing line between the predominantly Serbian North (Mitrovica) and the predominantly Albanian South (Mitrovica). This division was implemented by the NATO forces in the aftermath of the Kosovo war in 1999, in order to prevent potential attacks from the Albanian majority against the Serbian minority in the north. Following the independence of Kosovo in 2008 and the approval of new legislation on local self-government and a process of decentralisation, North Mitrovica officially became a municipality in 2013. The situation in Mitrovica (North and South) remains fragile, not only because of ethnic divisions and tensions, but also as a result of the poor social and economic outlook. Over 50% of the population is economically inactive (Peci, Agani, Nixha, & Ukshini, 2019).

Mitrovica is a frequent site of manifestations of ethno-political radicalisation and ethnic tensions, which are exacerbated by religious differences. The government in Serbia seeks to portray the situation of Serbs living in the north of Kosovo as a religious struggle as well (i.e. Christian Serbs being persecuted by Muslim majority Albanians (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-North, 2021). In general, Kosovo is heavily portrayed in the Serbian public discourse as a site of quintessential religious relevance for the Serbian people. According to Tim Judah, "Serbs like to hark back to the Middle Ages as a high point in their past and thus common identity. Before that, there were only disparate lords and peasants; afterwards, centuries of Ottoman domination. A glorious past was thus the hope of a glorious future and in that story, Kosovo was to become central, especially as Serbs began, after their first rebellion of 1804 against the Ottomans, to re-create a state, looking to the past for inspiration." (Judah, 2008, p. 18). For instance, in 2017, the Serbian government attempted to send a train to the north of Kosovo from Serbia, heavily painted with Orthodox religious symbols and with the slogan "Kosovo is Serbia" (DW, 2017). The inter-ethnic divisions and tensions are considered contributing factors to a stronger commitment to religious identity. Prejudice between ethnic Albanians and Serbs is widespread and there is limited interaction between the two groups.

Podujeva municipality has a population of 72,000 and is located in the north-eastern part of Kosovo on the border with Serbia. The socio-economic situation in the municipality is roughly the same as in Mitrovica. It has a high rate of unemployment and limited opportunities for young people. As a result, the population's dependence on social services is high. During the Kosovo war in 1998/99, Podujeva suffered one of the highest rates of destruction of its infrastructure. Over 5,000 homes out of a total

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[2] Read more about Podujeva from the OSCE profile of the municipality, available at:
https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/4/13126_0.pdf
[3] Read more about Mitrovica South from the OSCE profile of the municipality, available at:
https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/3/122118_1.pdf
[4] Read more about Mitrovica North from the OSCE profile of the municipality, available at:
https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/9/122119_1.pdf

of 14,000 were destroyed (OSCE, 2016). Podujeva also has a multi-ethnic composition, with an estimated 2,000 Kosovar Serbs living in the municipality. In this study, Podujeva stands out for the limited manifestation of violent extremism inspired by religion or ethno-politics. As regards foreign fighters, a total of five individuals travelled from Podujeva to the war zones in Syria and Iraq (Perteshi, 2018).

The next section provides the country background and the profile of the selected field sites for North Macedonia.

2.2 North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, the research was conducted at two field sites, or municipalities: the municipality of Tetovo and the municipality of Kumanovo. This section discusses their profiles and examines key developments in the country to provide context for the analysis.

The municipality of Kumanovo is located in the north of the country, close to the border with Serbia. It includes the city of Kumanovo and 46 villages. Its total population, according to the last census conducted in North Macedonia (NMK) in 2002, was 105,484 (NMK-Government, 2018, p. 70). It is an ethnically mixed municipality, with Macedonians constituting the majority of the population, predominating in the city of Kumanovo and in the majority of the 46 villages that belong to the municipality. More specifically, according to the 2002 census, there were 63,746 ethnic Macedonians (60.4% of the total), 27,290 ethnic Albanians (25.8%), 9,062 ethnic Serbs (8.5%) and 4,256 Roma (4.3%), as well as small groups of ethnic Turks, Vlahs and others. A total of 76,272 people live in the city of Kumanovo: 46,744 ethnic Macedonians (54.6%), 18,278 ethnic Albanians (35.1%), 5,230 ethnic Serbs (4.5%), 4,056 Roma (3.6%) and small groups of other ethnic minorities.

The municipality of Tetovo is located in the north-western part of NMK, close to the border with Kosovo. It includes the city of Tetovo and 17 villages. Its total population, according to the last census conducted in NMK in 2002, was 86,580. It is an ethnically mixed municipality, with Albanians constituting the majority of the population, predominating in the city of Tetovo and in 15 of the 17 villages that belong to the municipality. More specifically, according to the 2002 census, there were 60,886 ethnic Albanians (70.3% of the total), 20,053 ethnic Macedonians (23.2%), 2,357 Roma (2.7%) and 1,882 ethnic Turks (2.2%), as well as small groups of Serbs, Bosniaks and others. A total of 52,915 people live in the city of Tetovo: 28,897 ethnic Albanians (54.6%), 18,555 ethnic Macedonians (35.1%), 2,352 Roma (4.5%), 1,876 ethnic Turks (3.6%) and small groups of other ethnic minorities.

Emigration is a preeminent feature of life in NMK (Judah, 2020). It is estimated that between 1990 and 2019, more than 200,000 people left NMK, bringing the total number of emigrants to around 32% of the total population (UN statistics). According to official estimates, remittances account for about 4% of GDP, while unofficial estimates put their share of GDP as high as 10% (ETF, 2021). Both Kumanovo and Tetovo have significant diaspora communities that maintain their ties with their places of origin (which is especially visible during the summer months when the streets of both Kumanovo and Tetovo are full of cars with foreign plates), constituting not only a valuable source of income (remittances), but also operating as a conduit for a variety of ideas "coming into" the two cities.

Minority education, particularly in primary education, has been a central feature of NMK's education system, a legacy of the former Yugoslavia. The 2001 conflict further increased educational separation between the two main ethnic communities (Macedonians and Albanians), something that is also present in both Kumanovo and Tetovo. A notable educational feature of Tetovo that is lacking in Kumanovo is the 2001 establishment of two universities in the city, the State University of Tetova and the private South East European University, an initiative of the former OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoel. Although there are no quantitative data available, there can be little doubt that the two universities have had a beneficial effect not only on economic development (see, for example, the income brought into the city by students of the two universities), but also on the overall standards of living for a provincial city like Tetovo.

As the initial centre of Albanian political activism following NMK's declaration of independence in September 1991, Tetovo is associated with the establishment of new political parties, such as the Democratic Party of Albanians, as well as with wider Albanian political activism seeking to address deep-seated Albanian grievances regarding their position and treatment in NMK. During the 2001 crisis, Tetovo's political activism and its proximity to the Šar/Sharr Mountains and to Kosovo led the area around Tetovo to become one of the centres of clashes between the National Liberation Army (NLA) and the security forces, with fatalities occurring even inside Tetovo (Christidis, 2021). As expected, inter-ethnic relations were affected, with a flow of displaced persons – ethnic Albanians from villages fleeing to Kosovo and ethnic Macedonians from the city of Tetovo fleeing to Skopje. Kumanovo was affected less than Tetovo during the 2001 conflict, although hostilities took place north-west of the city, and at one point NLA forces were threatening to cut off water supplies to the city (ibid.). While there were no fatalities or displaced persons as in Tetovo, it is hard to define the precise impacts of the conflict on local inter-ethnic relations due to an absence of literature.

Local politics in Kumanovo have been dominated by ethnic Macedonian political parties, in particular the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDUM), which has won all the municipal elections since 2000. The current Mayor is Maksim Dimitrievski, a member of SDUM. Similarly, local politics in Tetovo have been dominated by Albanian political parties. Since 2001, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) has been the most successful political party in local politics, winning three terms in total, including the last two. In the local elections of October, 2021, Bilall Kasami of BESA Movement was elected the new Mayor of the Tetovo municipality replacing Teuta Arifi, of DUI who had won the last two mandates. .

The worst security crisis that Kumanovo experienced since 2001 occurred in May 2015, when in Divo Naselje, on the outskirts of Kumanovo, the police clashed with an armed group of ethnic Albanians, mainly from Kosovo, and 22 people lost their lives (eight police officers and 14 members of the armed group). According to NMK's Interior Ministry, "one of the most dangerous terrorist groups in the Balkans has been neutralised" (The Guardian, 2015), although the timing of the whole operation, when NMK was in the midst of a deep political crisis, generated a lot of speculation about the real motive behind this episode. In the region of Tetovo itself, the most serious crisis occurred in November 2007 when the police clashed with an armed ethnic Albanian group headed by Ramadan Shitij and Lirim Jakupi, an ex-UÇK (Kosovo Liberation Army) veteran, who was eventually arrested in Kosovo in September of 2010, and considered involved in criminal activities (Marusic, 2010).

Kumanovo (like Skopje, Struga and Gostivar) was part of the so-called "Operation Cell" that took place on 5 August 2015 and resulted in nine arrests, mostly of returned foreign fighters. In the summer of 2016, Operation Cell was followed up by Operation Cell 2, in which four former foreign fighters, aged 23 to 38, were arrested. Several months later, Operation Cell 3 was conducted in cooperation with the Turkish police, when five Macedonian citizens, three from Kumanovo and two from Skopje, were arrested in Istanbul on their way to Syria (Šutarov, 2017).

More recently, there were two police operations "against terrorism and extremism" involving persons from Kumanovo. The first took place on September 1, 2020, when the police arrested three persons accused of planning "terrorist attacks" (NMK-MIA, 2020). In 2019, the three persons had established an armed organisation ideologically close to ISIS and were planning to organise a series of attacks in NMK. On 27 December 2020, the police arrested another eight members of the organisation, five from Kumanovo and three from Skopje.

3   Community vulnerability to radicalisation in the Western Balkans

This section outlines key findings with respect to the drivers fuelling "online and offline radicalisation" in Kosovo and North Macedonia based on the data gathered at the selected field sites. It identifies the dominant narratives in the online and offline spaces fuelling radicalisation as well as the contexts in which they occur. Since narratives and drivers of extremism are often laced with gendered notions of what is considered as "acceptable behaviour", this section also explores the way in which gender norms and practices shape narratives in online and offline media influencing radicalisation. Given the recent historical and political context in Kosovo and the region, the role of the legacy of war and conflict will also be examined – especially with regards to its potential to power extremist narratives propaganda online while also instigating violence. The first part of this section examines the case of Kosovo, followed by the case of North Macedonia.

3.1   Community vulnerability to radicalisation in Kosovo

So, there were also statements made by Serbian and Albanian politicians who have spread hate speech and ignited ethnic conflicts in the north. Ethnic extremism is not directly related to religious or Islamist extremism for sure, because there is no evidence to prove this. However, failure to address the problems of the past, such as payment of reparations, finding the missing, punishing criminals, apology, and other problems are keeping radical elements of hatred and hatred between Serbs and Albanians alive, and they are directly inciting and increasing nationalist extremism in Kosovo. The Kosovo war was separated from religion, and religious extremism had almost nothing to do with the Kosovo war. Nothing connected the

This section draws on analysis of the current research as well as on notes from focus groups and interviews conducted in the framework of the PAVE research in Kosovo. In addition, KCSS has developed a database that is used to track online trends of extremism and disinformation. The database provides disaggregated data on radical rhetoric on online platforms (covering Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok and traditional media). The section will make use of specific content from the database related to religious-based and ethno-political extremism to offer a better understanding of the extent and framework by which online radical peer-group socialisation is consolidated. More broadly, this section establishes that **traditional media in Kosovo (e.g. TV channels) remain more influential in terms of shaping opinion, but the online channels present a more potent mechanism for the dissemination of information and community mobilisation on a particular issue**, including radicalisation. Specifically, the key findings include the following:

Lingering uncertainty over the political status of Kosovo and the lack of a clear European Union integration perspective give impetus to extremist rhetoric and influence. A particular factor of community vulnerability in Kosovo has been the **disappointment and disillusionment with the European integration process**, which initially anchored the country's path towards reforms and gave citizens hope for a better future as part of the EU. However, in recent years, cracks in the Euro-Atlantic consensus in Kosovo have started to emerge (Maliqi & Ilazi, 2021). Kosovo citizens remain the only nationals in South-East Europe who have not been granted visa liberalisation by the European Union, although the European Commission recommended visa liberalisation in 2016 and confirmed in 2018 that Kosovo fulfilled all the conditions. Some Member States, such as France and Netherlands, have rejected visa liberalisation for Kosovo on the grounds that there is still work to be done on the rule of law and the fight against corruption. However, the majority of Kosovar citizens do not believe this is the reason; 39% think it is the result of some EU Member States' prejudices towards Kosovo and 25% believe it results from discrimination (Ilazi, 2020), and the PAVE fieldwork has shown that they think the real reason is that Kosovo is a majority Muslim country (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-South, 2021). The research shows that visa liberalisation would be an important mechanism to prevent and counter radicalisation and violent extremism in Kosovo (Kursani, 2015). The Kosovar citizens see themselves as unwanted by the EU, and this forms an important part of the narrative that is used by ethno-political and religious radical networks to promote anti-Western sentiment (Maliqi & Ilazi, 2021). A respondent from North Mitrovica noted that vulnerability to radicalisation comes primary from poverty and political insecurities related to the future (Community member, North Mitrovica, 2021).

Poverty and economic deprivation make individuals more susceptible to extremist influences. There are now increased concerns in light of **announcements of cuts in EU and US funding for development in Kosovo**. Among focus group participants and interviewees, deprivation is considered as an exacerbating factor for radicalisation. As a focus group participant in North Mitrovica notes, "it is mainly the economy; the greyness of the economy affects the intensification of any kind of radicalisation among the population in Kosovo", while depicting youth as more susceptible to any kind of recruitment and indoctrination (NGO activist, North Mitrovica, 2021). Moreover, another respondent notes, "Mitrovica

has been transformed from one of the more industrially developed municipalities in Kosovo before the war, to one of the poorest municipalities after the war, and poverty is making its citizens vulnerable to extremist currents" (NGO activist, South Mitrovica, 2021).

In Kosovo, the **focus on religious radicalisation has overshadowed other forms of radicalisation**, including ethno-political radicalisation. The fieldwork in Kosovo shows that most people feel that while religious radicalisation is a problem for Kosovo, it "was blown out of all proportion" for the purposes of the political agenda to undermine the legitimacy of Kosovo as a young country in the international community. They mention as an example the failure of the West to problematise the fact that the number of Serbian foreign fighters going to Ukraine to join terrorist groups out of religious conviction exceeded the number of Kosovar Muslims who travelled to Syria and Iraq (Visoka & Beha, 2021). PAVE research suggests that **in the online domain, ethno-political radical communities are dominant**. These communities "represent a continuation of the politics of the 1990s that draw on historical myths to promote as well as justify violence, especially against particular ethnic groups" (KCSS; ELIAMEP; Sfax, 2020). In the case of Kosovo, this manifested in **heightened ethnic tensions between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs**.

Ethno-nationalist radicalisation is fuelled by failures to deal effectively with the past, inciting polarising political rhetoric. Specifically, the **unresolved legacy of the war between Kosovo and Serbia** is seen as a key factor contributing to radicalisation that leads to violent extremism. The PAVE fieldwork and existing literature (see Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2017) show that the Kosovo war in the 1990s and the lack of a process for dealing with the legacy of this conflict remain the most radicalising factors in Kosovo. The overwhelming presence of hate in the public discourse between Kosovo and Serbia also adds to the religious divisions, whereby **religion is taken as a layer to add to "othering" and promoting differences between communities**. Furthermore, ethno-nationalism is fuelled by conflicting ideas or a "dual reality" whereby members of the Kosovo Serb community continue to deny the reality of Kosovo's existence as a sovereign state, while also denying or distorting historical facts to support their worldview. One of the legacies of the war between Kosovo and Serbia is Serbia's active rejection of Kosovo as an independent state and this shapes radical narratives about Serbia as a malign actor among Kosovar Albanians. Kosovar Albanians see Serbia as the enemy and that extends to some degree to their perception of their fellow Serbian citizens in Kosovo: "we see the Serbian state as a state that has ruled us, as a conquering state which has committed genocide and terror in our country, whereas the Serbian community who do not see Kosovo as an actual state do not accept Kosovo's authority in areas where they live, giving way to ethno-political radicalism." (NGO-Leader-Mitrovica-South, 2021). They also note that for middle-aged or older generations of Kosovo Serbs who grew up with former leaders of their own ethnicity it is difficult to accept the new reality of Kosovo as a sovereign state (ibid.).

Storytelling presents an important, although under-researched medium for perpetuating ethno-national radicalisation. **Storytelling**, which serves to maintain a collective memory of victimhood and vilify the "other" group, was agreed by many respondents to be one of the main push factors of radicalisation leading to violent extremism. In more practical terms, this means parents or older generations speaking to younger generations about how malign the intentions of the other groups are, and cautioning them to distrust members of those groups, especially on the basis of ethnicity. By referring to

efforts to deal with the past and calls for Serbia to apologise for war crimes, a young Kosovo Serb notes: "They are not calling for us to deal with the past by discerning what happened to everyone, but by humiliating those who have remained" (North Mitrovica, 2021). Another adds that "there is no right-wing belief among Serbs, no real right-wing idealism. When the Germans lost World War I, you know how that resulted in Nazism, so we were in a similar situation, we lost three wars in the 90s", speaking about how as a "losing side, you have a tendency to regain what you lost", continuing that there are efforts to push Serbs to admit what they consider "non-existent guilt" and to "understand that the myth is Srebrenica, the myth is genocide, the myth is its crimes, oversized crimes" (North Mitrovica, 2021).

Lack of quality education that fosters critical thinking is seen as a facilitating factor for radicalisation. The current **education system**, which is characterised by outdated teaching methods that do not encourage critical thinking or effectively address social issues, creates vulnerability to radicalisation. There is an **interconnected relationship between education and social media peer-group radicalisation**. Education and media literacy are seen as the overarching factor that hinders progress in addressing online peer-group radicalisation (Focus-Group-Podujeva, 2021) (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-South, 2021). As emphasised by a municipal official in South Mitrovica, "lack of education pertaining to social media use and scarce critical thinking modules for youth directly impact the level of radicalisation at the national and local level" (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-South, 2021). The view on this linkage was consistent in other municipalities as well. In Podujeva, the role of education, it was argued, is indicative of how individuals engage through online peer-group socialisation. The main argument here maintained that "a society which has a good level of education subsequently uses social media to build [social cohesion]", whereas "a society with a low level of education uses social media to enhance [social cleavages]" (Focus-Group-Podujeva, 2021). As a respondent notes, "quality education is one of the most pressing challenges that we face as aspects such as media training play an important part in thinking critically and strengthening efforts to prevent the spread of radical elements" (South Mitrovica, 2021). Furthermore, as a youth activist notes, "since 2014 when we started researching teaching in schools, we were not able to find experts/sociologists who are able to treat or talk effectively about social issues as part of civic education classes, which could also include topics of extremism, religion, citizenship, etc. – and this is our weakest point" (South Mitrovica, 2021).

Lack of good governance and accountability creates a vacuum in services at community level, leaving space for other actors to fill. Lack of government funds for prevention of radicalisation makes P/CVE efforts unsustainable in the absence of government readiness to respond to the needs of local communities, with the result that the municipalities of Podujeva and Mitrovica became vulnerable to the influence of alternative actors such as religious organisations, external actors or other entities for service provision in the community. It is important to mention that in some instances, such influence did not stir up extremism, such as **the role of religious leaders in Podujeva**; rather, it **had the opposite effect**. For instance, in light of the threat of radicalisation, **religious leaders in Podujeva chose to self-mobilise and coordinate with diverse members of the community against negative influences in their municipality**. Their mobilisation against violent extremism took place on a voluntary basis and was more akin to active citizenship. However, respondents highlighted the ongoing need for more government-supported projects in their respective municipalities, such as the **need to build sports facilities**,

which are considered as an important way of keeping the youth – as a group vulnerable to radicalisation – more engaged. Due to the lack of such government support, space for other actors, including malicious ones, widens. Moreover, as a respondent notes, **most funds for preventing and countering violent extremism come from international organisations and some diplomatic missions in Kosovo**, with no funding from the government, thus making it difficult for municipalities to implement rehabilitation and reintegration projects (South Mitrovica, 2021).

The **media** are viewed as a factor driving radicalisation due to their **rampant misinformation, poor editorial practices and biased or sensational reporting**. In an environment that is characterised by a lack of quality education, the role of the media as a source of information becomes especially relevant. In this context, respondents consider that the media have had a detrimental impact in the spread of violent extremism, even if that was done inadvertently in many cases. This issue is closely linked with the fact that **many media reports are prepared by journalists who are not specialised in the reporting of security or terrorism-related topics** and therefore lack the proper expertise to professionally report on the matter. As a respondent highlights, "these journalists sometimes publish unconfirmed information, spread extremist propaganda without being aware and often wrongly use terms related to extremism – failing to properly contextualise them" (NGO representative, South Mitrovica, 2021). For instance, another respondent adds that "the media give a lot of room to people who misinform the public and often have no authority or expertise to speak about religion" (South Mitrovica, 2021). National media discussing ethnic relations or religion with individuals who are not recognised as experts on the subject or are seen to be significantly one-sided are perceived as agitating by the respondents. This seemed to be particularly the case among the Muslim community, who feel that people who do not truly understand the Muslim religion or are perceived to be biased speak with apparent authority about Islam in TV debates, which makes members of the Muslim community feel that their religion is purposely misrepresented by the media. On the other hand, a respondent notes that "the media here have made imams celebrities, giving publicity to everything they say and making it possible for them to have a greater following than the mayor of the municipality" (South Mitrovica, 2021). Another respondent laments that "there are no more free, independent media" (North Mitrovica, 2021).

Social media are overwhelmingly considered as a driver of vulnerability, although cases of radicalisation exclusively through online platforms are not referenced specifically. In Kosovo, research has consistently found a **direct link between online radicalisation and participation in the wars in Syria and Iraq**, which also introduced Kosovo to the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). The link between online media and FTFs is also emphasised by those interviewed during the PAVE fieldwork. For instance, a civil society activist from the municipality of Podujeva argues that: "Most young people in Kosovo, even before going to Syria, had firmer connections with social networks, not with classical media. Imams and some people who give lectures that are not very traditional and some who are even extremist can be easily found on **TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat**." (Civil-Society-Podujeva, 2021). While local institutions and NGOs have noted that religiously inspired radicalisation has shifted in intensity since the start of the crisis in Syria, networks of individuals continue to make use of online platforms to amplify hate speech and extremist views. In 2014, Kosovo's security institutions began targeted operations against religiously inspired radicalisation, which led to the arrest of radical preachers, and a number of influential online platforms were closed, such as *"Al-Muwahhidun Shqip", "Shpata e Mëshiruesit" [Sword of the Merciful], "Shehidat e Ballkanit" [Balkans Shahids], "Ke durim o shpirti*

im" [Be patient my soul] and "*Thirja në Tehuid" [Call to Teuhid]* (Balaj & Kelmendi, 2017). The interviews from the PAVE research suggest that as the **online domain remains unregulated or self-regulated and the response from institutions to online radicalisation is limited in scope and effectiveness**. A professor of sociology from North Mitrovica in Kosovo is convinced that the lack of any kind of control of online information makes it a very effective tool for radicalisation (Professor-of-sociology, 2021).

Dealing with online radicalisation is a major challenge for Kosovo. As of 2021, there are an estimated 1.7 million internet users and 1.1 million active social media users in a country with an estimated 1.9 million people (Kemp, 2021). The significantly high number of social media users shows that Kosovars are dependent on online channels for accessibility and delivery of information. As noted by a high-ranking public official in Kosovo, "social media plays a very important role in Kosovo's society, to the extent that they play a crucial role similar to that of a [fourth estate]" (Public-Official-Podujeva, 2021). While this remark might speak to ideals of Kosovo's swift development into an "open society", it also has a significant practical implication for religious-based and ethno-national online radicalisation. In relation to the influx of Kosovar citizens joining the fighting in Syria and Iraq, this connection has become obvious and noted across discussions with local and central stakeholders. The current discourse on this trend highlights that "the majority of youth in Kosovo, prior to going to Syria, have developed the majority of their radical ties through social media, not traditional media" (ibid.). And, specifically in Kosovo, **Facebook has been identified as the main source of access to radicalised content due to its ability to host a range of interactive online tools, including video content, messaging, closed community group creation and networking**. For instance, the South Mitrovica interviews conducted during the PAVE fieldwork show that there is the perception that Facebook is the primary social media network that enables dissemination of radical content and propagates violent extremist rhetoric (Journalist-Mitrovica-South, PAVE interviews in Mitrovica South, 2021). Similarly, accounting for the influx of religious-based radicalism in the period after 2014, local perspectives highlight that "the basis for the spread of extremism was through social media, especially through closed community-based groups on Facebook" (Youth-Activist-Mitrovica-South, 2021). When discussing the effect of other social media platforms, there seems to be a convergence among stakeholders in recognising that "Twitter can be disregarded due to its low use in Kosovo; however, TikTok, as of recently, and obviously Facebook continue to be the main platforms that target individuals above 25 and seek to radicalise them" (ibid.). Similar trends can be seen in the context of ethno-national political radicalism finding its roots in a historical revisionist discourse of Serbian nationalism (Kelly, 2019). For instance, a Facebook profile of Vladislav Dajković features several posts that aim to spread disinformation in relation to NATO's humanitarian intervention in 1999 to end the war in Kosovo (Bellamy, 2002). This individual was publicly noted by Kosovo's Prime Minister as an instigator of violence.[5] Furthermore, there are two prominent individuals that actively promote and shape far-right extremist narratives against Kosovo. Boris Malagurski, a Serbian-Canadian film director, made a documentary film to oppose Kosovo's bid for membership in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),[6]

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[5] For more information, see this Euronews article on the subject: https://euronews.al/en/kosovo/2021/09/26/kurti-people-with-criminal-backgrounds-are-participating-in-jarinja-and-bernjak-protests/

[6] For more information see this Balkan Insight article: https://balkaninsight.com/2017/09/18/serbian-movie-about-kosovo-sparks-new-tensions-09-18-2017/

and prepared other media material against Kosovo for the 'RT', a Russian state-controlled media out-let. Arno Guyon, a French national and far-right activist, who was also appointed to a government position in Serbia, has established a non-government organisation, called 'Solidarité Kosovo' that ac-tively promotes extremist far-right narratives against Kosovo, under the guise of humanitarian work, and pushes revisionism of the past.[7]

The effective use of narratives and counter-narratives is an essential part of the existing research and conceptual discussions on (de)radicalisation (Freedman, 2006). In the framework of the PAVE project, the cognitive aspect of online (de)radicalisation poses one of the most critical challenges to its effective regulation (KCSS; ELIAMEP; Sfax, 2020). In the case of Kosovo, while the government has implemented measures to counter radicalisation and prevent it from leading to violent extremism, these mainly con-sist of securitised responses to a rather complex challenge, **and public institutions have yet to formu-late an effective policy concerning online (de)radicalisation**. The government response to dealing with radical content online has been to close down such sites, but this has not solved the problem, as the authors of such content simply create an alternative online presence (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-South, 2021).

Narratives of religious-based radicalisation tap into war-related grievances by drawing parallels be-tween the Syrian conflict and the Kosovo war, while also inciting hate towards the democratic system. The plight of civilians in Syria and Iraq, including **moral-shock campaigns online showing disturbing images or videos of repressive actions by the government in Syria against civilians, has been the single most important narrative leading people to adopt radical views** and even in some cases to travel there to join the fight. For Kosovars, the wounds of the brutal conflict between Kosovo and Serbia during the 1990s were fresh and many could relate to the plight of the civilians in Syria under the tyrannical regime of Bashar al-Assad. In this way, the **"IS narrative exploits Kosovo-specific vul-nerabilities** related as the post-war society grapples with forging an identity, past grievances pertain-ing to the 1998-1999 war such as wartime rape and the perceived bias against Muslims to incite re-cruits from Kosovo to join its war efforts in the Middle East" (Kraja, 2017, p. 6). A study from the Koso-var Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) shows that **YouTube channels with videos of alleged atrocities committed against civilians played a key role in pushing people to travel to Syria and Iraq** (Balaj & Kelmendi, 2017). This was also confirmed from the PAVE fieldwork in Kosovo. Local imams in the mu-nicipality of Mitrovica South believe that fake information that was widespread on online channels during the war in Syria and Iraq has done more to radicalise people in Kosovo than any preacher or individual could have done through sermons or other direct contact (Religious-Leader-Mitrovica-South, 2021). In the municipality of Podujeva, citizens were targeted by online videos on YouTube and Facebook "showing Albanian-speaking fighters in the periphery of Damascus being greeted by Angels in support of their jihad against the regime and the West" (Religious-Leader-Podujeva, 2021). Addi-tionally, local officials noted that with the proliferation of newer social media platforms such as TikTok, "lectures by radical imams are now even more readily accessible than before" (NGO-Leader-Podujeva,

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[7] For more information read these two articles: Article from Balkan Insight "French Connection: 'Humanitarian' Far-Right Claims Kosovo as Cautionary Tale" - https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/16/french-connection-human-itarian-far-right-claims-kosovo-as-cautionary-tale/; Article from Radio Free Europe "Arno Gujon - od ekstremne desnice do funkcije u Vladi Srbije [Arno Gujon - from the extreme right to the position in the Government of Serbia]" - https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/arno-gujon-od-ekstremne-desnice-do-funkcije-u-vladi-srbije/30972389.html

2021). In South Mitrovica, it seems the audience was targeted with videos on Facebook and YouTube that highlighted "the life in the Caliphate, as well as the targeted violence against Muslims and their pleads for help" (Security-Expert-Mitrovica, 2021).

Interestingly, radical narratives on online platforms are not only specific to the plight of Muslims in Syria. **Similar narratives on victimisation can also be seen in relation to Iranian influence in the country**. Following the US operation that led to the killing of high-ranking Iranian official Qasem Soleimani, radical content was evident on social media (namely Facebook). A Kosovar woman and Islamic scholar, via a Facebook post in response to Soleimani's killing, noted that "by killing the man of the house, you have killed the whole family, therefore, revenge without borders is obligatory" (RFE, 2020). Although she was later arrested by the Kosovo police, her stature in the community, coupled with a significant social media following, offered a platform to other Kosovar citizens joining in the violent rhetoric.

However, it is important to note that religious-based online radicalisation is not limited to narratives of victimisation. The KCSS research on radical social media content highlights that **religious-based communities on Facebook often engage in hate rhetoric aimed at the political system**. In the context of the most recent municipal elections in Kosovo in October 2021, a number of Facebook posts were highlighted in the KCSS disinformation database related to religious-based radicalism. A recurring feature among these posts is disillusionment with Kosovo's democratic governance system, with proponents of radical rhetoric calling for a complete "boycott of voting" as according to holy scripture, this is "part of a democratic system that disregards Islamic faith" (KCSS-Database, 2021). Although these narratives do not directly call for violent action, they continue to reflect a growing trend in Kosovo that is partly a response to political developments.

In Kosovo, both state and non-state actors (mainly civil society) have been actively involved in implementing **counter-narrative campaigns against online radicalisation**. The government of Kosovo, in cooperation with Hedayah, has drafted the Countering Violent Extremism National Action Plan: Communications Strategy as a means to "synchronise" online and offline communications with the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism (2015-2020) (Hedayah, 2020). Although this was drafted in agreement with Kosovo's National Coordinator's office for CT and CVE, the government has done little to follow up on the objectives and actions identified in the communications action plan. The strategy rightly shifts the government approach from a "security-centred" strategy to a more holistic and cross-sectoral engagement that focuses on awareness and prevention. Similarly, there are a number of community-level undertakings that have sought to offer online counter-narratives to the well-consolidated and established radical online networks. One of the key findings that was highlighted throughout communities in Podujeva and South Mitrovica was the **engagement of moderate imams**. In both cases, local stakeholders underlined the importance of imams in enhancing understanding of the "nation" and "patriotism" as potential counter-narratives to religious-based radicalisation (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-South, 2021). For instance, in Podujeva, mention was made of Idriz Bilalli, whose moderate stance and emphasis on Albanian identity and "nation" are readily accessible online (through YouTube lectures) and serve as a crucial alternative to current extremist rhetoric building on cultural ties with Syria and Iraq (Public-Official-Podujeva, 2021).

While there has been mention of the institutional counter-narrative strategies employed by the Islamic Community in Kosovo, local stakeholders have been hesitant to applaud their impact on dismantling online radicalisation. This was particularly evident in discussions of the online impact of counter-narratives at the community level. The example of the **FolTash online portal** (with a presence on Facebook and YouTube), which was **developed by a former head of the Islamic Community in Podujeva municipality**, is seen as to some degree effective counter-narrative engagement at the community level, as opposed to the potential ineffectiveness of a similar approach at the institutional level by the Islamic Community of Kosovo. Although FolTash has relatively low engagement on YouTube, its impact on Facebook is significant and important to counter radicalisation narratives (Education-Official-Podujeva, 2021). FolTash's online footprint on Facebook features diverse content on a range of topics including religious tolerance, comprehensive analysis of religious scripture and the situation of VE and radicalisation. Those interviewed during the PAVE fieldwork have recognised the positive impact of **the "Real Jihad" platform, initiated by the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, for providing a window into the devastating reality of life under the Islamic Caliphate** (Youth-Activist-Mitrovica-South, 2021).

In the context of ethno-political radicalisation, there is a similar observation of narratives pertaining to victimisation and disillusionment with the political system, which are centred on the unresolved dispute between Serbia and Kosovo over the declaration of the latter's independence in 2008. Worryingly, ethno-political narratives among the Kosovo Serb community include a denial and/or distortion of historical facts, especially related to the Kosovo war and its casualties. Kosovo Serbs oppose the authority of the Kosovar public institutions, because they see them as institutions of the Albanian majority community, although the Kosovar constitution gives broad political rights and representation to the non-majority communities, including Kosovo Serbs. Online narratives that promote ethno-political radicalisation are often based on the public perception that the Western-led international community applies "double standards" toward the Serbs (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-North, 2021). This is often also related to the war crimes committed during the wars of the 1990s, and the perception that the international community tries to convince the Serbs to accept responsibility for crimes which they believe were not committed, such as the genocide at Srebrenica, as illustrated by this quote from the focus group discussion in the municipality of Mitrovica North: "The myth is Srebrenica, the Kosovo myth is not a myth at all, the Kosovo myth is the foundation of the Serbian identity. We even see from the issue of the Battle of Kosovo that Albanians use every opportunity to even artificially satanise Serbs" (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-North, 2021). Kosovo Serbs tend to view the international community's engagement and Kosovo's political decision-making as a means to continue "humiliating the defeated side [Serbs]" (ibid.). What is striking is that denial of the Srebrenica genocide is echoed also by supposedly well-educated and informed individuals, such as high school teachers. For instance, a sociology teacher from the municipality of Mitrovica North made the following comment: "Certainly, all Muslims believe in the myth of Srebrenica, where they say that 15,000 Muslims were killed and it was not even a thousand. There is another myth about Racak, which has been proven to be untrue […] Racak is especially used in the media and Srebrenica, it is especially used by the Western media who are to blame for that. So, these things that are happening in Western countries, especially in Germany, need to happen, because they ignore that radical extremism and help themselves to wash away their involvement in the bombing of Kosovo and Bosnia." (Professor-of-sociology, 2021). These strong sentiments that deny genocide and war crimes that were committed in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina,

suggest that, at least a segment of the Serbian community in Kosovo, do not recognise the brutality of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, who was indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for former-Yugoslavia (ICTY) on 61 charges of crimes against humanity, including genocide.

A key aspect of online peer group socialisation relates to how networks of individuals build upon community linkages and interact with each other. These networks have been formed with the aim of ensuring that targeted discourses are maintained and supported through active engagement online. In this sense, (de)radicalising, as established above, not only relies on mobilising around specific community grievances; it also requires that target audiences actively voice and participate in shaping them online. In Kosovo especially, there is **extensive interaction among different age groups (not only limited to youth) across various open and closed social media platforms**; however, religious-based online peer group socialisation has significantly decreased in recent years. Despite this, the research shows that **since 2014 there has been a continued, albeit lower-intensity online peer-group socialisation** around particular topics such as "discrimination against Muslims, the decline of the voice of Adhan, the issue of headscarves, the demolition of mosques, lack of mosques, etc." (Balaj & Kelmendi, 2017). An important finding is that, despite antisemitism being a popular topic for online peer-group socialisation, in Kosovo this is limited. A study on antisemitism in the Western Balkans suggests that the "level of antisemitism in Kosovo seems to be limited. Antisemitism in the media and society has been consistently monitored by state authorities. Some antisemitic sentiment and conspiracy theories exist in small segments of society" (Përteshi, 2021, p. 98).

PAVE research suggests that in the case of Kosovo, religious-based radical content is more likely to be the subject of intermittent and controlled closed group discussions. Popular online pages in Kosovo that promoted religious radicalisation (such as "Ummeti i Teuhidit", "Agimi i vertete" [True Dawn] and "Islami eshte Hak") are no longer easily identifiable due to the rapid action on the part of the authorities to limit their viewership (Balaj & Kelmendi, 2017). During their period of popularity, these online pages, usually on Facebook, featured continuous engagement by groups of individuals in supporting and openly advocating for radical ideologies. **Religious-based online socialisation has been greatly limited due to the perception of monitoring and potential intervention by the authorities and, therefore, the PAVE focus group discussions suggest that religious-based radicalisation has once again shifted offline** (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-South, 2021). The same cannot be said about religious-based counter-narratives that can be found online. As briefly mentioned earlier, the FolTash platform has gained significant traction among peer groups seeking access to content that deals with and debunks the radical narratives. While FolTash has a multi-platform online presence, it seems to be most effectively utilised through Facebook.

In conclusion, online peer-group socialisation will likely remain a key source in disseminating radical ideologies. In Kosovo, **social media interactions have shown to have direct effects on the spread of radical ideologies**. Although security institutions have well-developed capacities to identify, address and sanction the proliferation of online radical communities, radical individuals continue to operate through well-networked closed groups. Stakeholders have identified that religious-based online radicalisation has significantly decreased recently; however, loosely based networks of closed (i.e. Facebook) groups continue to exist**.** Ethno-national political radicalisation, on the other hand, has seen an exponential rise and can be traced directly in relation to recent political developments. In both cases,

communities tend to mobilise around a radical and shared understanding of marginalisation (victimisation) and disillusionment with political systems. Local-level perceptions have highlighted the strong effect of social media in drawing in disadvantaged youth and forming radical community linkages. While narratives in strengthening religious-based radicalism are well-consolidated and formalised, **grassroots-led online counter-narratives** have been noted to have had an unprecedented effect in mobilising communities around more moderate narratives. Ethno-political radicalisation is increasing and continues to be problematic to counter effectively. Competing inter-community narratives online are maintained through continuous engagement by individuals seeking to marginalise perspectives along ethnic lines. These community linkages are often maintained by "celebrity-type" influencers who give a voice to a general discourse aimed at the victimisation of ethnic minorities and a perceived lack of government inclusion. Their ability to convene and strengthen online community ties has, in turn, promoted continuous individual engagement/responses.

3.2 Community vulnerability to radicalisation in North Macedonia

The key findings with respect to the drivers fuelling radicalisation in North Macedonia are based on the data gathered by the ELIAMEP research team at the selected field sites, notably Tetovo and Kumanovo. More specifically, the team organised four focus group discussions, two in each municipality, and conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with civil society activists/members, politicians, religious community leaders, public servants working in the police, security departments, education and social work, journalists and other media professionals, academics and other experts. For the analysis, the team adopted a comparative research method with a cross-municipal study that included desk research and an interpretative approach to fieldwork data. The team has partially used the NVIVO software for the analysis of the fieldwork data.

In parallel to the analysis of the data from the fieldwork, the research team conducted an 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 Albanian. The online content found to be supporting violent extremism was analysed by conducting a structured content analysis. The online content was included in a database containing information on the type/format of content associated with the identified source, title and key protagonists, affiliation (if known), physical location (if known) and language. Then, using textual content analysis, the key messages and narratives were analysed and categorised according to the type of extremism. The interactions with the target audience (shares and reactions) were quantified and the comments on the content were analysed using three categories: supportive, neutral or critical of the content.

"There is a kind of extremism in Tetovo, but not at the high level that it was at before. Tetovo has no problem with Islamic radicalisation. Political extremism is more of a problem. When it comes to Foreign Fighters, Tetovo comes last on the list." *(Focus-Group-Tetovo, 2021)*

The situation in North Macedonia regarding violent extremism is determined by the country's **history of ethnic rivalries** and by the ideologies to which ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians have been exposed since the 2001 conflict. These factors have produced **three types of extremist trends: ethno-nationalism, religiously motivated extremism, and violent right-wing extremism**. These extremisms are interdependent, contributing to reciprocal dehumanisation, incitement of violence and polarisation, fed by the country's legacy of ethnic tensions and conflictual politics. Almost all interviewees stated that radicalisation as a process and violent extremism as the result is enabled, fuelled and shaped by a number of factors and drivers that operate in a particular context at both micro and macro levels in the municipalities of Tetovo and Kumanovo, affecting both ethnic groups (Focus-Group-Tetovo, 2021).

Religiously motivated radicalisation is found to play a role among both Orthodox Macedonians and Muslim Albanians and is primarily associated with the spread of violent extremist ideologies and inciting hate by radical imams and priests, as well as with the foreign fighters (FFs) phenomenon. Extremism continues to be present in the city of Tetovo and the surrounding areas but not at the high levels of the past.

The interviewees in Tetovo are not seeing violent Islamist extremism as a "problem" for their city, even though many of them accept the existence of **madrasas run by imams who endorse radical views and the presence of a "sect/organisation", presumably Salafist, which operates with foreign funding**. The fieldwork revealed that Tetovo has not remained immune to this kind of extremism, with some of the 156 NMK citizens from with region who joined the paramilitary formations in Syria and Iraq, although the number was smaller compared to other regions of the country, including Kumanovo (Civil-society-representative-Skopje, 2021). Even though the FF flows from NMK have effectively ceased, this does not necessarily mean that support for extremist ideas in specific communities, including Tetovo and Kumanovo, has dissipated. Rather, those extremists who are violently inclined no longer have a foreign outlet, which raises important policy questions regarding the local threat landscape and the potentiality of those individuals to conduct domestic attacks and incite other members of the community (Stojkovski & Kalajdziovski, 2018).

The situation in the country is becoming more convoluted and challenging with regard to the **return of FTFs and their families from Syria and Iraq**. About 100 fighters have already returned to North Macedonia from the conflict zones, including a small number from the surrounding areas of Tetovo and Kumanovo, with the security services keeping track of them to keep the threat level low (Civil-society-representative-Skopje, 2021). In terms of manifestation, the situation differs significantly between the two municipalities. So far, Tetovo has not faced any public manifestation of religiously inspired extremism. Moreover, there is no sign of visible recidivism among FF returnees in the region. This is not the case with Kumanovo, where four FF returnees, after their release from prison, formed a new cell under the name of "Lions from the Balkans" or "Lions from Kumanovo" in the area of Menkinova Koliba and began planning a terrorist attack in Skopje (Marusic, North Macedonia Arrests Three Terrorism Suspects, Seizes Explosives, 2020).

The most concerning development is that some of these individuals passed through rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) programmes to become bakers or locksmiths. Some of the returnees have not managed to reintegrate into society, many of them only pretending that they are integrated. The lack

of well-established R&R programmes, especially in prisons, to deal with the returnees increases the possibilities that these extremists will return to violence in their communities. The current reintegration system does not make full use of the capacities of state and non-state actors and does not deliver satisfactory results, which is reflected in a high rate of recidivism (Ilijevski & Savovska, 2021).

Ethno-nationalism, political extremism and sport hooliganism are perceived as a significant security and stability threat in Tetovo. The inter-ethnic relations in Tetovo and Kumanovo have improved significantly since the 2001 insurgency. However, the **local communities are struggling with two separate forms of ethno-nationalism created by the ongoing misunderstandings that exist between the two dominant ethnic groups, the ethnic Macedonians, and the ethnic Albanians** (Mojanchevska, Jovanchikj, & Musliu, 2020). Football violence between the ultras of ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian football clubs has increased community vulnerability to radicalisation.

In contrast to Tetovo, interviewees in Kumanovo see religiously inspired extremism as one of the main threats in their society even though other forms of extremism exist in the city, notably ethno-national and **far-right pro-Russian extremism** that has inspired young people to fight in Ukraine (Security-expert-Kumanovo, 2021). These forms of extremism continue to be underestimated by society, the state and international actors. While communities with indications for violent Islamist extremism are particularly targeted by P/CVE programmes, other forms of extremism, notably ethno-nationalism and violent right-wing extremism, often exist in the same communities but are addressed to a far lesser extent.

Tetovo is considered to be more resilient than Kumanovo. It belongs to the Polog region which has good economic indicators, while Kumanovo is part of the North-East region, one of the poorest in NMK, a situation exploited by extremists. In addition, the religious community of Tetovo is considered to have more control over religious life and the operation of self-proclaimed imams compared to Kumanovo, where radical imams like Sadullah Bajrami are teaching in the surrounding villages and are very popular among some sections of the community. In both municipalities, institutions have assembled local committees/bodies to deal specifically with the issue of radicalisation and extremism in their municipal settings. This demonstrates a local concern for the issue and shows that an approach for dealing with it exists, not only at national level.

With the recent events related to **the Tirana Platform[8], the Prespa Agreement and the developments with Bulgaria**, ethnic Macedonians tend to feel that their identity is under threat. All three events are sometimes portrayed as interrelated and part of a "master plan" to destroy the Macedonian nation and divide the state territory among the neighbouring countries. This is further exacerbated by the display of flags showing Greater Albania or Ilirida, implying a desire to redraw boundaries along ethnic lines, leading to reciprocal radicalisation. In turn, such a sentiment gives rise to organisations, platforms and documents (manifestos, charters, open letters) whose goal is to "end all injustices against Macedonians" at the individual and collective level. Some Facebook pages call for "Macedonians to stand up for themselves" against the global conspiracy and attempts to falsify history, and encourage

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[8] For the Albanian position on this term, see "Rama: Tirana platform is a myth created by politicians", available at: https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/04/19/rama-tirana-platform-is-a-myth-created-by-politicians/

Macedonians to stay "true to the cause, fight and die for the homeland". In this context, **ethno-national extremism overlaps with political extremism** which calls for an appropriate answer and approach to deal with the "traitors". Usually, the concept of "treason" relates to the SDSM, the centre-left party currently in government, as the most active political stakeholder in these events. Its political leadership is often accused of courting Albanian voters, being hostile to Macedonian patriots and willing to "sell" the Macedonian identity and state.[9] However, VMRO-DPMNE has also been often targeted for being passive and not undertaking more radical actions to prevent the name change, the Law on Languages, the census, etc. The so-called Macedonian patriotic associations therefore denounce all the mainstream Macedonian political parties for their lack of willingness or ability to protect the nation-state.

In the offline space, these ideas are represented through the use of the United Macedonia (Kutlesh/Vergina) flag and the map of Macedonia that incorporates parts of Greece, Bulgaria and Albania. These are also advocated by a marginal part of the political spectrum, including the parties United Macedonia led by Janko Bachev, Homeland Macedonia, a recently created faction of United Macedonia, and Vancho Shehtanski's Permanent Macedonian Radical Unification (TMRO). Occasionally, following certain events or marking anniversaries (such as the 27 April incidents), there are **peaceful protests** aimed at conveying these ideas and exerting pressure on the national authorities. Diaspora organisations (e.g. the World Macedonian Congress) are usually among the most prominent supporters of such events, which are labelled "All-Macedonian".

Most **diaspora organisations** seem to be concerned predominantly with ethnic and identity issues. They are mobilised by events affecting the national interests as defined through their lens and objectives. They are likely to organise and support peaceful protests (both in North Macedonia and in their respective countries) and publicity campaigns, such as the mobilisation against the Prespa Agreement and the Tirana Platform. While they are certainly acting in sync with local organisations and initiatives, it is impossible to determine to what extent they follow or shape the agenda. At the same time, on social media there is occasional backlash from ethnic Macedonians who actually live in the country against some extremist positions and initiatives organised by the diaspora. Their main argument is that it is very easy for people from the diaspora to advocate for specific solutions and to preach what is right or wrong when they do not live in the country and will not face the potential consequences of such solutions.

By contrast, some of the local extremist groups, usually involving the younger male population, have an agenda which includes but goes beyond ethno-nationalism and is more ideologically tainted with general far-right motives (anti-migration, homophobic, racist, neo-Nazi, etc.) Such groups tend to identify with, and strive to maintain relationships with, foreign groups and organisations which represent the same views (not the Macedonian diaspora, but "home-grown" organisations from other countries).

At the community level, especially in multi-ethnic communities such as Tetovo and Kumanovo, ethnic Macedonians sometimes feel threatened by ethnic Albanians, and **the question of minority rights is**

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[9] Some examples which sparked fierce discontent among ethnic Macedonians are the release from prison of Bajrush Sejdiu, an influential ethnic Albanian businessman from Kumanovo, ahead of the local elections in 2017: https://zase.mk/articles/350190/krasnikji-i-bajrush-na-sloboda-blagodarni-na-zaev-temelko-vo-zatvor

seen as a "zero-sum" game: more rights for one community are perceived to be detrimental to the other community/communities. This is in part due to the legacy of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) and its power-sharing model in which the size of the ethnicity was the only criterion for access to some rights (employment, use of the mother tongue in the public sphere and education, etc.) and in which inter-ethnic relations were exploited as a tool to score political points (ethnically based politics).[10]

Statements by political and religious leaders contribute to the **erosion of citizens' trust in institutions**, which ultimately leads to the belief that the state acts in a selective manner and does not offer equal treatment to everyone (institutional anomie). Ethnic Macedonians tend to believe that the system favours ethnic Albanians and vice versa. A number of highly sensitive court cases related to inter-ethnic violence leading to death were used by the SDSM in its 2016 election campaign to win over Albanian votes (including the case of Divo Naselje in Kumanovo) (Спасовска, 2021). More recently, the current Prime Minister Zoran Zaev also appealed to judges to apply "the same treatment" in two seemingly very different cases of violence causing death where the different ethnicity of the victims and perpetrators was the only common feature (one case related to the death of a child named Almir in Kumanovo, the other to the death of Nikola Sazdovski).

The feeling that there are **"double standards", discrimination and disrespect for the rule of law** largely contributes to the radicalisation of the ethnic Macedonian community. Given the diversity of situations exploited on social media, these grievances not only fuel ethno-nationalist extremism, but also lead to political extremism. Compliance – or lack thereof – with the COVID-19 restrictions has recently been one of the topics used to spark discontent among ethnic Macedonians. In several cases (all taking place in January 2021), non-compliance with COVID-19 measures has led to different outcomes, creating an impression that the law only applies to some ethnic Macedonians, while ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians close to the party in power enjoy impunity.[11] This sentiment is reflected in claims by the opposition leader Hristijan Mickoski and Archbishop Petar that the government only applied self-isolation measures and other restrictions to Easter and All Saints (Orthodox religious holidays), while there were no strict measures in place for Ramadan, although allegedly, most infections were due to iftar dinners. In general terms, this allegation has also been made by some conservative and extreme-

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[10] See, for instance, the statement by Zijadin Sela, the leader of the Alliance for Albanians, at an election rally; Sela said that if his party won the elections, it would fire the Macedonians from the regional branches of government institutions and employ Albanians instead: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtIX6078yQ4

[11] The traditional Vevchani Carnival held annually on 13 January which ended with the intervention of special police forces and the arrest of several ethnic Macedonians: https://denesen.mk/licemerie-na-huntata-vlajnkinoski-za-karnevalot-vo-vevchani-dobil-tri-prekrshochni-i-edna-krivichna-prijava/?fbclid=IwAR1WD6MuQ8WaeqngR9eQCiDcGb9LSwO1yza0IYxuMQ9ah9epxChG5iEzLwY has been compared to the protests by a group of ethnic Albanians related to the sentencing in the Monstrum court case where there was allegedly very little police presence and no arrests: https://skopskoeho.mk/zoshto-vo-vevchani-nemozhe-masenbal-a-vo-skopje-mozhe-protesti-so-mnogu-poveke-luge-bez-maski-i-distantsa/; https://www.expres.mk/kaj-se-maskite-reakcija-za-dvojniot-arshin-na-policijata-na-protestot-za-monstrum-i-vo-vevchani/ and to the celebration of SDSM's victory in the local elections in Shtip which took place in violation of all COVID-19 protocols but there was no police intervention at all: https://press24.mk/mickoski-vladata-za-svoite-vo-shtip-emajka-za-vevchanci-makjea

right political parties and movements, especially in the city of Tetovo, with claims that Macedonians are second-class citizens and that the government and the municipality do nothing for them.[12]

In the **online space**, the narratives of the same radical structures go beyond ethno-nationalism into the realm of typical far-right extremism. The traditional media are denounced as "not being free and tasked with brainwashing". There is anti-migrant and anti-vaccine rhetoric, support for right-wing politicians like Hungary's Orban and Slovenia's Jansa, and condemnation of the progressive values imposed by the West which promote LGBTQI rights and undermine traditional Orthodox Christian and family values.

Some Facebook pages are actually amplifying social media tools of blogs/blog posts which detail the ideology of the extremist groups/structures in question (identifying in some cases with the Straight Edge subculture). Their blogs preach how the "battle should be fought" (not on social media) and warn that their patience is running out and a "bloody revolution" may happen. In order to "lead by example", some members of these movements have also posted photos and videos of themselves conducting guerrilla actions (for example, putting up posters or fake street names) and attending a neo-Nazi march in Sofia, Bulgaria. In terms of the country-specific situation, recurrent themes of all Facebook pages observed include the boycott of the census and support for the "Defenders of the Constitution" who were imprisoned for the violence in Parliament on 27 April 2018. Cross-page reposts and similarities in the modus operandi and language indicate that some of the Facebook pages and groups analysed may be administered by the same individuals.

What are the dominant narratives in online and offline fuelling of radicalisation processes? All interviewees in both Tetovo and Kumanovo agreed that the online space and the new technologies have been transformed into a successful tool in the hands of malicious actors whose intention is to further disseminate their narratives and radicalise parts of society.

"Social networks have the greatest impact in spreading religious, sport and political extremism. The videos about ISIS, aggression between children, through movies and games, through everything else, have the greatest impact and therefore in the coming period we should mostly work on addressing fake news, propaganda material and abuse of social networks and the internet for such purposes. This is not only about young people. As part of the community action team, we conducted a survey on how fake news has an impact on violent and extreme behaviour in a pandemic and it turned out that many people, even adults or the elderly,

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[12] Integra political party: https://mia.mk/kandidatite-od-integra-na-sredba-so-gra-ani-vo-tetovo/, National Movement for Macedonia: https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/partii/ndm-premierot-zaev-da-raboti-za-site-gragjani-vo-tetovo; the case of a Macedonian who was denied a personal document solely in Macedonian by the municipality: https://kanal5.com.mk/na-makedonka-vo-tetovo-ne-i-izdale-ednojazichen-dokument-make-doncite-bile-pod-20-vo-opshtinata/a481371 ; https://pressingtv.mk/makedonija/makedoncite-vo-tetovo-grag-jani-od-vtor-red-za-niv-nema-dokumenti-samo-na-makedonski-jazik/

The online space where groups and individuals with different backgrounds from around the world are operating is perceived as an environment with more opportunities for inciting extremist views. The general perception is that online extremist propaganda presents a serious threat to citizens' and communities' security and to public order in general. **The security threats posed by this phenomenon have taken on new and more dangerous dimensions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has instigated an unprecedented digital transformation of people's lives**. Terrorists and extremists, who are often pioneers and innovators in the digital space, have gained new opportunities to adopt and adapt these new technologies to radicalise and broaden recruitment (Loraine, et al., 2021). The digital recruitment tactics of groups who support different types of extremism – religiously inspired, ethno-national or right-wing – and political violence are visible on a number of social media platforms. Not only are people accessing more extremist content, including conspiracy narratives, online, but they can now more easily be targeted by terrorists and extremists in chat rooms, gaming platforms and other open and dark spaces online. Yet terrorists and extremists have introduced innovations faster than the speed with which public authorities have been able to respond and, as a result, have grown their digital advantage (ibid.).

In the case of NMK, the number of Albanian foreign fighters in the Middle East, some of them from the Tetovo and Kumanovo regions, provides a perfect example of how the online presence of radical groups and imams has led to the radicalisation of individuals from local communities and the perpetuation of violence offline. The Albanian case gives the impression of **a sophisticated mechanism that utilises a combination of online and offline practices to attract, radicalise and recruit individuals**. This mechanism has led to the establishment of a well-organised community that operates in all Albanian-inhabited areas of the Western Balkans and in the Albanian diaspora in Europe as well. This community has its own specific recruitment procedures which start with the online attraction/fishing of individuals (Islamist internet recruiting), continues with their religious manipulation through the teaching of the radical interpretation of the Islamic doctrine by radical self-proclaimed imams in madrasas, and ends with recruitment. Members of this online community can recognise each other on the basis of their activities, enabling them to expand their network through the inclusion of new followers and members.

"The internet is the easiest tool to propagate any views, both extremist and nationalist, firstly because it reaches recipients very quickly, and secondly because it is difficult to locate the sources. Some profiles are reported, but others are opened in different groups, so that when they are terminated they are immediately 'transformed'. So they get there fastest and the internet as a tool is the best

The analysis of pages and profiles on Facebook and channels and videos on YouTube revealed differences in the content of posts before and after the arrests of imams/recruiters. Before 2014, we can identify direct and open calls to violence in the form of Islamist extremism. **The criminalisation of and legislation against criminal activity, with the arrests of a number of imams, recruiters and militants, altered the nature of online posts. The most recent posts are camouflaged in religiously-oriented teachings.** There is a tendency for the pages with the most extremist content to shut down their activities (this is why some of the pages have not been updated since 2014) in order to continue elsewhere, in new pages or profiles with different names where extremist posts co-exist alongside humanitarian messages and imams' sermons in an effort to decrease the likelihood of being identified by the authorities. There is a high possibility that a number of these pages are administered by the same persons. The most concerning development is that videos featuring the sermons of radical imam Rexhep Memishi are still circulating in the online space.[13] The high activity on posts on these pages, especially those related to Memishi or other imprisoned imams, points to the existence of a large number of supporters who are constantly commenting and calling for their release from prison. It is very probable that a number of the people posting comments have already been radicalised

One common feature of all profiles, pages and channels created by Islamic extremist groups is the combination of religiously-oriented teaching with the indirect proclamation of the "call to jihad" which is not necessarily related to violent extremism. However, the hate speech of these profiles/pages against specific groups, countries, ethnicities and religions gives a negative connotation to the content of these posts which can function as indirect motivation for use of violence.[14] In a few words, they use religion and the protection of their faith to legitimise war and justify violence. Their narrative echoes the calls for the protection of Islam and Muslims from their internal and external enemies and portrays the foreign fighters as the "soldiers and lions of Allah".[15]

Many of these posts consist **of videos that cover the massacres of Muslims in Syria and elsewhere (Palestine, Somalia, China and Chechnya, etc.) and photographs of soldiers fighting the enemy**. This narrative has the potential to work perfectly as a source of inspiration for young people, not only in ethnically and religiously divided communities like Tetovo and Kumanovo. In Kumanovo, where Albanians are in the minority and the feeling of discrimination on ethnic grounds is higher, someone who

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[13] See, for example, Facebook profiles such as "Ebu Reis Fetahu" and "Nehat Ebibi", which are still posting videos, photos and quotes of the imprisoned imam, while the YouTube channels "Shoqata Keshilla" and "Minber Media" are hosting a large number of videos with the sermons of Rexhep Memishi.

[14] The video entitled "Syria between Hadith and Reality" hosts a sermon by the North Macedonian imam Rexhep Memishi in which he supports the war against the Assad regime in Syria, indirectly encouraging people to become part of it. In his speech, we can also identify anti-Israeli messages and anti-West sentiments.

[15] One example is the video entitled "Hamza Ferati - Shehid (Rijad Memishi)" which features a nasheed (song) about an Albanian martyr and glorifies jihad. The words of the song justify the actions of foreign fighters in Syria and could provide motivation for other young people, even though it cannot be considered as an open call.

is both Muslim and ethnic Albanian is more vulnerable to this kind of narrative and consequently at greater risk of potential radicalisation. The fact that Tetovo is a majority ethnic Albanian city makes its Albanian population less vulnerable to these kinds of narratives. In general, it seems that the **sense of ethnic marginalisation as a mobilisation factor** for violent extremism is stronger in Kumanovo than in Tetovo.

The majority of profiles and pages still support the imams who have been convicted of terrorist activities, including recruitment and hate speech. Often, they share content martyrising the imprisoned imams and saying that "it is an honour and service to Allah to be in jail".[16] Some of these imams' radical sermons and speeches, including those of the principal ISIS recruiter Rexhep Memishi, are still present online, giving continuity and expression to their narratives. **Easy access to radical materials on the internet** has been identified as a factor contributing to extremism. All participants in the fieldwork in both Tetovo and Kumanovo identified that this kind of propaganda has the potential to be effective in further radicalising individuals in their communities. In addition, the online battle that radical profiles and pages have started against the moderate imams who reject radical Islam also points in this direction.[17] Many pages feature narratives against the imams of the official Islamic Community of North Macedonia, characterising them as fake and deceitful imams whose ideas and work do not serve Islam but their personal interests. Not only are religiously radicalised people directly influenced by these kinds of narratives; many Albanian youths and elderly continue to separate themselves from the mainstream religious community and support conservative Islamic ideas that cater to jihadist narratives. The imam is the main figure in legitimising violence. The cyberspace is used but is an associative element of the imam's preaching. The strategy of radical imams to place a particular conflict or struggle within a religious context provides them with the required theological justification to call for support. In other words, they need to be perceived as legitimate conveyors of religious values in order to have a solid theological standing and justify violence.

Following this discussion of factors of community vulnerability in Kosovo and North Macedonia, the next section analyses the factors of community resilience to radicalisation.

4 Community resilience to radicalisation in the Western Balkans

This section provides an analysis of the data from the fieldwork conducted in the framework of the PAVE project in Kosovo and North Macedonia concerning factors that shape community resilience to

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[16] The video entitled "Prison is for men. Learn the truth about our Imams!!" supports the imams arrested in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia for recruiting Albanian fighters. Through this video, the extremists suggest that jail is for real men and ask Albanian Muslims to learn the truth about their imams. They support the arrests (by non-believers) of those who fought against Serbs and the NMK's authorities.

[17] One such video is entitled "The Deviant Imams" where Rexhep Memishi talks about these imams and describes them "as the biggest danger to Islam". The supporters of radical Islam do not consider traditional and moderate imams to be "true Muslims" but see them as "deviant imams" and "collaborators with Western countries and cultures".

ethno-political and religious radicalisation. The first part analyses resilience in Kosovo, while the second part deals with the case of North Macedonia.

4.1   Community resilience to radicalisation in Kosovo

"Women in general, and mothers in particular, are agents of change in the community. They notice the early elements of radicalisation and violent extremism in their children. This opens the way for a response. With the local anti-violent extremism strategy adopted by the municipality of Mitrovica, we have developed practical activities for women on how they can contribute to preventing the spread of violent extremism and radicalisation." (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-South, 2021)

This section analyses the fieldwork data from Kosovo on drivers of community resilience to radicalisation in the country, based on the interviews and focus group discussions held in three municipalities: Podujeva, Mitrovica South and Mitrovica North. The section presents the main arguments and findings based on the analyses of the fieldwork data and a review of the existing literature. The field sites selected for this research (Mitrovica and Podujeva) are broadly similar in terms of their socio-economic situation and were therefore selected to enable a comparative analysis of the two communities and thus gain a deeper understanding of what makes one community more vulnerable and the other more resilient to radicalisation.

An important factor of community resilience to religious radicalisation in Kosovo has been Kosovo's esoteric Islamic tradition and the failures of external efforts to impose a more rigorous interpretation of religious doctrine. According to a report by Adrian Shtuni in 2016: "Kosovo, a country with no prior history of religious militancy, has become a prime source of foreign fighters in the Iraqi and Syrian conflict theatre relative to population size." (Shtuni, 2016, p. 1) Isa Blumi, on the other hand, argues that: "Albanians have traditionally practiced Islam in ways unique to the region, practices which included the synthesis of a number of local forms of spiritual traditions which ultimately evolved into complicated rituals in which Muslims and local Christians often shared the same spiritual site." (Blumi, 2005, p. 2). So, what changed? The common answer across the research (Qehaja, Avdimetaj, & Ilazi, 2021) is external influence from faith-based charities and foreign non-governmental organisations aimed at changing the practice of what a media article referred to as "Islam lite", or the "Kosovar way" of following Islam, which is based on strong commitment to principles of secularism (Fitzgerald, 2012). According to those interviewed in the framework of the PAVE project, "failure to practise religion as it was practised traditionally in Kosovo remains one of the big challenges" (NGO-Activist-Mitrovica-South, 2021). In practical terms, **the "Kosovar way" is characterised by a strong belief that religion and religious beliefs belong to the private sphere, and the public sphere is not determined or governed by a religious doctrine**. In particular, according to Blumi (2005, p. 3), the main target of attack

from the faith-based charities from the Gulf States was also the main source of community resilience, namely "Kosovo's esoteric Islamic tradition that resisted attempts to centralise and thus homogenise Kosovar's faith over the last ninety years". This argument was also supported by the Kosovo Resilience Index study by the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), which states: "Religious harmony remains one of the main values with which the Kosovar society is identified, thus helping the country to prevent the spread of radical religious elements internally", noting that "the challenge remains the clash of different sects or groups within the Muslim community of the country" (Perteshi, 2020, p. 8). Interviews conducted in the framework of the PAVE research also support the argument that a major factor of community resilience to religious radicalisation has been the open-mindedness of religious leaders, who opposed efforts to impose a literal interpretation of religious doctrine, as explained by an imam from the municipality of Podujeva: "One element that has made Podujeva stand out in the field of extremism is something like this: we, the imams, have moved away from something we can call the Islamic status quo. What does it mean? They have the same understanding of the Qur'an as 14 centuries ago and have not moved on. Some people try to keep the status of Islam suspended in the interpretation from 14 centuries ago, while some other imams challenge this mentality and move away from the status quo. The imams of Podujeva do not want Islam in the status quo. I also think that this has played a role, but it takes further effort, and this must be regulated institutionally." (Focus-Group-Podujeva, 2021)

Traditions are an important factor of community resilience to religious and ethno-political radicalisation in Kosovo. Communities that had a strong sense of a traditional identity related to the practice of the religion and associated doctrine and also have confidence in their local religious leaders were more resilient to radicalisation. In this sense, the fieldwork shows that **in the case of Kosovo, religiously inspired radicalisation was seen as an externally promoted process that aimed to change the traditions and norms of the community**. This is the case particularly in the municipality of Podujeva. Traditions in this context are understood as social norms and practices that are centred on respect for older members of the family; they include not bringing embarrassment to the family by adopting behaviours or beliefs that are not considered indigenous to the family and the community. Traditions are also understood in the context of religion and the well-established norms on practising religion. In the case of Kosovo, this has been referred to as "traditional Islam", denoting the ways in which Kosovar Albanians have practised their Islamic faith, as already mentioned above. The concept of "traditional Islam" is also used by the religious leaders in Podujeva municipality, who are engaged in a struggle to protect it from the new breed of imams educated in the Gulf states (Religious-Leader-Podujeva, 2021). The fieldwork shows that some practices and norms that were associated with religiously inspired radicalisation and were considered foreign and new included the refusal of males to shake hands with female members of the extended family, such as cousins (Focus-Group-Podujeva, 2021). If a male relative started embracing such practices, this was seen by family members as a sign of radicalisation, because in Kosovar traditions not shaking hands with family members is considered highly disrespectful and offensive. As explained by a senior mental health worker dealing with cases of radicalised individuals, in some cases interventions were organised, usually by the older members of the family who would draw on traditions and family as arguments for convincing the relative in question not to further embrace religious practices that were considered as external. The appreciation for traditions as a factor of community resilience is also highlighted by the following response from a civil society activist in the municipality of Podujeva when asked how the community deals with signs of radicalisation: "[we

have] some traditions, which are a little more specific and special and which we have preserved with dignity. They are inherited from our ancestors, who did not allow extremism, not even in the religious sense." (ibid.). As explained by Gollopeni and Kamberi, "not allowing extremism" meant preventing the spread of "Wahhabism" and "Salafism", which continue to be largely synonymous with religiously inspired radicalisation (Gollopeni & Kamberi, 2014). However, religious leaders promoting traditional Islam in Kosovo feel threatened and their influence is declining, which can lead to their reluctance to strengthen community resilience to radicalisation; this is illustrated by the comment that "many traditional imams are watching out because some may declare us traitors because we are fighting extremism, but this does not mean that we should give up" (Religious-Leader-Podujeva, 2021)

Social cohesion centred on ethnic identity and the need to protect the culture associated with it is an important factor in community resilience to radicalisation; however, it can also inspire ethnopolitical radicalisation. In addition to this, **religious diversity within the community strengthens resilience, as is the case with the Kosovar Albanians.** While Kosovo is predominantly Muslim, there is an important minority Albanian Catholic community in the country, and pupils in schools are taught that Albanians belong to Christianity and Islam. The first Albanian School in Kosovo is located in a church in the village of Stubla, in the municipality of Viti, a predominantly Albanian Catholic community (UNDP-Kosovo, 2019). According to Tim Judah: "Whenever Albanians address this issue it becomes a matter of pride, but also a cliché, to quote a line from a poem of Pashko Vasa, a 19th-century Catholic writer, who said that 'the religion of the Albanians is Albanianism.' He meant that the identity of Albanians did not derive from their religion, as it did for other peoples in the Balkans." (Judah, Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know, 2008, pp. 8-9). This diversity among Albanians, with the primacy of loyalty to ethnic rather than religious identity, is considered an important factor of community resilience. This is also illustrated by this statement from one of the participants in the PAVE focus group in the municipality of Podujeva: "I heard the imam talk about Mother Teresa and Skanderbeg,[18] namely they spoke about our foundations; this makes you understand why we do not allow other elements, and we have continued with a spiritual fanaticism that we keep and do not allow other elements leading to extremism to enter here." (Focus-Group-Podujeva, 2021). In the municipality of Mitrovica South a focus group participant, a local imam, commented: "You can change your religion, but you can never change your national identity." (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-South, 2021). The **strong sense of primacy of ethnic identity over religion** is consistently expressed in the research conducted in the framework of the PAVE project. The opinion polls in Kosovo have also shown that for Kosovar Albanians, traditional Islam is an important aspect to their identity as well and they reject other interpretations of the Islamic doctrine (Gani Bobi, 2011). For the Serbian community in Kosovo, Orthodox Christianity is central to their ethnic identity and the two are often indistinguishable when discussing the issue of identity with the Kosovo Serbs (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-North, 2021). For the Kosovo Serbs, religious extremism or radicalisation is associated with Islam, as illustrated by this quote from an interview in Mitrovica North: "there is no radical religious extremism in my community because we are Orthodox Christians. It is a different situation with our Albanian neighbours who are Muslims" (Professor-of-sociology, 2021). This perception among the Kosovo Serbs that religious extremism is only about Islam prevents the community from recognising and dealing with ethno-political radicalism or far-right elements that draw heavily on

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[18] This is interesting because both are Christian Albanians, yet are celebrated even by Albanian Muslims and religious leaders.

Christian religion to foster "othering" and mobilise society against the Muslim Albanian majority in Kosovo.

The emergence of new leaders from civil society organisations in the north of Kosovo provides an opportunity for reconciliation and countering of ethno-political radicalisation. The Serbian-dominated north of Kosovo continues to be a hotspot for ethnic tensions between Albanians and Serbs. Since 1999, the north of Kosovo has largely operated with a different legal and institutional framework, although some progress has been achieved with the integration of the judiciary and the police (CIG, 2017). The unresolved dispute between Kosovo and Serbia is seen as a major factor of vulnerability to radicalisation, as shown by this quote from the focus group discussion in Mitrovica North: "I think that Kosovo is the main area for the possibility of radicalisation in our country. We have seen that with Milošević and in general with all those right-wing organisations which, due to our frustration with the situation in Kosovo, manage to generate support, mainly from the slightly more radical part of the population. So, for us, Kosovo is definitely the main source of national frustration first, and then a breeding ground for radicalisation. I think it is more than poverty because that myth [about Kosovo] is just too strong for us." (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-North, 2021). This opinion is rather different from the perceptions of the majority in the north of Kosovo, as already explained, who see radicalisation only as a challenge for the Muslims and Albanians. For instance, another member of a civil society organisation in the north of Kosovo argued that "in the north of Kosovo we have one good thing about people, that they talk about it with disgust, but while there is disgust on one side, radicalism does develop within some other communities. So, I know one example of a guy who was Orthodox and decided to convert to Islam after coming of age, and he was very radical in his ideas. I'm not talking about actions, I'm talking about words and ideas" (Civil-Society-Activist-Mitrovica-North, 2021). In other words, this implies that the simple act of converting to Islam might be seen as radicalisation. However, **emerging leaders from civil society are demanding more balance and an even-handed approach regarding what happened during the war in the 1990s**, as illustrated by this quote from the focus group discussion: "To simply be as fair as possible to the victims and that is the part that is impossible, not to use those painful pasts in the negotiations, because after all we have talked a lot about Albanians, let's talk a little about ours. The statements of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija regarding the incidents against Serbs are neither objective nor balanced, nor, in the end, completely true." (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-North, 2021). However, the challenge for these voices is that they are marginalised and often deal with campaigns that aim to delegitimise them or portray them as pro-Albanian, which can also happen in the Albanian community by labelling a person as pro-Serb to delegitimise their arguments concerning the past. One important and positive project implemented by the New Social Initiative, an NGO from North Mitrovica, is called "Kosovo Collective" and brings together Serbs and Albanians to discuss topics of common interest and examine sensitive and divisive issues between the two communities. After each meeting, two participants, one Albanian and one Serb, are invited to write opinion pieces on the subject.[19] In Mitrovica South, important work is being done by another NGO, Community Building Mitrovica (CBM), on **promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and strengthening under-**

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[19] See two examples of such op-eds, one from an Albanian participant: http://newsocialinitiative.org/op-eds/war-dialogue-and-the-younger-generation/ and another from a Serbian participant: http://newsocialinitiative.org/op-eds/are-we-equal-and-why-are-we-not-the-fate-of-the-serbs-south-of-the-ibar/

standing between communities. One of their recent projects is the Reconciliation and Conflict Transformation (RCT) programme, which, among other things, aims to **transform the curriculum in high schools in order to facilitate a conciliatory approach to dealing with the past**, and also **mobilises young people from Albanian and Serbian communities to prepare counter-narratives to ethno-political radicalisation**.[20] Both the NSI and the CBM employ multi-ethnic staff and are rare examples of Kosovo Albanians and Serbs working together.

Decentralisation of the authority and responsibility to counter and prevent violent extremism and promote **greater involvement of municipal actors** in Kosovo is fostering community resilience to radicalisation. Most of the deradicalisation work and efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism have been under the control of the central government in Kosovo, with little inclusion of the municipal authorities. In recent years, this has started to change, and municipalities themselves are becoming more persistent in assuming a greater role and responsibility. In 2019, the municipality of Mitrovica South, seen as vulnerable to ethno-political and religious radicalisation, adopted the municipal plan to counter violent extremism for the period 2020-2022.[21] And what adds relevance to this step on the part of the municipality is that the plan was developed by the local NGO, Community Building Mitrovica, with the participation of the municipality. As a result, the plan is objective and deals with the key factor of vulnerability to radicalisation in the municipality. The plan includes measures to support the development of critical thinking skills among high school students. In 2015, the municipality of Gjilan in Kosovo started to implement the **Referral Mechanism as a pilot project against radicalisation**. This instrument is focused on prevention through early detection and has been very successful.[22] The Referral Mechanism is led by the deputy mayor and consists of a group of local institutions with the sole purpose of identifying, evaluating and providing assistance and treatment to persons at risk of becoming part of foreign conflicts or showing signs of radicalisation. Members of this mechanism include the Centre for Social Work, Employment Agency, Islamic Community, a representative from the Turkish community, a representative from the Serbian Orthodox community, Directorate of Health and Psychiatric Service, Directorate of Education, and civil society. Gjilan municipality's Referral Mechanism has been very successful, with specific cases where identified individuals who displayed signs of radicalisation were persuaded to abandon their intentions. With the support of the community, these individuals were reintegrated fully into society. The Kosovo government also cooperated with UNDP Kosovo and developed a **teacher's manual for prevention of violent extremism**, which was widely disseminated across Kosovo.

Active **community engagement by the formal religious institutions and their cooperation with public institutions** have strengthened resilience to radicalisation. PAVE fieldwork and other existing research confirm that in Kosovo, good cooperation between local authorities and the Islamic Community is an

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[20] A video showing the work of the CBM's RCT project is available here: https://www.facebook.com/CBMitrovica/videos/672802967064133/

[21] See this news item from the official website of the municipality of Mitrovica South showing the moment the representatives of CBM presented the plan to the representative of the municipality: https://kk.rks-gov.net/mitroviceejugut/news/komuna-e-mitrovices-pritet-te-behet-me-planin-komunal-per-parandalimin-e-ekstremizmit-te-dhunshem-ne-mesin-e-te-rinjve-2020-2022/

[22] See this news item, which includes an interview with the deputy mayor of Gjilan on the success of the Referral Mechanism: https://kallxo.com/lajm/video-si-funksionon-mekanizmi-referues-ne-gjilan-per-parandalimin-e-ekstremizmit/

important factor in countering and preventing religious radicalisation; this is the case in the municipality of Podujeva, for example (Demjaha, 2018). In the words of a senior official from the education department of Podujeva municipality and a local religious leader, "what has helped us is the cooperation with the leadership of the municipality; it has been at the maximum level, not only in terms of cooperation; we have also taken concrete steps" (Focus-Group-Podujeva, 2021). Cooperation between public institutions and the Islamic Community was also seen as an important factor of community resilience in the municipality of Mitrovica South (Journalist-Mitrovica-South, 2021). Important institutional mechanisms have been established to facilitate this cooperation, such as the Referral Mechanism in Gjilan municipality, but also the **Municipal Community Safety Councils (MCSCs)**, which are obligatory for each municipality and constitute a high-level forum that brings together all major actors working in the security sector, including civil society. The purpose of the MCSCs is to provide a platform for coordination of measures and interventions and early detection of community safety challenges. The Kosovo government has also adopted the **National Strategy and Action Plan for Community Safety 2018-2023** and the Strategy **and Action Plan for Community Policing 2017-2021**. However, the implementation of the strategies in practise is not satisfactory (Perteshi & Ilazi, 2020). The Kosovo government has also established a dedicated unit to coordinate deradicalisation efforts and support for rehabilitation of radicalised individuals. Known as **the Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Persons (DPRRP)**, it operates under the Department for Public Safety of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The DPRRP is led by a women and has been very successful in creating trust in the community, including among the repatriated Kosovars from Syria and Iraq (Stakeholder-Consultation-Kosovo, 2021). In 2018, **Kosovo's Ministry of Justice signed a memorandum of understanding with the Islamic Community of Kosovo to cooperate on rehabilitation of citizens repatriated from Syria and Iraq**. The idea behind this cooperation was for the Islamic Community to provide imams who would talk to the repatriated citizens and FFs and debunk their ideological beliefs that influenced their decision to travel to Syria and Iraq in the first place (Ministry of Justice of Kosovo, 2018). However, this cooperation did not materialise because of the publicity surrounding the announcement, which resulted in the FFs held in Kosovo's correctional services becoming aware of this partnership; they rejected participating in the programme as they had no confidence in imams that were legitimised by the government (Perteshi & Ilazi, 2020). Apart from the more institutionalised cooperation between the government and the Islamic Community, there are other very positive grassroots examples that illustrate factors of community resilience to radicalisation. One such example relates to the municipality of Ferizaj. The mosque and the church in Ferizaj are located in the same yard and images of the two are often used to illustrate religious tolerance in Kosovo. The closeness of the two religious sites is rare and has also led to a friendship between the local imam and the Orthodox priest, which has attracted the attention of the national media. The two clerics regularly interact with each other and have visited each other's place of worship. [23]

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[23] See this video from Radio Free Europe on the relationship between the Muslim imam and the Orthodox priest in the municipality of Ferizaj: https://www.evropaelire.org/a/xhamia-dhe-kisha-ne-ferizaj/29347740.html and also this local media article, which shares their opinions on the importance of their cooperation: https://telegrafi.com/ne-ferizaj-xhamia-dhe-kisha-ne-nje-oborr-flasin-imami-dhe-prifti-video/

4.2   Community resilience to radicalisation in North Macedonia

"Our country is totally illiterate when it comes to the internet. Everyone can write what they want, insult you, hurt you … Children are totally exposed as soon as they pick up the phone or turn on the television. Programmes to challenge radical narratives in the online space are limited or non-existent." (Focus-Group-Tetovo, 2021), discussion with police officers

Countering radicalisation through counter-messaging has been held up as a priority by the NMK government. The **North Macedonian National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism puts emphasis on building the capacities of local and religious communities to prevent radicalisation via social media counter-narratives** (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2018). However, despite this prioritisation, the fieldwork in Tetovo and Kumanovo showed little evidence of concrete initiatives and actions at the national or local level. Not only had none of the Tetovo participants, members of civil society, municipal representatives, teachers from local schools and journalists participated in any capacity-building training, but they were also not aware of the existence of any such projects. Despite the non-existence of any counter-narrative projects or portals run by local stakeholders, the counter-narrative approach for the engagement of vulnerable audiences that might be most at risk from violent Islamist propaganda is considered necessary, with many of the participants believing that there should be more investment in this area. **Community actors lack the capacities to deal with the online space**, especially with chat rooms, gaming platforms and other open and dark online spaces which assist extremist groups to radicalise individuals. The social media landscape of violent extremist messaging and propaganda is fast-paced and ever-changing. This reality, in combination with the limited capacities of state institutions and civil society to design and implement relevant and highly reactive content, makes these kinds of projects more necessary than ever.

The two largest religious communities, the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community, can play important roles as part of the multi-agency system for the prevention of radicalisation. However, the inclusion of religious communities in the process remains a challenge (Kambovski, Georgieva, & Trajanovski, 2020). NMK's Islamic community, although engaged in some activities, is divided and lacks a unified approach among its practitioners. Likewise, other religious communities and faith-based organisations such as the Orthodox Church have rarely been involved in P/CVE and lack awareness of their role. The **recent approval by relevant state authorities for the establishment of separate Islamic community structures for Salafist groups** is identified as a move that will likely consolidate the position of the radicals in the country and further weaken the authority of the official and moderate Islamic religious community, making it more difficult to reach a consensus among religious practitioners on the Islamic Community's participation in counter-narrative initiatives (Gordana, 2021)

Over the past two years, all stakeholders have been preoccupied with the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and the return of the FTFs from conflict areas (Dzumhur, 2020). Public authorities are not giving the necessary attention to online intervention. Their efforts have been limited to a series of negative measures, notably the removal of suspect accounts and the filtering of extremist content. The effect of these measures is questionable. The large amount of extremist content in the online space makes its identification by the authorities a very difficult issue, while determining whether content is violent extremist or not has become a challenging task for the authorities involved. In addition, the online extremist groups are inventing new tactics to hide their traces from the authorities through the creation of different social media accounts administered by the same person. In North Macedonia, the case of the imam Rexhep Memishi is very indicative: although he is in prison for recruiting ISIS followers, the videos with his sermons are still present in the online space. A quick search on Google with the keyword "Rexhep Memishi" leads to 39,500 results, including Facebook pages and YouTube channels that host his sermons. For example, the YouTube channel "Ibn Rexhep" includes a playlist of 254 videos with a very high number of views.[24] This situation indicates the gaps in the state's efforts to tackle online radicalisation.

Apart from suppressing online extremist activities, **the NMK government is implementing online strategic communication campaigns to promote inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations** in an effort to reduce the space that can be utilised by extremist groups online. One example of the government's strategic communication initiative is the idea of "One society for all", a campaign launched by the Zaev government in 2018.[25] This campaign was part of a national strategy aimed at promoting diversity, not only ethnic and religious, but also gender, disabilities, etc.[26] 18 videos were produced in total as part of this strategy and are currently available on YouTube.[27] One of the videos presents counter-messaging against the narrative of Islamist groups, which depict Christianity as one of the biggest enemies of Islam. The video attempts to displace this extremist narrative by promoting the coexistence of Orthodox Macedonians and Muslim Albanians. A priest and an imam, against a background of young Macedonians and Albanians praying next to each other, are shown saying "we have lived together for centuries, and we will continue to do so because only in this way will we move forward".[28]

In addition to the online distribution, these videos were aired free of charge on national media in the Macedonian and Albanian languages and links to them were provided on all the public authorities' websites. While the idea sounds very noble, the general impression is that its implementation is lagging far behind. One of the reasons could be the **lack of funding**, since most of the activities in the action plan are to be funded by "international donors". To date, it has mainly been used as a slogan (hashtag)

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[24] The YouTube Channel "Ibn Rexheb" hosts a very large number of videos with the sermons of the imprisoned North Macedonian imam Rexhep Memishi

[25] More information on the "Building one society for all project" is available on the official website of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia.

[26] The details of the national strategy "One society for all" are available on the official website of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia.

[27] The videos created in the context of the "Building one society for all" campaign are available on its official YouTube channel.

[28] The campaign's video entitled "Кампања: Меѓуетнички и меѓурелигиски соживот – Соживо" promotes peaceful coexistence between NMK's religious communities.

by government and SDSM officials, but also by their opponents in cynical comments about how they are not living in one society for all. The appeal of videos with counter-narrative content seems to be significant, as the number of views show. However, it is still very low compared to the number of views of videos posted by extremists and the level of engagement they attract.

The impact and appeal of this messaging rely to a large extent on the credibility of the messenger and their ability to convince the target audience. It is commonly assumed that featuring the voices of former extremists and foreign fighters may prove to be effective here. One example of a social media project featuring former foreign fighters is the **YouTube channel "Life Stories"**.[29] The channel includes 32 videos with life stories of a diverse range of people (former extremists, students, community observers, imams, etc.) from different countries (Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and the Albanian diaspora in central Europe). In one of these videos, Mustafa, a former Albanian extremist from North Macedonia, says that young Albanians in NMK believed that it was quite normal to go to Syria. They saw their contribution in the war zones as a "sevap" (good deed) to save innocent people from crime and injustice in these places.[30] They believed that if they died on the battlefield, they would become martyrs and their family would go to heaven. Mustafa recalled that the internet and social media played an important role in his decision to join ISIS. Young Albanians were strongly affected on an emotional level by the videos of the Syrian conflict because of their own experiences of war in North Macedonia and Kosovo. Mustafa says that he was thinking of travelling to Syria, mainly because he was influenced by the shocking images of dead children, but in the end, his family prevented him from going. He describes this decision as the right one since his friends who returned from Syria were disillusioned with the situation. As he explained, it was not what his friends believed it would be. They did not even know whom they were fighting. At the end of the video, Mustafa says that he is happy he did not go to Syria. This can be seen as a direct message to people who are considering adopting extremism. Sharing the personal experience of a disillusioned former extremist in this way not only reveals the reality; it can also help to prevent other young people from joining extremist groups.

Family members can potentially also play a key role in challenging the messages and undermining the appeal of violent extremist groups and in stopping the violent extremist narratives from spreading. One successful example is the speech by Zak Ebrahim, a son of a terrorist, in a TED Talk, available on YouTube with Albanian subtitles.[31] This is a video against terrorism which looks at the effects of growing up in an extremist family. **The family is the greatest factor influencing whether young people reject or endorse violent extremism**. The video conveys the message that even if they grow up in an extremist setting, a child can choose a different path from their parents'. In the video, Zak Ebrahim describes his personal experience of surviving hate and violence. He says that a son does not have to follow the path taken by his father. It conveys a very strong message: "Being a good person is a choice, and being a bad person is a choice too." "I am tired of hating people" is the most powerful message to come out of this video, which takes a firm stand against bigotry. The video is relevant to everyone in

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[29] The YouTube channel "Life Stories" hosts a number of videos featuring former foreign fighters from North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania and the Albanian diaspora in Europe.

[30] The video entitled "Life Story Mustafa – North Macedonia" describes the story of a young former foreign fighter from North Macedonia.

[31] The video, entitled "I am the son of a terrorist. Here's how I chose peace | Zak Ebrahim", tells the story of a terrorist's son who chose not to follow his father's example.

every country, including NMK. In the local communities of both Tetovo and Kumanovo, family influence is important in dampening a young person's propensity to become a violent extremist. Some of the individuals who joined VE groups in Syria were highly influenced by members of their family. This is reflected in the fact that in NMK's remote villages, the families of individuals who had been killed in Syria dealt with it by labelling them "martyrs" and glorifying their actions in their communities. In this context, policies and online communication strategies which aim to undermine radicalisation in the community should focus on family members, especially parents.

Education (including **online media literacy**) is identified as another important factor of community resilience. All participants in the fieldwork in both Tetovo and Kumanovo recognised the symbiotic relationship that exists between resilience and education. The main argument is that the education system has certain attributes that make it ideally suited to building individual, community and systemic resilience. **In ethnically divided countries in particular, education retains high public value because it reaches both populations, serving as a vital hub for information-sharing and critical thinking**. Although education in NMK is described as being of "low quality", it is recognised as having central importance in fighting radical ideas and influences. In the case of Tetovo in particular, the presence of two universities is seen as a factor that increases community resilience. The general perception is that Tetovo's tradition in education, which has led to higher levels of educational attainment, has helped in building **critical thinking** among its citizens, making them less vulnerable to the narratives of extremist groups. It is exactly this factor that differentiates Tetovo from Kumanovo. The population in Kumanovo is considered to be more susceptible to manipulation and recruitment into extremist groups.

There is no doubt that education is seen as a powerful instrument for building community resilience to radicalisation processes, but almost all participants in the fieldwork believe that in the case of NMK it has worked in the opposite direction. One of the commonly agreed issues touched upon by participants was the lack of meaningful means for educational professionals to recognise and flag up signs of extremism and to monitor cases when young people are exposed to radical material. The most problematic aspect here is the failure of the P/CVE mechanism in NMK to provide these frontline practitioners with educational information about violent extremism, even though their central role in the prevention architecture is well-recognised. The fieldwork revealed that teachers, education specialists and school psychologists are not well-informed about radicalisation, violent extremism and resilience and their daily engagement with the topic is minimal to non-existent. The equation becomes more complicated when the concept of resilience to radicalisation is added to the discussion. Local teachers in both Tetovo and Kumanovo could not understand what this concept entails, revealing their inability to provide their students with sufficient information about it. One other concerning fact is that the **programmes which are implemented by the state and civil society with the support of international donors to increase teachers' capacities to deal with radicalisation lack inclusivity**. These projects are not reaching all the country's educational staff, especially those teaching in schools located in remote villages. The low level of knowledge about radicalisation among the country's education professionals has left young people unprotected. This, in combination with the lack of meaningful engagement and communication between school staff and parents, has damaged primary prevention, leading to the second level of prevention where young people have been already exposed to radical material. In this

phase, the mission of the education system to convince young people to stop engaging with radicals is more difficult.

"The problem with the education system is that it harms resilience – it is actually in favour of division. It's so easy to radicalise those groups because they cannot interact, communicate, you keep them closed in certain areas, in certain groups and then it's much easier to manipulate them." (Representative-of-the-religious-community-in-Tetovo)

Another problem, related to education, is that there are **separate classes and schools for ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians**. Segregation in the education system has become deeper and more entrenched over the years, with students belonging to one ethnic group not interacting with students from a different ethnic background. As a result, there is now a new generation of Albanians in the country who do not speak Macedonian and their interaction with ethnic Macedonians is at non-existent levels. Even when communication takes place, the different stories from both Tetovo and Kumanovo revealed that it is conducted in English (Civil-society-representative-Skopje, 2021). The education system in NMK has thus emerged as one of the major contributors to the de facto segregation between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians (Petroska-Beska & Najcevska, 2004). This system has locked both education staff and students into a closed perspective with negative stereotypes and prejudices shaping their outlooks about the others. Inevitably, this sense of clear division between "us" and "them" that prevails in North Macedonian schools creates fertile ground for extremist and radical ideas. All in all, the segregated education system is identified by the majority of participants in the fieldwork as a contributory factor to radicalisation trends at early stages (Civil-society-member-Tetovo, 2021). The Achilles heel of the education system in North Macedonia is believed to be its inability to promote connections within communities (social bonding), between communities (social bridging), and between communities and institutions (social linking). These weaknesses of the education system are harming community resilience.

This is not the only gap in the formal education process in NMK. The general perception among the fieldwork participants is that the system does not build knowledge and critical thinking skills. The **high levels of functional illiteracy among young people** have left them empty-handed, without the skills to resist extremist ideas (Teacher-Tetovo, 2021). In addition, the school curricula and especially the teaching of history are delivered in a way which serves the nationalist agenda of one or another ethnic group (Popovikj, 2021). Students are not sufficiently informed about values such as ethnic coexistence, tolerance, multiculturalism and respect for others' opinions. This notable gap in the education system solidifies the narratives used by Islamist and nationalist groups, leaving room for extremist groups to exploit sensitive national issues for their own purposes. The **sense of separated history** that the education system creates among the country's two ethnicities means that different community actors may pursue conflicting approaches to resilience-building. These different ways of understanding the notion of community resilience against radicalisation are hindering the development of protection systems for communities against extremism.

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The gap in meaningful inter-ethnic interactions and intercultural activities left by the gaps in the education system is covered by the **civil society sector**, which acts as a facilitator between the local population and government, especially in areas where communities lack trust in state institutions. There are numerous examples of contributions by local CSOs to community engagement. The Centre for Intercultural Dialogue (CID) is one prominent example that aims to **promote intercultural acceptance and active citizenship through capacity-building processes, education and youth work** in the region of Kumanovo. The MultiKulti Youth Centre created by CID is working with young people from both ethnicities to strengthen their resilience to violent extremism. Community centres like MultiKulti are building the narrative of living together peacefully to confront the future threats, including violent extremism, through joint action. These centres where young people come together or engage in joint activities such as sports and cultural events are seen as significant local tools with the capacity to deliver results in building community resilience.

Similarly, Multikultura, the Community Development Institute (CDI) and the Center for Balkan Cooperation LOJA, all **Tetovo-based NGOs, are working on youth activism and inter-ethnic relations**, **promoting tolerance and cooperation** as two key preconditions for building any kind of community resilience. LOJA organises activities to equip future teachers with the skills needed to implement intercultural activities in schools. The Educate2Prevent programme carried out by Nexus Civil Concept also seeks to strengthen the capacities of teaching staff, parents and representatives of the municipal administration to recognise the early signs of radicalisation (Stojkovski & Selimi, 2018). While ambitious in their scope, there is a **lack of evidence-based or systematic evaluation of such efforts and initiatives** to determine the effectiveness of educational activities implemented by the CSOs. When it comes to youth projects, the critics say that these programmes focus on ensuring that young people have the "proper attitude towards radicalisation" and in so doing place the onus on a change in attitude rather than looking at the need to address issues of segregation in education.

Online media literacy education is considered by the participants in the fieldwork in both Tetovo and Kumanovo as a useful intervention strategy to prevent violence and tackle online radicalisation (Focus-Group-Kumanovo, 2021). However, they recognise that the **literacy skills of young people in NMK are still underdeveloped**, attributing the low level of resilience against disinformation and fake news to various factors: the authorities' reluctance to address the issue, the highly controlled state media, business interests, low trust levels in society and the shortcomings of the education system. Online media literacy has not been integrated into the education system in NMK, while the existing school programmes on information literacy have appeared inadequate (IREX, 2021). This has left individuals exposed to a wide range of material available on online social media platforms and unable to distinguish between quality and fake news. This, in turn, increases the risk of these people being exposed to misleading information and propaganda material distributed by extremist groups. The online threat landscape has prompted national, local and civil society stakeholders to address the challenges posed by young people's exposure to extremist online content. These stakeholders' intention is to make individuals digital media-literate, an ability that can foster resilience and reduce the risk of their being radicalised to violence. The current government in NMK seems serious about incorporating media literacy into an ongoing reform of primary education (ibid.). It seems that civil society is set to play a prominent role in the initiative to make the citizens of NMK more media-literate. Examples of this

abound, including the YouThink project carried out by IREX in cooperation with the Macedonian Institute for Media, the Institute of Communication Studies and the Youth Educational Forum, which aims to equip young Macedonians with the critical thinking and information engagement skills and awareness that they need to build resilience to mis- and disinformation, hate speech, conspiracy theories, extremist narratives and other forms of manipulation. Although these initiatives are promising, the reality has shown that it is difficult to change established patterns of radicalisation and develop resilient attitudes, especially among adults.

All in all, the role of education as a strong community resilience factor is recognised by all stakeholders. The country's education policies are currently oriented towards closing all existing gaps and deficiencies, including more initiatives for integrated education. One outstanding example are the Kumanovo municipality's plans to create a new generation of young Albanians and Macedonians educated at the same kindergartens in the hope that this step will open the way for joint schools (Local-official-Kumanovo, 2021). Education is seen as indispensable in promoting critical thinking. In the context of a multi-ethnic society with a "troubled multi-ethnic past", such as NMK, the education system should also invest in promoting respect and awareness of cultural differences. The satisfactory implementation of education reforms not only requires the transfer of schools into a mechanism that will teach inclusion and dispel negative ethnic and religious stereotypes; it also necessitates the reconceptualisation of ethnic differences and a strong cohesive vision of national identity.

5   Gender Considerations

In both Kosovo and North Macedonia, the PAVE fieldwork shows that communities recognise that **women play an essential role** in responding to radicalisation and violent extremism and in countering the credibility in the narratives that seek to recruit youth in radical and violent extremist ideologies.

The Kosovo government has established dedicated units to promote gender equality, such as the Agency for Gender Equality in the Office of the Prime Minister, which has also addressed the issue of the role of women in P/CVE. The government has adopted the Kosovo Program for Gender Equality 2020-2024 which includes the drafting and accreditation of a training programme for journalists in the field of gender equality and combating violent extremism (AGE, 2020). The data in this programme shows that in Kosovo, media articles on women and violent extremism made up 1.8% of all articles on women (ibid.). However, Kosovo's national strategy to prevent and counter violent extremism makes only one mention of women when it talks about increasing cooperation among central and municipal authorities in thematic policy areas involving women.

The PAVE fieldwork and the existing literature show that there were **two phases of online narratives that targeted women in Kosovo** and encouraged them to join the Islamic State. The first phase focused on narratives that aimed to show the Islamic State as an opportunity for empowerment of women (Kelmendi & Jakupi, 2019). In other words, for some women, joining ISIS and travelling to the war zones in Syria and Iraq was about claiming their agency. The second phase focused on narratives on the role of women as defenders of Islam. Here is an example of a message based on this approach in a Telegram

channel: "Our beloved sisters, please share and follow this channel (on Telegram). The Kuffar don't want us to be safe but we have a duty to protect our Ummah and our Islamic State. The apps downloaded from this channel ensures that you don't provide your personal information to Apple or Android, keeping you safer" (ibid., p. 30). Women were specifically targeted in the IS recruitment strategy and this has been documented in court transcripts that show that **in some cases the women persuaded their husbands to join the Islamic State** (ibid.). The role of women in Kosovo both as a major pillar of community resilience to radicalisation but also as actors in the radicalisation process was affirmed in the focus group discussions in the municipality of Podujeva. However, the patriarchal mindset is present in the community with respect to their understanding of radicalisation of women in Kosovo, as explained by this quote from a journalist in the municipality of Mitrovica South that describes the perception of the radicalisation path: "In my opinion, men were inspired, persuaded. In addition to the media products that both men and women have access to, they were convinced by holding numerous meetings with people sharing the same idea, which were held in the mosques. Women, on the other hand, have received information and instruction from their husbands. Here it is seen that the husband has the main role in the family, which is patriarchal. That is, if the husband has decided to go, his wife and children have joined him." (Journalist-Mitrovica-South, 2021).

The religious leaders in Kosovo uphold and promote the role of women in countering violent extremism. The head imam of the Islamic Community in the Municipality of Mitrovica South stated that "**women in general, and mothers in particular, are agents of change in the community**. They notice the early elements of radicalisation and violent extremism in children. This opens the way for a response. With the local anti-violent extremism strategy adopted by the municipality of Mitrovica, we have developed practical activities for women on how they can contribute to preventing the spread of violent extremism and radicalisation." (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-South, 2021). Existing research shows that "women in Kosovo play important roles in violent extremist groups, such as ISIS and al-Nusra, and display a great deal of personal agency both in fighting against violent extremism and in taking part in such groups when they find them attractive" (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2017, p. 9)

Human Rights Watch "found that rape and other forms of **sexual violence** were used in Kosovo in 1999 as weapons of war and instruments of systematic 'ethnic cleansing'" (HRW, 2000). The victims of rape during the Kosovo war have started to come forward with their stories and emphasise the lack of justice for their traumatic experiences (Haxhiaj, 2021). Kosova Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims has documented the cases of rape and provides important support to the victims. However, the crimes committed during the Kosovo war, including the rape of thousands of women and men, are not recognised by Serbia and this forms part of the narratives concerning the grievances of the Albanian community in Kosovo. The Kosovo Serbs believe that this is part of the "blame Serbs for everything" narrative (Focus-Group-Mitrovica-North, 2021).

When it comes to the participation of women as vectors of radicalising messages, they are involved to a lesser degree in comparison to men. Photos and **videos showing physical gatherings of radical groups seem to reveal a much lower female presence** in such events and even when they are represented, women tend to have a secondary role. However, they are **more likely to be members of Facebook groups and to like/follow pages with extreme content**. With respect to Macedonian language narratives, references to traditional family values and stereotyped gender roles are dominant. Women

are mostly referred to as mothers, sisters and wives who supported and contributed to the fight for the Macedonian cause. There are mentions of women who fought alongside men, both throughout history and in recent events (such as the 27 April incidents) and their efforts and sacrifices are praised. However, women are generally not supposed to do the same things that men do because biologically they are predetermined to a different societal function – giving birth and taking care of the family. **Feminism is denounced as a Western import which threatens and weakens society** because it lures women away from the family, transforms them into "gold diggers" and makes them promiscuous.

While important gender gaps persist throughout the country and across all issue areas, **rural women seem to be particularly affected by gender stereotypes**. Almost all rural women under 30 would like to leave the villages for the cities and only 30% of the women above 30 would like to stay. Furthermore, women from non-majority ethnic communities are more affected than Macedonian women when it comes to economic empowerment (only a quarter of ethnic Albanian women in rural areas have income and are financially independent, as opposed to half of ethnic Macedonian women), education (the gender balance in education in the ethnic Albanian community lags behind the Macedonian rate), access to healthcare in their mother tongue, etc. (CRPM, 2012).

In terms of tactics and targeting, men are targeted to a greater extent than women by extremist groups (Focus Group conclusions from Kumanovo and Tetovo). However, the fieldwork revealed that **extremist groups continue to target women of all ages through the mobilisation of gender-based narratives and online propaganda, using gender stereotypes and norms**. In the context of Islamist radicalisation, this is evident from the **existence of specific Facebook pages/profiles and YouTube channels dedicated exclusively to women**. Women are at the epicentre of Islamic propaganda due to their position at the heart of the family and the influence they have on its members. These pages give the impression that they are created by women in an effort to promote a sense of inclusivity, solidarity and a feeling of belonging to a digital community.[32] The way in which these profiles are structured gives the impression that they are working in two directions: to spread the narratives of religious radicalisation among women by presenting them as strong enough to have a role in their societies, and to show how women should behave based on the strict moral code imposed by the religion. For example, these pages are full of photos which show women and girls dressed in the hijab or niqab, supporting the idea that "wearing niqab reflects the true beauty of women".

Extremist groups and radical imams on social media tend to advocate for women to cover themselves, accusing women who wear Western-style dress of being immoral. The **campaign against women's emancipation**, which is seen as undermining Islamic values and "male dominance", tends to go hand in hand with attacks on the democratic system. Liberal societies with higher gender equality are seen as the invention of the West whose purpose is to destroy Islam from within through the propagation of secularism and "immodesty of women". This kind of argument is very common in the sermons of many imams preaching in various mosques in North Macedonia. Qëndrim Jashari and Sadullah Bajrami, both imams in NMK, are well-known for their **misogyny**. In one of his videos, Jashari describes women

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[32] "Robresha e Allahut (Albanian) – Allah's slave – Sara Inshaallah Mujahid (English)" and "Pasuesja e Synetit (Albanian) – The Successor of Sunnah (English)" are two Facebook Profiles supporting the narratives used by Islamic radicalists.

as dangerous, "evil beings who with their tricks can lead husbands along the wrong path or to bad things".[33] He therefore advises men to be careful around women. Sadullah Bajrami is also well-known for his ultra-conservative ideas, especially on how women should dress and their role in society.[34] This obsession with the way women should behave can be seen as an effort to establish a specific pattern of gender roles.

> *"… whether men or women, everyone is susceptible to this kind of extremism. Now all women have phones and see things online more than men. Men work more, while women don't, so they use the internet more, see these websites, share them, talk to each other, and say 'this is the right thing to do' …"* (Focus-Group-Kumanovo, 2021)

Extremist mobilisation relies on gender roles in which men belong to the frontline as protectors of the family, while women come second, playing a key care-taker role by raising the children of Islamist fighters. Since women are indoctrinating the future fighters, they should strictly adhere to Islamic values and rules. However, the contribution of women in NMK is not restricted to their traditional role as a "good wife and mother". It goes beyond the simplistic, stereotypical approach which presents women only as victims, accompanying family members or non-significant members of the group. **Beyond these roles, women have been found to fulfil other roles as recruiters or propagandists** and are active in both the online and offline spaces. The increased activity on social media profiles run by women shows that **people are highly influenced by the propaganda shared by individuals who belong to the same sex as them**. In addition, the reactions to different posts show that **women are more likely to be members of Facebook groups and to like/follow pages with extremist content**.

Key factors influencing women's participation in extremist groups include high social marginalisation levels, poor local governance in rural areas and women's experience of domestic violence along with overall gender inequality. Based on 2019 data, it is estimated that 14 women from NMK have travelled to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters, out of a total of 156 Macedonian citizens (Kelmendi V. , 2019). Further cases have been reported of women and girls being radicalised in the country but identified before reaching Syria (Selimi & Stojkovski, 2016). Some of the NMK citizens who travelled to Syria were accompanied by their wives. In some cases, this was not the result of their own willingness but was due to the influence of their families. Many of them are now back in NMK and are expected to participate actively in the country's ongoing programme for the reintegration and resocialisation of former foreign fighters. When it comes to the other forms of extremism, while **sport hooliganism and**

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[33] The video entitled "Dredhitë e Grave (Albanian) – Women's Tricks (English)" features a sermon by Qëndrim Jashari where the imam is expressing his anti-women feelings.

[34] In the video entitled "A lejohet me punu në bank qe punon me kamat? (Albanian) – Is it allowed to work in a bank that works with interest rates? (English)", Imam Sadullah Bajrami supports the idea that "the 'good women' who will be inhabitants of heaven are dressed according to the Muslim rules without wearing treasures or showing part of their bodies to the members of their families".

nationalist and right-wing extremism have traditionally been perceived mainly as a problem among men, the North Macedonian example showed that **women have also a key role in these movements**. Women who are part of these organisations prefer to operate in the background and play a variety of roles: as activists, street fighters and leaders of local branches, protest coordinators and internet activists.

Women are vital agents of change in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in North Macedonia and Kosovo. The important role that women can play in community resilience is already recognised by CSOs in projects like the "MotherSchools", a Women without Borders project that was launched in the municipality of Chair in Skopje in 2016 and since then has expanded to other municipalities such as Tetovo. The programme aims "to both heighten concerned mothers' awareness of the threat posed by radicalisation and build their capacity to safeguard their families and communities against this threat". The programme has helped mothers to identify early warning signs of radicalisation in their children and promote counter-narratives to violence. However, **women are still underrepresented in the public/government sphere, particularly in leadership positions in the security sector**. The non-inclusion of women in these sectors does not allow them to have a say in key decision-making processes related to P/CVE. The role of women in successfully countering violent extremism and building resilience is acknowledged but is not fully understood by all community leaders.

The fieldwork revealed the need for more gender awareness in P/CVE approaches in NMK and Kosovo due to the very simple fact that through their work in community organisations, schools, CSOs and families, women tend to be the first to identify the initial symptoms of radicalisation and should therefore be trained so that they can respond appropriately at an early stage.

6   Conclusion

Ethno-political and religious radicalisation remains a challenge for both Kosovo and North Macedonia. In both countries, the fieldwork shows a **growing trend of violent right-wing extremism and ethno-nationalism**. In the case of North Macedonia, **sport hooliganism** appears to be a further challenge at the macro (societal) and micro (individual) levels throughout the country and in specific municipalities, including Tetovo and Kumanovo. The state has managed to avert some of the more acute threats, including internal attacks by foreign fighters and radical figures who have been released from prison.

The fieldwork shows that key **factors of vulnerability to ethno-political radicalisation in both countries are the complex inter-ethnic relations, the failure to effectively deal with the past and unresolved bilateral disputes with neighbouring countries**. For Kosovo, relevant factors include the competing narratives between the two main communities in the country, Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, about what happened during the brutal war of the 1990s, as well as the ongoing dispute with Serbia over the status of Kosovo as an independent state. This issue is closely linked with the failure to deal effectively with the past and the legacy of conflict in Kosovo. For North Macedonia, this is also linked with the past, the 2001 conflict and the country's longstanding bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, which have led ethnic Macedonians to believe that their state, identity and culture are

under attack. Macedonians seem to believe that some of the solutions to bilateral disputes are aimed at humiliating their country.

What has added to the frustration of both Kosovars and Macedonians and inadvertently empowered ethno-political radicalisation is the **disappointment or disillusionment of the citizens of both countries with the European Union (EU)**, stemming from the failures of the European integration process. The Macedonians agreed to change the name of their country in 2018 in order to move forward with the EU accession process, and yet the opening of the negotiations has been blocked by a single Member State that demands concessions on areas such as language which touch upon the foundations of their country's cultural identity. For Kosovo, it has to do with the EU's failure to deliver a visa liberalisation process for the Kosovars, who remain the only citizens of South-East Europe to still require a visa to enter the Schengen area.

The **religiously inspired radicalisation in both countries is strongly connected with internal and external efforts to control the meaning and interpretation of religious doctrine**. In the case of Kosovo, religiously inspired radicalisation is seen as a coordinated attack against what has been dubbed by scholars and local religious leaders "traditional Islam". In a similar context, in North Macedonia, the interpretation and practice of religion have been exponentially challenged by the emerging cadre of young religious scholars educated in other countries, including the MENA region and the Middle East. In both countries, **religious radicalisation is utilised to strengthen "othering"** and this is present in both Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities. In the case of Kosovo, being Orthodox Christian is essential to the identity of the Kosovar Serbs, and in the same way for ethnic Macedonians religion is central to their identity. In other words, cumulative extremisms are observed in both countries.

The governments of Kosovo and North Macedonia have prioritised policies and programmes for dealing with religious radicalisation and violent extremism. In this respect, **both countries have adopted specific legislation and strategies and have created government units to counter and prevent violent extremism**. International actors are also actively engaged in both countries to support prevention and countering of violent extremism. **The European Union (EU) has contributed significantly** in both countries by supporting policy-making by the government as well as education, research and awareness-raising campaigns among civil society organisations. While the progress is evident in both countries when it comes to the institutional framework for P/CVE, **governments in Kosovo and North Macedonia lack the capacities and the know-how to deal effectively with online (de)radicalisation**. However, the main **initiatives here come from local and community leaders**, such as FolTash in Kosovo. 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 grown their advantage in the digital space by using a variety of narratives in order to convince their targeted audiences and populations. Although there is a measure of regulation of the online space, the state's failure to deal successfully with online extremism has allowed radical groups and extremist figures to be active all over the internet. **Social media and social networks play an important role in fostering counter-narratives but their potential seems to be underexploited** by both the government and civil society organisations.

With respect to gender, there is **limited understanding of how gender norms shape society** and how patriarchal values are interwoven at different levels of public and social life. **A persistent patriarchal mindset in both countries is detrimental to the security and agency of women**. The public discussions and the way in which public policies in both countries have been framed reveal a level of gender stereotyping, e.g., in the discussions concerning foreign fighters, whereby in some government communications it is assumed that all the fighters are male. The research shows that for some women, travelling to Syria and Iraq to join the fight was a way to acquire agency. **Women are vital agents of change in countering violent extremism** in North Macedonia and Kosovo. The important role that women can play in community resilience is already recognised by CSOs in both countries through the implementation of projects such as "MotherSchools", a Women without Borders programme, and the Partners Kosovo programmes. The fieldwork shows **that communities in both countries do not regard women as more or less vulnerable than men**. However, the participation of women as vectors of radicalising messages is lower in comparison to the participation of men. A key finding on gender relates to tactics and targeting, with men being targeted more often by extremist groups.

Kosovo and North Macedonia have adopted and implement important P/CVE policies and programmes. **The success of such online and offline deradicalisation efforts will depend on effective inter-institutional coordination, funding and empowerment of the municipal authorities and civil society**. In both countries, **civil society is a trusted and effective actor** when it comes to deradicalisation programmes and it can support the public institutions in developing the necessary capacities to deal with online aspect of (de)radicalisation.

7 Recommendations

Based on the research conducted by KCSS and ELIAMEP in Kosovo and North Macedonia, the following key recommendations have been developed and are applicable to both countries.

7.1 Recommendations for the government

- The government should address the problems created by the educational segregation between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians in North Macedonia. The local authorities should find ways to bring communities from both ethnic groups together through joint activities as the only way to address the misconceptions and stereotypes of the past.

- The government should develop capacities to deal with online (de)radicalisation and invest in better understanding far-right extremism.

- The government of Kosovo should implement an outreach campaign and build trust and relationships with the Serbian community in Kosovo.

- The government should couple P/CVE actions with community- and relationship-building. Community-building programmes can strengthen community resilience, capacity and leadership. The creation of referral programmes and training for social service providers, school counsellors, teachers and psychologists, law enforcement agencies and clergy on how to identify individuals susceptible to P/CVE could contribute to the effectiveness of these programmes.

- The government should examine the possibility of making internet literacy and civility part of the school curricula. Media literacy programmes can enhance students' critical thinking skills and awareness of the tactics of online ideological propagation and recruitment.

- The government should develop an effective counter-messaging strategy, including training for its local and national actors on how to produce persuasive counter-narratives. A cross-departmental entity tasked with coordinating all actors engaged in the counter-narrative strategy could help to ensure that government communications are effective in countering violent extremist discourse.

- The government should improve community policing capacities by organising mixed group training, especially 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 spaces online where extremist groups radicalise individuals.

7.2 Recommendations for the international community

- The US government and the EU must work together in putting an end to EU policy-makers' ambivalence towards the region, closing the gap created by the stagnation in the EU accession process. This is the first necessary step in challenging the influence of radical and extremist groups in North Macedonia. Stagnation in the EU accession process is mobilising radical forces from all sides.

- The international community must increase its recognition of far-right extremism and ethno-political radicalisation as problems for the stability and security of the Western Balkans region. There should be increased support for research to better understand the impact of far-right extremism in the Western Balkans. Religiously inspired radicalisation is not the only form of extremism threatening societal peace in both countries. In this sense, the international community should reconsider its discourse when addressing the issue of violent extremism in both countries.

- The international community should continue funding non-governmental community-based actors to develop grassroots programmes but in a more structured way in order to secure effectiveness and continuity. Community-based NGOs are the most appropriate agents of CVE messaging and other activities.

- The international community should increase the efforts for a successful process of normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia in the framework of the EU-facilitated dialogue. The normalisation process should include some elements of dealing with the past, such as the resolving of the issue of missing persons.

7.3 Recommendations for civil society

- Civil society is a credible actor with the capacities to support the government's efforts in the prevention and countering of violent extremism. In particular, civil society has developed capacities in the field of online (de)radicalisation and public institutions can benefit from such expertise. However, the government must improve platforms and mechanisms to coordinate the work with civil society.

- Faith-based non-governmental organisations have started to emerge in Kosovo and North Macedonia and are working on de-radicalisation projects. As examples from Kosovo show, some important counter-narrative projects are led by former religious leaders. However, support for these initiatives from government and the funding community has been limited. Civil society organisations must assume a more pro-active role and take ownership of the P/CVE projects. Civil society should lead efforts and advocate for greater inclusion of the gender perspective in the government's P/CVE programmes and policies.

- Religious communities should play a more active role in P/CVE actions, including increasing their presence in online platforms where religious practitioners can spread messages of unity. The engagement of religious practitioners in raising awareness and dispelling myths and misconceptions about ethno-national and religious radicalisation through the use of technology and the online space is more necessary than ever. The Islamic Religious Communities of North Macedonia and Kosovo should enhance their cooperation with national institutions and NGOs in order to prevent the expansion of extremist ideas through the misinterpretation of Islam. They should also work to establish a unified approach among their practitioners on the issue of radicalisation and extremism and, in cooperation with the relevant authorities, prevent the establishment of parallel structures such as madrasas, schools or kindergartens by radical groups. The Orthodox Church in NMK should also start engaging more actively.

- The local CSOs should take ownership of the projects in P/CVE and develop the capacities needed for that endeavour. Once local CSOs increase ownership of their projects and initiatives, they can influence donors to adapt their funding mechanisms 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 youth. While it is indeed a field of major importance, other important areas and actors such as the elderly, parents and religious practitioners should not be neglected. Local CSOs should focus on the parent-student-teacher nexus when implementing their P/CVE projects.

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