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PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Preventing violent extremism, the Balkans

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Policy brief summarising the EU and other stakeholder's prevention strategy towards violent extremism in the region, the Balkans

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Editors:	Diana Mishkova, Simeon Evstatiev
Authors:	Arber Fetiu (GLPS), Diana Mishkova (CAS), Edina Bećirević (AI), Evlogi Stanchev (CAS), Leonie Vrugtman (IDM), Predrag Petrović (BCSP), Simeon Evstatiev (CAS), Stoyan Doklev (CAS)
Reviewers:	Morten Bøås, Kari Osland
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Introduction

Aims, regional background and case studies

Violent extremism (VE) has spread throughout the Balkans, particularly their Western part, since the collapse of former Yugoslavia and the bloody wars accompanying its disintegration. Often described as a "black hole" with a high conflictual potential, and despite certain positive developments in terms of economic and political reforms over the last decades, the phenomenon of VE is one of those spheres, where disturbing tendencies and challenges persist and have even multiplied.

The present brief analyzes the EU and other stakeholders' prevention strategies towards violent extremism in the Western Balkans (WB), focusing on Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Serbia with the aim to outline the dominant external approaches and narratives behind the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) and the perceptions thereof by local stakeholders and other domestic voices. Approaches are defined along the continuum of "hard" and "soft" policies and measures. "Hard" approaches imply security and securitization, while "soft" approaches entail programs aimed at social cohesion. The former signify interventions on behalf of law enforcement cooperation, data exchange and intelligence, combating terrorism financing, prosecution, border control etc., while the latter refer to interventions pursuing social cohesion. "Soft" approaches thus entail promoting tolerance, countering hate speech, reintegration of radicalized individuals, etc. by fostering rule of law, democratic institutions, inter-religious dialogue, youth and women empowerment, etc. These are in effect two complementary approaches to stability and conflict resolution, both envisaging distinct training programs and capacity building.

Until now, Islamic radicalism has been the main focus of prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) strategies in the region. The emphasis of both domestic and international security officials on Salafism-inspired Islamist extremism came about first in BiH, where several terrorist attacks and terrorism-related incidents occurred in the post-war period. Facilitated by weak state institutions, lax borders and high crime rates, terrorist groups gained a foothold in Albania. Foreign religious foundations rushed in. Thousands of young Sunni Muslims travelled to Turkey, the Middle East and Asia, returning to Albania, Kosovo or BiH having embraced Wahhabi or Salafi interpretations of Islam at odds with the Hanafi-Maturidi tradition, which had prevailed in these countries for generations.[1]

The issue of radicalization became particularly pressing after the outbreak of the war in Syria, when the participation of citizens of these countries as foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict opened up a whole new dimension. Prior to this, local authorities as well as locally present international actors were primarily focused on the fight against terrorism, which fell under the general counterterrorism strategies that had been put in place. Over 1,070 nationals of Kosovo, BiH, North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro made their way to Syria and Iraq with the aim to join the ranks mainly of the Islamic State (IS) and to a lesser degree al-Qaeda affiliates. Other overall estimates reach 1353 men, women and children from the WB

[1] The Hanafi-Maturidis follow the Hanafi legal school (*madhhab*) in combination with Maturidi theology (*kalam*). From Ottoman times, this is the prevalent religious orientation among the Sunni Muslims in the Balkans.

Balkans travelling to Syria and Iraq.[2] From the outset of the Syrian conflict, the countries that registered some of the highest rates of jihadi mobilization in Europe are Kosovo, BiH, and North Macedonia.[3] Currently, the WB is the region with the highest number of returned foreign fighters in Europe[4], which moved it to the forefront of attention of various external stakeholders, including the EU.

PREVEX approach and methodology

Pursuing in-depth case studies of occurrence and non-occurrence of VE, the project "Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the MENA: Strengthening Resilience in Enabling Environments" (PREVEX) conducts context-sensitive research and regional comparisons in order to improve the understanding of how different drivers of VE operate and how resilience can be strengthened in "enabling environments." Given the still vague common usage of the notion "violent extremism," PREVEX seeks to understand the term more specifically – as a phased and complex process in which an individual or a group embraces a radical ideology or belief that accepts, uses or condones violence.

As PREVEX employs a "bottom-up" approach to local–global dynamics, this brief is the first of a set of policy documents evolving from the regional analysis of the Balkans starting from the other end – by "scaling down" the existing external strategies vis-à-vis the local context. The brief's methodology is based on the expertise of six contributors, desk research, and expert interviews with officials, policy analysts, and community leaders. The document synthesizes in a comparative manner and elaborates on country-by-country reports submitted to the Centre for Advanced Study (CAS) Sofia from PREVEX's WP5 partners in Albania, Kosovo, BiH and Serbia. The case study of North Macedonia has been pursued by the CAS Sofia team. Due to the restrictions enforced due to COVID-19 pandemic, research does not benefit from fieldwork .

Dominant external P/VE strategies and narratives

A number of external stakeholders have been operative in the region. They have pursued distinct strategies, developing competitive and partially overlapping approaches to both PVE and CVE. Most instrumental, next to the EU, has been the role of the United States (U.S.) working through its embassies or federal institutions like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations through its Development Program (UNDP), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as some local non-governmental/civil society organizations (NGOs/CSOs) and foundations representing nation-states like the Britain or Germany. Besides, external stakeholders active in the WB region include institutions based in the Muslim-majority world, such as the Turkish Diyanet or the

[2] Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors after the Fall of the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 12 (6), 2019, pp. 30–45.
[3] For a detailed list and breakthrough of the numbers and the proportion of foreign fighters vis-à-vis the respective Muslim populations, see Vlado Azinović, *Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, Extremism Research Forum, London: British Council, 2018, pp. 4–6.
[4] Albert Shtuni, "Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications," *CTC Sentinel* 12 (7), 2019, pp. 18–24, here 18, 20.

Hedaya – an international organization based in the United Arab Emirates and active in Central Asia, South Caucasus, Turkey and the MENA region, which has received European financing via programs, such as STRIVE Global (2015–20).[5]

Although WB countries themselves have rarely been the target of terrorist attacks inspired by Al-Qaeda or the IS, the transnational type of radicalization and VE spread throughout the region, coupled with the "export" of foreign fighters, brought Islamist violent extremism into the focus of the EU's and other external and domestic stakeholders' P/CVE strategies.

EU strategy toward VE in the Western Balkans (WB)

The EU strategy towards VE in the WB is spelled out in the EU Directive 541 of the European Parliament and the Council of Europe of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism,[6] which replaced the Council Framework Decision from 2002 (475/JHA) and amended Council Decision from 2005 (671/JHA). It builds on the EU Counterterrorism Strategy, adopted in 2005, which envisages countering radicalisation by "promoting even more vigorously good governance, human rights, democracy as well as education and economic prosperity, and engage in conflict resolution."[7] In 2020, while mentioning the dangers posed by "far-right" and "far-left" forms of VE, the EU restates that the Islamist movements, such as al-Qaeda and the IS, remain the main threat for the Union. Foregrounding the vulnerability in this respect of the WB, among other areas, the EU calls "for the focus on violent extremist Islamist ideology to be further reinforced."[8] Even in countries like BiH, where ethno-nationalist radicalization is of growing concern, the EU Delegation Advisor on CT/CVE in BiH, Holger Engelman confirms that "the most dangerous threat in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains Islamist groups."[9]

The EU possesses a set of comparative advantages when it comes to influencing the P/CVE policies of WB states. The EU enlargement and integration process is instrumental as an incentive for most of the countries to undertake various reforms concerning not only, or in some cases even primarily, implementation of preventive measures, but enforcement of the rule of law, democratisation, and transparency. This is evident in the two countries currently seeking to launch a negotiation process for EU accession – Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia. This said, security and P/CVE have not been neglected for, as an EU official in Tirana put it, "The Western Balkans are directly bordering the EU and if this region is stable and secure, it has a direct effect on the stability and security in the EU"; but he also added, "If you ask me money wise, we are not putting a lot into security."[10]

Region-wide and bilateral arrangements

[5] Hedaya, STRIVE Global Program, last accessed 14 December 2020.
[6] Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA, OJ L 88, 31.3.2017, 6–21.
[7] Council of the EU, The European Union Counter-terrorism Strategy, Doc. 14469/4/05, 30 November 2005, art. 11.
[8] European Council, Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism, 16 June 2020.
[9] Interview with Holger Engelman, 13 November 2020.
[10] Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020; interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.

Since 2018, all EU's engagements in the region have been aligned with its overall strategy for the WB, *A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans.*[11] Compared to earlier regional strategies, this one puts more emphasis on CT and P/CVE.[12] Seeking to increase their cooperation on P/CVE, the EU and the governments of WB countries signed a *Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans 2018–2020.*[13] This action plan builds on the outcomes of a series of high-level CT visits (so-called CT Dialogues), conducted in 2017–18 with the participation of ministers of the interior and justice, police heads, intelligence agencies, CSOs and umbrella structures like national CVE Coordination Centres.[14]

In addition to and complementing this joint initiative, between 2018 and 2020 the EU concluded separate "arrangements on antiterrorism cooperation" with the governments of all WB states. According to the specific priority actions they envisage, we can distinguish two groups of states:

- *Albania, North Macedonia*[15] and *Serbia*[16], where the main priority actions are:

1) Stepping up efforts to P/CVE, which include de-radicalisation initiatives, training local practitioners (teachers, local government officials and social workers, community policing officers, representatives of religious communities); building strategic communication capacities; applying a multi-agency approach that includes civil society organisations; addressing online radical content.
2) Amending legislation on anti-money laundering and terrorism financing; increasing financial investigative capacities.

- *Kosovo*[17] and *Bosnia and Herzegovina*[18], where measures are focused on:

1) Addressing the challenges posed by returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTF) and their families through: systematic investigation and prosecution of criminal acts committed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF); disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes inside and outside prisons; sharing of information on RFTF with EU Member States.
2) Updating the national criminal codes to align them with EU legislation and close gaps in the criminalization of terrorism-related offenses.
3) Rectifying deficiencies in and implementing the legal framework for criminalizing money laundering and terrorism financing.
4) Setting up (in BiH) of a Europol National Contact Point to enhance cooperation with Europol; pro-actively exchange information with Europol on returning FTF and money laundering.

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[11] European Commission, A Credible Enlargement Perspective for an Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans, 2018, last accessed 3 December 2020.
[12] Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.
[13] European Commission, Signature of the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans, 5 October 2018, last accessed 4 December 2020.
[14] Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020.
[15] European Commission, Commission and the authorities of Albania and North Macedonia endorse arrangements on counterterrorism cooperation, 9 October 2019, last accessed 6 December 2020.
[16] European Commission, Commission and the authorities of Serbia endorse an arrangement on counterterrorism cooperation, 19 November 2019, last accessed 6 December 2020.
[17] European Commission, Commission and the authorities of Kosovo endorse an arrangement on counterterrorism, 30 October 2019, last accessed 6 December 2020.
[18] European Commission, Commission and the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina endorse an arrangement on counterterrorism cooperation, 19 November 2019, last accessed 6 December 2020.

Capacity building that enables local institutions to address the prevention of radicalization and VE is at the heart of the EU policies. However, information on the effectiveness of the projects implemented so far remains scant.

For all these countries a uniform structural measure has been envisaged – the establishment of National Coordinators for CT and C/PVE, tasked with threat assessment analysis, background analysis of various forms of radicalization and VE, and devising a coordination mechanism for new local projects on PVE. The "arrangements" prescribe biannual reports to the Commission on the state of their implementation, including difficulties they might be facing.

In addition, the EU-funded CTMORSE project provides coordination, monitoring and knowledge base, as well as technical and implementation support for interventions in areas of EU CT and P/CVE initiatives.[19] In line with its strategy, the EU is seeking to expand the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) to include the WB, effectively integrating practitioners from the region in the EU-based network of 6000 academics and policymakers working on P/CVE and creating more exchange among WBs practitioners themselves.[20] RAN organises thematic Working Groups for frontline practitioners; produces publications on violent extremism and radicalisation that lead to terrorism (VERLT), the status of VE, lessons learned; and contributes to EU policies on CT and P/CVE.[21]

Other local international actors representing EU member states are also involved in PVE initiatives. Recently, the government of Netherlands has become one of the key international stakeholders on PVE through a major regional project covering six countries (Albania, BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo), on *Supporting Western Balkan Governments in Preventing and Responding to Challenges Related to Violent Extremism and Returnees from Conflict Zones*, aimed at direct interventions with RFTF, their rehabilitation and reintegration. The German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, and Berghof Foundation, as well as the British Council have also run C/PVE projects.

While seeking to encompass the whole of the WB through a web of coordinated and connected agreements and convergent actions – as it is attested by the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism signed between the EU and the governments of WB countries, supplemented by bilateral agreements – the EU has made a concomitant effort to devise its C/PVE policies in the region in a context- and country-sensitive manner. In countries like Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, where VE is considered less strongly manifested and/or a pre-accession negotiation process is pending, prevention is targeting primarily: (i) *infrastructural and systemic reforms concerning rule of law, democratic procedures, human rights and transparent governance and,* (ii) *'soft', community-based PVE measures. In 'hot' areas, such as Kosovo and BiH, the EU's C/PVE policies are primarily:* (i) *security-based and* (ii) *prioritize programs for de-radicalization in prisons and rehabilitation of released violent extremist offenders. At the same time, the EU (unlike the U.S.) lacks the proper instruments to pursue consistent securitization in the region, in particular military forces and intelligence services (save*

[19] CTMORSE (Counter-Terrorism Monitoring, Reporting and Support Mechanism), last accessed 5 December 2020. The website provides a clickable global map of the counties the security of which the EU has supported.
[20] Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020; interview with EU official, 9 November 2020.
[21] EU Migration and Home Affairs, About RAN, 2020, last accessed 6 December 2020.

Europol). Other limitations affect the repatriation of FTFs: as the EU member states do not have a coherent strategy among themselves, the EU cannot propose a common strategy for and assistance in repatriation. Finally, while some Western governments have begun investing in projects intended to combat far-right extremism inspired by ethno-nationalism, especially in BiH and Serbia, the majority of international efforts remain focused on Islamist VE.

Approaches of the U.S. and other non-EU stakeholders

- United States of America

The U.S. Embassy, the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are key external actors on the PVE scene in the whole WB region. The U.S. has been involved in many projects in Kosovo and has played an important and proactive role in the development of counterterrorism policies. U.S.-commissioned PVE researches, often pioneering in the region as a whole, have been crucial in the development of the respective National C/PVE Strategies, while U.S. agencies have played a crucial role in their implementation.

In *Kosovo,* the CT and C/PVE role of the U.S. has been conspicuous, having supported major projects focusing on Kosovo's RFTF and addressing risk assessment of VE[22] as well as root causes, contexts and drivers of radicalization and VE.[23] The U.S. Embassy has also supported local NGOs, conducting research and implementing PVE-related initiatives, as well as PVE initiatives led by international actors, including *MotherSchools Kosovo* (by Mothers without Borders),[24] municipal training, capacity building of the Kosovo Police and the development of local PVE initiatives.[25] At the same time, the *National Strategy against Terrorism and Action Plan 2018 – 2023*,[26] the drafting of which was supported by the U.S. Embassy and ICITAP and is in line with the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy, prescribes no specific preventive measures with regard to PVE, while referring to the previous *National PVE Strategy* (2015-20) as the ultimate reference for PVE. The main foci in the new Strategy are the Kosovo RFTF, while stating as its aim "countering and combating extremist or radical ideologies of whatever nature, which may lead to the use of violence." Actions proposed by the strategy feature strengthening borders to better monitor the mobility of potential terrorists, building institutional capacity to effectively prosecute and convict suspects, and establishing or developing local-international cooperation.

In *Albania*, too, the U.S. Embassy is one of the biggest funders of P/CVE-related projects implemented by the state as well as CSOs. Following the drafting of the first-ever study on VE in Albania that supported the elaboration of the National CVE Strategy, the Embassy

[22] USAID. *Kosovo Violent Extremism Risk Assessment April-May 2015*, 2015 last accessed 11 December 2020.
[23] Shpend Kursani, *Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Pristina: KCSS, 2015.
[24] For more information, see https://wwb.org/activity/motherschools-kosovo/
[25] Ellis Grace, Kayla Freemon, Stephanie Palermo, Sheridan Sullivant, Kirsten Wade, *Community Safety Action Teams: A Catalyst for Improving Community-Police Relations in Kosovo*, Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2020.
[26] North Macedonia, *National Strategy against Terrorism and Action Plan 2018–2023*, last accessed 12 December 20202.

funded two consecutive national assessments on VE in 2018 and 2021.[27] In the last few years, Albanian State Police has worked closely with U.S. agencies "to align Albanian government requirements with U.S. expertise and resources, ensuring the Albanian government develops focused CT capabilities."[28] The U.S. Embassy is also the main donor to Albania's largest NGO-based *School as Community Centre* initiatives and supports long-term projects aimed at promoting civic knowledge, religious tolerance, and faith-based education among students of religious high schools. It also runs an annual small grants programme on P/CVE, focusing on building resilient communities and a safer cyber ecosystem, raising awareness for VERLT and its risks and improving the capacity of media, youth, women, teachers, and local structures such as LPSC.

In *North Macedonia* and *BiH,* the Department of State has been supporting, since 2015, a number of bilateral and regional trainings for law enforcement officials, investigators, prosecutors, and judges "to increase capacity to address foreign terrorist fighter-related cases and threats." [29] In *North Macedonia,* it has fostered programs for the rehabilitation and reintegration of RFTF family members. North Macedonian experts mention Kosovo as a positive example of successful work towards re-socialisation of RFTF. Washington is perceived by local actors as playing the leading role by supporting relevant projects, while the North Macedonian PCV/E Coordinator works mainly with the U.S. Embassy in Skopje in addressing the reintegration of RFTF.[30]

Characteristic of the U.S. CT and C/PVE in *BiH* and *Serbia* is the official recognition that in these two countries "extremist ideology and regional nationalist groups are potential sources of terrorism" and of "the revitalization of terrorist ideologies, and opportunities for self-radicalization to terrorism, including racially and ethnically motivated terrorism" as one of "the [U.S.] main terrorism concerns."[31] In *BiH* the primary US PVE program, since 2017, has been run by the USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), aimed "to strengthen positive political and social actors and discourses to provide alternatives to extremist voices and influences."[32] Initially launched in response to the "concern about the number of foreign fighters from the Balkans that were going to Syria and Iraq," in the past two years the program goals have expanded to include forms of extremism other than Salafism/Islamic radicalism, such as ethno-nationalism. The explanation given is that, with the defeat of the IS, Bosnia no longer faces the same pull for foreign fighters, and research indicates Islamic radicalism within the country seems to have shifted away from promoting jihad to legal but still potentially problematic topics, such as lifestyle and culture changes for BiH citizens. Accordingly, USAID/OTI has expanded its definition of what the PVE means in the Bosnian context and its projects are now focusing on ethno-nationalist and religious extremism in parallel.[33] Other US

[27] For the studies on VE funded by the U.S. Embassy and conducted by IDM, see Study "Violent Extremism" in Albania, 2018, last accessed 12 December 2020.
[28] U. S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Albania*, last accessed 11 December 2020.
[29] Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015, Macedonia* and *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, Macedonia*, last accessed 12 December 2020.
[30] Interview with Marjan Gjurovski, expert in regional security, Professor at the Skopje Faculty of Security and Vice-Rector of St. Kliment Ohridski University in North Macedonia, 22 November 2020.
[31] Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Bosnia and Herzegovina*; Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Serbia, last accessed 12 December 2020.
[32] https://www.usaid.gov/stabilization-and-transitions/bosnia-herzegovina
[33] US official

intervention in BiH are primarily security-based, focused on helping the government in returning former IS fighters returning from the battlefields in Iraq and Syria (repatriation program).[34]

In *Serbia,* the U.S. have neither directly supported any projects nor engaged in countering extremism. In 2018 and 2019, however, USAID supported a comprehensive research led by the non-governmental Center for Free Elections and Democracy with the aim to identify the root causes and drivers of VE in order to assist the government and communities to "identify, report, investigate, prosecute and prevent VE, as well as build resilience to VE.[35] The special emphasize was on identifying groups of people with extreme views but also those who could also go beyond embracing extreme and radical views and resort to violence in defending or promoting their beliefs. The research was based on public opinion poll supplemented with focus groups and interviews with extremists. However, research findings have not been disclosed to the public.

- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

Of the WB regions, Albania, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and far less so Kosovo and Serbia, are in the focus of OSCE's PVE programs. According to an OSCE report, it professes implementation of a human rights-based and "whole-of-society" cooperative approach to CT and C/PVE rather than state-sanctioned security-based "hard" policies.[36] The OSCE seeks to perform monitoring and consulting functions, participates in the drafting and implementation of the national C/PVC strategies in the above three countries, and focuses on programmes addressing: VE risk assessment, awareness raising, interfaith dialogue and specialized workshops with imams, de-radicalization in prisons, educational reform, rehabilitation and reintegration programs. A multi-annual OSCE–UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) capacity-building program supports national efforts to counter terrorist financing in South-Eastern Europe and provide border security training.[37]

- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

The UNDP Office in *Kosovo* has been a major actor in the PVE strategies, having contributed to the assessment of the conditions leading to radicalization and the development, drafting and implementation of the National Strategy. It has commissioned numerous reports and evaluations on the issue of PVE.[38] In 2016, UNDP helped develop and establish the first referral mechanism implemented in the municipality of Gjilan/Gnjilane, applying multi-agency

[34] https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2019/12/19/prva-grupa-deportiranih-drzavljana-bih-iz-sirije-stigla-u-sarajevo

[35] USAID, Violent Extremism Assessment Serbia/Face to Face Research Data, 5 September 2019, last accessed 14 December 2020.

[36] Alush Doda, Marina Mclellan, *Promoting a Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: Summary Report of Roundtable Discussions on the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism in the Republic of North Macedonia*, Skopje: OSCE, 2020, pp. 11–13.

[37] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Regional Programme for South Eastern Europe (2016–2019)*, United Nations, 2015, 42 – 43, last accessed 14 December 2020.

[38] The most important UNDP commissioned reports are the following: UNDP (Unpublished) (2016), *Comprehensive Assessment to Counter Violent Radicalization in Kosovo*; A. Goshi, and D. Van Leuven (2017), *Kosovo-wide assessment of perceptions of radicalization at the community level*; UNDP (2017), *Public Pulse Analysis on Prevention of Violent Extremism in Kosovo.* UNDP; B. Xharra and N. Gojani, *Understanding Push and Pull Factors through Primary Interviews with Returned Foreign Fighters in Kosovo*, UNDP, 2017.

and multi-stakeholder approach, to provide support for at-risk individuals. The objective of the referral mechanism is to establish a cooperative bond between the local authorities, the police and the local community by gathering recommendations, assessing threats and developing adoptable support. In *Serbia*, UNDP has supported a comprehensive public opinion poll on socio-economic drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism among youth in 2016 which was conducted by public opinion poll agency – CeSID.[39] The UNDP offices in the different WB countries has also supported promotion of best practices and through numerous programs has pursued the objectives outlined in the National Strategy. In 2018, it published a *Teacher's Manual* on PVE. [40]

- Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), a public-private global fund to support local, grass-roots counter radicalization and recruitment efforts in at-risk communities, has been active in Kosovo since 2006. It has contributed to the creation of *Resilient Community*, a consortium of NGOs aimed at promoting community resilience to prevent and combat VE and radicalization. In its work on PVE, the GCERF has focused primarily on the creation of employment opportunities, improved education and vocational training.

- Turkey

There is scant public information about the kind of involvement the Turkish state supports in the WB. In *Albania*, Turkey has good political connections, business enterprises (there are a lot of Turkish companies, especially in mining, energy, etc.), invests in building mosques, religious and secular education (Turkey took over Albania's best performing university in 2018). It also supports community-focused projects, however, these are not intended as P/CVE projects, but pursue increasing influence via community engagement. In *Northern Macedonia*, Turkey exerts considerable influence over the Muslim community via its Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA).[41] These Turkish institutions cooperate closely with North Macedonia's Islamic Religious Community (IRC) for the preservation of the Ottoman heritage in the country.

The Turkish factor is sometimes depicted as an obstacle to the infiltration of "radical Islam" in the country.[42] According to Metin Izeti, Professor at the University of Tetovo, "Turkey is the shield against religious extremism in Balkans."[43] Some Western observers, however, are less sanguine. As one of them said, "The Turkish TİKA which is closely related to the ruling AKP and the Muslim Brotherhood has invested in this region huge amounts of money disguised as funding for the restoration of religious sites, NGOs and even political parties. Saudi Arabia is doing the same via fake NGOs."[44]

In view of the scarcity of public information, more extensive country-specific field research must be undertaken before a fuller picture of Turkey's involvement in the WB and its ramifications for the C/PVE could emerge.

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[39] *Survey of the drivers of youth radicalism and violent extremism in Serbia*, Belgrade: CeSID and UNDP, 2016.
[40] UNDP, *Prevention of Violent Extremism: Teacher's Manual*, 2018, last accessed 10 December 2020.
[41] *Facebook.com/TIKA.Makedonya*; *Twitter.com/TIKA_Uskup*, last accessed 10 December 2020.
[42] *Time.mk/arhiva*, last accessed 10 December 2020.
[43] *TIKA.gov.tr*, last accessed 10 December 2020.
[44] *Mk.voanews.com*, last accessed 10 December 2020.

Despite stronger leaning towards security-based "hard" measures in some cases, particularly Kosovo, the U.S. C/PVE approach, similar to the EU's, involves a mixture of "soft" and "hard" measures, in different proportions in the different countries. U.S. involvement appears to be most conspicuous on both counts in Kosovo, where EU has been trying to play a more important role only since 2017, and least so in Serbia. In all WB countries the U.S. lend expertise and resources to security, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies. While developing CT capabilities and repatriation and re-integration programs, it also contributes with a number of ambitious community-based programs, like the USAID/OTI in BiH. On the whole, the U.S. policies appear reasonably balanced between securitization and prevention and display a tendency towards expanding the definition of VE in the WB to include other forms, such as far-right ethno-nationalism in Serbia and BiH.

Considering the large areas of overlapping policies and measures between the various external stakeholders, at least two sets of questions come to the fore: about their coordination and about the comparative assessment of their effectiveness. There is much more to be desired about the first of the National CVE Centres, tasked with coordinating CVE programming among international donors and avoiding duplication of effort. In order to improve the coordination of EU and U.S. initiatives beyond incidental meetings, the EU is seeking to include the U.S. in the IISG platform.[45] *This platform coordinates security efforts of the EU, UNDP, IOM, OSCE, and DCAF Ljubljana in the WB focusing on three pillars: CT, organised crime, and border security*[46]*. As regards assessment of results, like in the case of EU projects, little information is available.*

Domestic P/CVE strategies in the Western Balkans

Each of the Western Balkan countries has developed its own strategies for countering terrorism (CT) and P/CVE introducing legal measures implemented through government institutions and national coordinators often working in cooperation with civil society.

National strategies and legal frameworks

The National P/CVE strategies of the WB states have largely evolved from their governments' cooperation with international actors. Three main dimensions have marked the development and implementation of P/CVE measures throughout the region and their entwinement with the strategies of key external stakeholders:

1. In the post-9/11 decade CT actions prevailed and were undertaken under the influence mainly of the "hard" U.S. approach under the banner of combatting al-Qaeda. Initially CT and the emerging broader P/CVE were directed towards securitization on a national and regional level, prioritizing legislation, law enforcement, and border security.
2. With the rise of the IS, and especially following the travel and return of hundreds of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans to Iraq and Syria, the "hard" measures have

[45] Interview with EU Official, 2 November 2020; interview with CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.
[46] Regional Cooperation Council, *Integrative Internal Security Governance – IISG*, 2020, last accessed 8 December 2020.

become increasingly entangled with "soft" P/CVE policies, seeking to address a broad ambit of aggravating factors and potential root causes for violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (VERLT). State institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and external stakeholders have been partaking in the drafting and implementation of these policies.

3. New legal frameworks have been introduced to fix specific penalties for involvement in terrorist activities and foreign fighting. Following the UN Security Council resolution 2178 (2014)[47], the WB governments amended their penal codes and made it illegal for one to join military operations in a foreign state, or support such operations through other means, such as calling for or helping others to join or offering financial support.

International stakeholders, especially the EU, the U.S., the UN Development Program (UNDP), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have been heavily involved in the development and implementing the WB national P/CVE strategies that were adopted between 2014 and 2018. Significantly, all these national strategies reflect the EU counter-terrorism strategy, and priority areas follow the main EU principles for countering terrorism – prevention, protection, investigation/prosecution and response.[48] Most of the objectives, measures and concrete activities in the national strategies are designed to be implemented in cooperation with the multiple branches of government and governmental institutions, civil society (NGOs and religious institutions) and professionals and international partners.

Some strategies outline a "hierarchy" of the VE threats. Such is the case of *Kosovo*, whose strategy states that "[c]urrently, the biggest threat appears to be the so called ISIL," along with "national radical extremist groups of Albanian and Serbian origin." The Kosovo strategy is the only one to explicitly mention and define religion-based terms, such as "jihad" and "Salafism". It underscores the threat posed by some extremists to eradicate the "highly tolerant and rational" Hanafi tradition replacing it with "more extreme and irrational teachings of Salafi doctrine." However, the document admits that the Salafis, who wage jihad in the sense of "violent armed war," are a minority.

The *Serbian* strategy lists the "main manifestation forms" of VE, namely religiously inspired terrorism ("radical Islamic movements", "radical religious preachers" and FTFs), ethno-nationalistic and separatist terrorism in Kosovo and Metohija, left-wing and anarchical terrorism and right-wing terrorism.

The *BiH* strategy declares that the greatest threat to its safety and security comes from the three terrorist organisations and individuals and groups inspired by their ideologies: Al Qaeda, ISIL and Al-Nusra Front. The BiH National Strategy (2015–20) and the North Macedonian strategy, while foregrounding Islamist extremism, put forward the goal "to counter all forms of extremist and terrorist activity respecting the values of democracy, rule of law and human rights and freedoms."

[47] United Nations Security Council, Counter-Terrorism Committee, Resolution 2178 (2014) Addressing the Growing Issue of Foreign Terrorist Fighters, 24 September 2014.
[48] European Council, "EU Fight against Terrorism," last accessed 12 December 2020.

The *Albanian* strategy does not present specific forms of VE. The only mention of a concrete VE threat is in a paragraph noting that Albania is among the countries playing an active role in the fight against ISIL/Daesh.

The terminology and the financial resources allocated for specific measures in the 2016 *Serbian* National Strategy (2017-21) and Action Plan[49] indicate that Serbia has primarily adopted a "hard" approach (protection, prosecution of terrorists and response in the case of a terrorist attack). Although the media and civil society are mentioned as relevant actors, the strategy prioritizes security rather than prevention. Preventive measures have been highlighted in the action plan, however, either as part of the regular activities of designated institutions or are assigned very limited budget. Moreover, although some international stakeholders encouraged the government institutions to acknowledge right-wing extremism through strategic documents, this has had no results so far.

The combination of CT and P/CVE approaches sometimes blurs the line between the two types of strategies. Although focused on two similar, yet different, kind of policies, the content of the North Macedonian CT and P/CVE strategies largely overlap.[50] Both documents argue that although VE and terrorism are two separate problems, they are "simultaneously two parts of a larger, wider and more dangerous 'cycle' of threats." Interestingly, both *North Macedonian* strategies declare that "CVE is not a soft option but rather a strategic imperative."

The 2015 *Kosovo* National Strategy of VERLT and its Action Plan, in turn, come up with detailed and well-elaborated strategic objectives to address the push and pull factors that determine and contribute to the radicalization process of individuals. It foregrounds four strategic objectives: (1) early identification of potentially violent individuals; (2) prevention through measures, such as raising awareness and capacity building; (3) intervention to help at-risk individuals and groups; and (4) de-radicalization and reintegration.[51]

The Western Balkan national strategies and action plans involve costly measures and strong commitment to their implementation, which local government typically do not provide. Seeking to fill in this gap, NGOs – with the support of international donors, such as the EU, the U.S. embassies, OSCE and the embassies of European states like Britain, Germany and The Netherlands – carry out a large part of the actions set out in the strategies. At the same time, the shortage of funds in the state budgets to support strategy's implementation, entails near total dependence on donor funding and prevents national ownership of P/CVE efforts.

Religious institutions and P/CVE

International actors in the Western Balkans recognize the important role of the official Muslim institutions, which condemn violent extremism and cooperate with the governments and external stakeholders against radicalization.[52] An example is the *Albanian Muslim Community*

[49] The Republic of Serbia, National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism for 2017–2021, Belgrade, 2014, last accessed 11 December 2020; The Republic of Serbia, Action Plan for Implementation of National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism, Belgrade, 2015, last accessed 11 December 2020

[50] Government of the Republic of [North] Macedonia, National Counterterrorism Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia (2018-2022). Skopje, February 2018.

[51] Kosovo National Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism from 2015–2020, Pristina, 2015, last accessed 12 December 2020.

[52] For example, US Embassy in North Macedonia, Country Reports on Terrorism 2015: Macedonia, last accessed 11 December 2020.

(KMSH), which is actively involved in P/CVE, seeking to unify the country's believers by institutionalizing religious education and the training of imams to whom it regularly issues directives.[53] KMSH has increasingly cooperated within different P/CVE initiatives with the US Embassy in Tirana, the EU and the OSCE. Official Muslim religious institutions in all WB countries collaborate within various P/CVE programs and activities throughout the region. While playing such a crucial role, these official religious institutions face at least two sets of challenges.

In the post-1990 Balkans, transnational revitalisation of Islam inspired by global trends is under way, trends that contest and transform the locally embedded traditional Muslim practice and are perceived as alien foreign (e.g. Middle East) influences. While religion remains an important marker of collective identity in the Balkans, Muslim religiosity has changed by becoming increasingly "detached from organized religion and official doctrinal prescriptions."[54] The spread of global Salafism in the Balkans contests not only the legitimacy of "traditional" Islamic institutions, but competes with other major transnational forces, like the Muslim Brotherhood or Hanafi-Maturidism which have also been revived with the support of Turkey. The funds coming from various organizations and charities from Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates or Egypt, also plays an important role.[55] Transnational Islam thus creates supranational spaces of communication and reference – be it in mosque communities, informal circles or online. According to an Albanian-Macedonian observer, "parallel mosques" outside the authority of the official Islamic Religious Community (IRC), which propagate Salafi-Wahhabi influence from the Arab world, are more instrumental than the otherwise increasingly important online radicalization.[56]

Official Muslim institutions, as the *Bosnian Islamic Community* (IC) that seeks to protect "traditional Islam" and oppose *para-jamaat*s[57] by defending local religious practice,[58] or the *North Macedonian IRC* suffer structural and personnel weaknesses and crisis of legitimacy due to allegations of corruption and to internal strife. This prevents them from exerting control over communal life and jurisdiction over some mosques, leaving space for the spread of extremist narratives by some imams and the formation of para-*jamaat*s.[59] As a North Macedonian Albanian Muslim intellectual experienced in P/CVE commented, "The failure of religious and traditional authority almost since the independence of North Macedonia contributed largely to the context of possibilities for radicalization."[60]

In some cases, country-specific IC measures are inadequate since the organization of religious life transcends state borders. In Serbia, for example, there are two official Islamic

[53] Interview with KMSH Official, 11 November 2020.
[54] Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy, "Islam in the Post-Communist Balkans: Alternative Pathways to God," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 15 (4), 2015, 457–471, here 458.
[55] Kursani, *op. cit.*, pp. 56–57.
[56] Interview with an Albanian expert in regional security from North Macedonia,
[57] *Para-jamaat*s – parallel communities, parallel *jamaat*s in mosques, mostly Salafi communities proliferating in BiH and elsewhere in the Western Balkans in the decades after the Bosnian war (1992–95).
[58] Hamza Preljević, "Preventing Religious Radicalization in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Role of the BiH Islamic Community," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37 (4), 2017, 371–392.
[59] Bećirević, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–7; Filip Stojovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, Country Case Study 1, Berlin/Skopje: Berghof Foundation and Democracy Lab, 2018, pp. 13–14; Florian Qehaja and Skënder Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus: Issues of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, Pristina, 2018, pp. 8–9.
[60] Interview, 21 November 2020.

institutions: the *Islamic Community of Serbia* (ICoS) based in Belgrade and the *Islamic Community in Serbia* (ICiS) headquartered in Novi Pazar, Sandžak, which operates under the auspices of the Islamic Community in Sarajevo. The unification plan proposed by Turkey in an attempt to broker the split have failed to achieve a reconciliation,[61] so that the ICiS remains strongly oriented towards Bosnia. Such trans-border entanglements make it harder for the governments to tally their strategies to the actual dynamics and ambit of religious life. "Religious parallelism" thus goes beyond the contradistinction between the official state supported Muslim institutions and the *para-jamaat*s.

Such challenges notwithstanding, the official Muslim institutions in the Western Balkans remain a key C/PVE partner of local governments and international actors. The adequate involvement of these institutions in the further implementation of P/CVE strategies will be crucial for keeping the Muslim mainstream of society in a process of dialogue.

Root causes and aggravating factors

Research has shown that there is no one path for an individual to become a radicalised violent extremist but a combination of ideological, psychological and community-based factors.[62] Moreover, global political and sociological drivers matter as much as ideological and psychological factors, while radicalisation is, in principle, a context-bound phenomenon[63] and a concept causing analytical confusion and entailing fundamentally different agendas at the policy level.[64]

In the WB, too, researchers outline a combination of root causes for the rise of VE and the emergence of the FTF phenomenon. The National Strategies adopted in these countries (discussed above) make reference to "push" drivers such as poverty, disenfranchisement, corruption, criminality, hate speech, prejudices, etc. The Kosovo document also emphasizes the "pull" factors such as ideological motives, material incentives, desire for adventure and leadership. Among the aggravating factors, the Serbian strategy notes the "self-victimisation" of some citizens.

In Albania, BiH, Kosovo and North Macedonia, the foremost factor identified at the community level is the deep societal polarization on religious, ethno-political and social grounds, to which a high degree of mistrust in political and religious institutions as unresponsive, ineffective and biased is added.[65] Policy research of VERLT in the WB often mentions as driver poverty or, more broadly, socio-economic factors.[66] Other studies, however, indicate that while violent extremists may come from all socio-economic backgrounds, evidence "suggests little direct connection between poverty or education and participation in

[61] Petrović and Stakić, *op. cit.*, pp. 31–31.
[62] Alex P. Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, Research Paper, The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, March 2013.
[63] Expert Group, *Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism: A Concise Report Prepared by the European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation*, Brussels, 15 May 2008, p. 7.
[64] Mark Sedgwick, "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22 (4), 2010, 479–494.
[65] Engjellushe Morina, Beatrix Austin, Tim Jan Roetman and Veronique Dudouet, "Community Perspectives on Violent Extremism: Strengthening Local Factors of Social Resilience," Berghof Policy Brief 09, Berghof Foundation, September 2019, pp. 4-5.
[66] Gjergji Vurmo, Enis Sulstarova, *Violent Extremism in Albania: A National Assessment of Drivers, Forms, and Threats*, Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2018, pp. 33–34, 57.

terrorism."[67] In a context of post-war identity crisis, social dislocation and fragile states, Salafi-jihadi propaganda among the WB Muslims around certain mosques and online, especially during the Syrian war, has become a major aggravating factor. However, to understand the actual drivers operative at present an extensive study on the ground, targetting those mosque communities that are perceived as spreading jihadi and other violent narratives, is needed, which the ongoing pandemic has prevented until now.

In some WB countries, especially Serbia and BiH, policy research is increasingly focusing on the so-called "reciprocal radicalization" between far-right ethno-nationalist extremism and Islamic radicalism.[68] According to a recent study of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) the negative representation of Muslims in the Sandžak region and Novi Pazar is creating a vicious circle of extremism.[69] The Atlantic Initiative Center for Security and Justice Research (AI) in Sarajevo also brings forth "reciprocal radicalization" as the major cause of VE in BiH.[70] In an interview for the AI, the USAID Representative in Sarajevo backs this approach, as he sees the causes to be stemming from "the current political dynamic of Bosnia, where political ethno-nationalist leaders are incentivised to maintain and deepen divisions between their supporting populations."[71] Muslims in other Balkan countries confirm the existence of a "negative synergy" between ethno-nationalist radicalization and Salafi-inspired extremism.[72] Hence, the notion of "reciprocal radicalisation" in some WB contexts deserves special attention, at the same time as it should alert to the analytical and practical risks involved in collapsing all forms of political violence into the notion of VE.[73]

Violent extremism in the WB thus shares three main types of root causes: (i) *global, related to the spread of transnational ideologies and transregional influences of movements, such as Jihadi-Salafism;* (ii) *region-wide, stemming from the deep societal polarization following the disintegration of former Yugoslavia; and* (iii) *country-specific, such as "reciprocal radicalisation" stressed by researches from Serbia and BiH. These three groups of factors are entangled, e.g. VE in BiH shares most of the root causes for the ongoing Islamist radicalisation with Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, while showing similarities with Serbia in terms of ethno-nationalist extremism as a revived legacy of the Bosnian war. The National Strategies adopted by the WB countries reflect some of these intertwined but context-specific drivers.*

Competing narratives and perspective of domestic actors on external P/CVE strategies

[67] Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection? *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17 (4), 2003, pp. 119–144, here 141; cf. Schmid, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
[68] Valery Perry (ed.), *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st-Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, Stuttgart: *ibidem* Press, 2018, pp. 19.
[69] Predrag Petrović and Isidora Stakić, "Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum: Serbia Report," *British Council*, April 2018.
[70] Edina Bećirević, "Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum: Bosnia and Herzegovina Report," British Council, 2018, pp. 10, 44.
[71] US official
[72] Interview with a North Macedonian Albanian Muslim intellectual experienced in P/CVE, 21 November 2020. Along with Macedonian ethno-nationalism, he mentions "minor fascist Illyrian antireligious individuals" among Albanians themselves.
[73] Anna A. Meier, "The Idea of Terror: Institutional Reproduction in Government Responses to Political Violence," *International Studies Quarterly*, 2020, pp. 1–11

There is by now an increasingly prevailing narrative among policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders that C/PVC demands a "whole-of-society approach" that includes everything from a democratic government to an accountable justice system to inter-institutional cooperation at the local level and envisions a role for multiple sectors and civil society actors in various preventions, intervention and rehabilitation programs.[74]

Against such consensual background, certain differences can be observed in the projects and programs funded by the U.S. and the EU, arguably attributable to the different tools available.[75] Whereas, next to P/CVE initiatives for state and non-state actors, the US supports also CT initiatives addressed to the respective directorate and intelligence agencies, the EU focuses mainly, if not only, on P/CVE measures. In the opinion of an EU official, this is because the EU lacks an army or intelligence agency, and has only Europol available to support CT initiatives.[76] This also explains why the other external stakeholders have focused almost exclusively on community-based initiatives.

At the same time, considering the strong involvement of all external stakeholders in P/CVE initiatives, funding opportunities from different donor organisations often overlap either because of similar objectives or because of many donors targeting the same community. In Albania during 2016-19, for example, there were so many on-going initiatives in the so-called "hotspots" for VE (e.g. Cerrik, Peqin), that local NGOs and community leaders warned that people got tired of all the "P/CVE talk." Moreover, due to the high number of organisations involved in community-based P/CVE actions, there is proliferation of similar one-time initiatives, rather than one organisation rolling out a specific initiative at a larger scale.

Overall, there seems to be little coordination among different international actors on a formal level, but rather informal and dispersed communication and information exchange among individuals implementing P/CVE programs in different organizations. One international organization representative even highlighted, "I would love for the interested donor community to sit in one room and discuss how to approach violent extremism." Mechanisms to measure progress, implementation and impact of C/PVE strategies also appear insufficient. EU representatives themselves acknowledge that there is too little emphasis on monitoring and evaluation of the overall strategy of external and domestic actors. Although all EU-funded projects include monitoring and evaluation guidelines and requirements, there is no overarching methodology or indicators to assess the impact of the EU's initiatives on P/CVE.[77] It is thus not surprising that, although each national CT and/or P/CVE strategy provides for the establishment of administrative mechanisms to monitor, evaluate and report on its implementation, the CVE Centres, which are responsible for assessing this implementation, have failed so far to deliver such evaluations.

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[74] See in this sense most recently OSCE, *Understanding Referral Mechanisms in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: Navigating Challenges and Protecting Human Rights*. A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe, Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2019, pp. 6–7.

[75] Interview with EU Official, 26 October 2020; Interview with EU Official, 2 November 2020.

[76] Interview with EU Official, 2 November 2020.

[77] Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020.

With respect to BiH and Serbia, some foreign stakeholder interviewees concur that "extreme ideologies" other than radical Islam have been neglected by the authorities and the international community and plead for the inclusion of all forms of VE in future strategies.

Country-specific local reception

EU representatives in *BiH* maintain that the main stakeholder in PVE should be the Bosnian government and its institutions. They also hold that the "EU has the most systematic approach to the problem," laid out in the EU's Western Balkan Counter-terrorism Strategy. EU representatives describe the EU approach to CVE and PVE as not only systematic, but driven by local ownership.[78] Still, the Counter-terrorism Strategy for BiH is very much modelled on the EU strategy, and Bosnian authorities face a number of challenges in its implementation. Some international community representatives outside the EU have recognized this and have addressed their critique regarding a lack of implementation not only to the Bosnian government but to the EU as well. When asked why the EU is not taking a more pro-active role or exerting pressure on the Bosnian government when it blocks carrying out a job at hand, an EU representative answered that although he "would like for us to engage a bit more in arm twisting, traditionally we [the EU] are reluctant to do this, and… are following the cooperative approach." Moreover, in the opinion of the AI, the position of the U.S. in terms of programming is much more welcome by local actors and experts than the one led by the EU, which sticks to a narrow definition of extremism, i.e. as only Islamist extremism.

Meral Tajroska, a former Women without Borders' (WwB) MotherSchools Ambassador in *North Macedonia* with a large experience in P/CVE, describes the existence of two groups in her country. The first group are those, who pay attention to P/CVE strategies and have, as a whole, a positive attitude towards P/CVE. The second group includes those who are either not aware of P/CVE measures or prefer not to talk about this issue. For, as this interlocutor put it, "VE is still a sensitive topic" throughout the country and "people avoid discussions on P/CVE." Still, when people of the second group become better informed about the nature of some PCVE initiatives, "they usually react in a positive way." However, reactions vary according to the type of violence: "If there is an ethno-national incident, then the whole country is in distress and the public opinion is loud and clear. Religiously-inspired incidents are not so much talked about but of course there are condemnations from the Muslim community (that's a reaction too)."[79]

In *Serbia*, BCPS's previous as well as current research (based on interviews with unidentified respondents and institutions) seems to suggest that local communities do not perceive strategies and programs pursued by external actors, both domestic and foreign, as fully relevant. Several facts, according to the BCSP analysis, support this claim. First, the National Strategy for preventing and fighting terrorism was blindly modeled by EU strategy, and emphasis in Serbia was put on improving "hard" security measures. Second, the focus of the National Strategy is on Islamist extremism, while in everyday life one is witnessing the rise of right-wing extremism. Third, the Strategy's Action Plan distributes resources unevenly investing most of them in improving "hard" security measures; some communities perceive

[78] Interview with Holger Engelmann, EU Delegation advisor on counter-terrorism, CVE, 13 November 2020.
[79] Interview with Meral Tajroska, psychologist, Executive Director of the NGO "Pleiades", a practitioner on PVE/CVE and reintegration, activist for gender equality and former Women without Borders' (WwB) MotherSchools Ambassador in North Macedonia, 4 December 2020.

external actors as imposing an agenda that is not well suited to the local context and needs. As per BCSP, local communities and donors believe that interventions aimed at addressing (violent) extremism are ad-hoc, sporadic, uncoordinated, and well under-resourced. The conclusion is that future interventions need to be better informed by local communities, take more into account all forms of extremism, more coordinated and better financed.

In *Albania*, (i) institutions, including the CVE Centre, show overwhelmingly positive about the involvement of external actors in P/CVE in Albania. Considering that the international community is the primary source of funding, this response is hardly surprising. According to the CVE Centre, the financial contribution and expertise brought in by external donors is instrumental for the Centre, although sometimes it can be difficult to align the priorities of domestic stakeholders with those of the donor.[80] The KMSH has also been very positive about cooperating with external actors, including their participation in meetings and workshops organised by the EU or OSCE and the projects they have implemented with the support of the U.S. Embassy.[81] Over the years, the KMSH has received scrutiny from what it calls "radical imams" in Albania for working with the U.S.[82] and taking part in projects funded by the West. Some believers also question why foreign funding from Western government is being allowed, while funds from Middle Eastern governments was recently limited. These actions could fuel already existing tensions about the lack of intra-religious dialogue within the KMSH and perception that the KMSH is a FETO-run or Western-controlled entity. (ii) Civil society, as the main implementer of P/CVE initiatives and actions described in the strategy's Action Plan, has also been largely positive about the support it receives of the international community. Most CSOs are fully dependent on (foreign) grants, which is good for their political independence, but also limits their opportunity to set their own agenda and priorities. (iii) While the CVE strategy sets out three types of actions, namely awareness-raising activities, capacity-building initiatives, and service delivery, only few projects focus on the latter, working directly with individuals affected by radicalisation.[83] Even in municipalities with a strong and active civil society presence, too little focus has been on projects aiming to identify and address problems at the community level.[84] Moreover, the implementation timeframe for EU's funding opportunities on P/CVE is too short to address VERLT sustainably,[85] as the average EU-funded projects for Albanian CSOs has been from a few months to approximately one year,[86] This does not provide opportunities for organisations to achieve the desired results as described in the CVE Strategy, nor does it allow for a project to have a lasting impact.

Conclusion and recommendations

[80] Interview with CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.
[81] Interview with KMSH official, 11 November 2020.
[82] *Ibid*.
[83] *Ibid*.
[84] Iris Aliaj, *Civil Society in Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism in Albania: Mapping Report*, Center for Legal Civic Initiatives, 2019.
[85] *Ibid*.
[86] Mandrit Kamolli and Arjan Dyrmishi, *Albania's Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Implementation, Outcomes and Alignment with the EU Approaches and Framework*, Center for the Study of Democracy and Government, October 2018.

External actors play a pivotal role in fostering counter-terrorism and P/CVE measures in the WB. Governments, official religious communities and experts in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia see the current EU strategy towards P/CVE as corresponding to the major VE-related challenges. In Serbia and BiH there are strong, domestic and international, voices pleading for broadening the analysis of terrorist radicalization and recruitment beyond Islamism to include extreme ethno-nationalism.

None of the external stakeholders has adopted a monolithic approach to the region, and all have tried to devise context- and country-specific policies in cooperation with local governments and the CSO sector. While there are a number of "push" and "pull" VE factors common to the whole region – most notably those caused by a recent civil war, state disintegration, social dislocation, institutional fragility and identity crisis – these societies exhibit major internal differences directly affecting the nature, spread and intensity of VE. Therefore, a combination of country- and even locally-specific measures with support for intraregional cooperation and coordinated action appears as the most appropriate approach.

Overall, the EU strategy has been predominantly "soft" entailing measures targeting democratic or systemic reforms or community-addressed initiatives. In some "hot" areas like Kosovo and BiH, the EU approach involves also security-based programs prioritizing de-radicalisation in prisons and released violent extremist offenders. Lacking intelligence and military instruments for "hard" securitizing approach, the EU's approach considerably differs from the one deployed by the U.S., which pays more attention to actions like law enforcement or tracking and persecuting terrorists. An increasingly significant external stakeholder, the EU is thus perceived as the second after the US across the region, even if the EU is funding great many civil society projects.

There exist at the same time large areas of overlapping policies and measures between the various external stakeholders. This foregrounds questions concerning competition and coordination, which have not been satisfactorily solved by now. Nor has the assessment of the results and effectiveness of these policies and measures been adequately carried out. On the whole, while much has been done to put the needed legislation in place, its implementation is lagging behind and in many cases shows deficiencies.

Policy recommendations

1) The EU should continue elaborating on the definition and scope of the phenomena at the heart of its P/CVE strategy, the ambit of VE itself in particular.
2) While legitimately focusing on Islamist violent extremism in the WB, the EU should not neglect other context-specific manifestations of extremism in the region, such as violent ethno-nationalism in BiH and Serbia, inasmuch as they interact and reinforce each other.
3) The EU should seek, ideally through specific instruments, stronger interaction and/or collaboration with the other external stakeholders in the field of P/CVE, especially the U.S., the UN and the OSCE, to ensure a higher degree of synergy and complementarity.
4) Measures geared towards training and capacity building on central and local level should be given higher priority.
5) A mechanism to facilitate information sharing among key P/CVE actors should be established to help support local leaders in implementing activities at the community level.

6) The EU should pay more attention to the monitoring and the assessment of the results of the ongoing and past P/VE initiatives – its own, those of other stakeholders and the national strategies.