



# Working towards Resilient Communities

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Kingdom of the Netherlands

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## **Introduction**

This policy paper focuses on the specific factors and drivers of violent extremism in Macedonia, and aims to address the core roots of this issue by investigating the dynamics of its development and manifestation, with the hope of contributing toward building more resilient communities. The research period underwent several phases of collecting and processing qualitative and quantitative information important to our analysis. During these phases, interviews with local and central government officials were conducted, followed later by many formal and informal talks with relevant stakeholders and individuals of interest to the research topic. By the same token, attempts to quantify the trending opinions among a selected population were done by carrying out a survey in the respective municipalities in Macedonia where they reside. In addition, to better understand the circulating ideology known to be used as motivation for violent extremism, religious clerics were consulted. Lastly, the online content found supporting violent extremism was analyzed, particularly the local language usage, by conducting a structured content analysis. These research findings lead us to focus more on the following issues:

- The threat of politicization of the school staff, and the poor communication channels between teachers, parents and students, lead the high schools to become fertile grounds for violent extremist groups.
- NGO capacities to become active actors in bringing about resilience to violent extremism.
- The role of religious preachers in preventing violent extremism at the local level.
- Lack of trust in public institutions for building community resilience.
- Lack of online counter-narratives with local context

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## Policy Report: Working towards Resilient Communities

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This research study aims to unravel the core causes of violent extremism, focusing on the city of Skopje, in the specifically selected municipalities of Cair, Gazi Baba, and Saraj. The city of Skopje was chosen due to the high number of reported cases of foreign fighters from this capital city. An additional element in our choice of Skopje is the ability to do in-depth research in these particular municipalities given Analytica's prior research record on violent extremism. Due to the increased number of returned foreign fighters, it was of utmost importance to continue assessing Macedonia's capital when it comes to CVE matters throughout 2017.

Continuing with Analytica's previous research paper "Assessment of Macedonia's efforts in countering violent extremism, view from civil society"<sup>1</sup>, this research is a follow-up, focusing this time on the community. The research project 'Working toward Resilient Communities' focuses on the factors and drivers of radicalization found or created by circumstances within the communities.

Thus, the policy brief will give a clearer picture on the main reasons, causes, roots and effects of violent extremism in Macedonia's capital, and will also investigate the perception of it. It is crucial to understand the drivers of radicalization in Skopje in order to be able to better work on countering those drivers. Because of the complexity of violent extremism, this study will attempt to look at all possible drivers, and analyze the phenomenon from many different angles.

The first part of the study will provide an introduction to the phenomenon of violent extremism and review the existing research on drivers of radicalization on a global scale. The second part of the study will consider violent extremism as it exists in Macedonia, and provide some local specifics. The third part will provide results from its research through focus groups and interviews on the drivers of extremism in Macedonia. The fourth part will draw some conclusions about online propaganda and how it is used for extremism. The last part will discuss the perception of citizens about general issues regarding violent extremism.

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<sup>1</sup>\* "Assessment of Macedonia's efforts in Countering Violent Extremism, view from civil society", Kaltrina Selimi and Filip Stojkovski, Analytica Think Tank. Online accessible at: [http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/extremism-en-updated-FINAL-web\\_ceb98.pdf](http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/extremism-en-updated-FINAL-web_ceb98.pdf)

## Violent Extremism and its drivers: a brief overview

The first part of this research study will introduce the phenomenon of violent extremism and give a summary of the research that has so far been conducted globally on drivers of radicalization, exploring what the literature says on this issue. It examines the wide spectrum of factors that contribute to the radicalization of individuals. Through this, we summarize what the literature shows on the drivers of violent extremism, and we attempt to pinpoint factors that seem to be of significance across the literature. This is important in order to dispel the myth that poverty and lack of education are the only or lead factors that lead to radicalization, which is not only incorrect but also might lead to inappropriate responses to the phenomenon of violent extremism. It is crucial to understand the complexity of the root causes of violent extremism in general, in order to be able to better attempt to research the phenomenon within the specific context of Skopje as the capital city of Macedonia.

Violent Extremism (VE) as a phenomenon has been receiving much attention in international politics and development discourses, and rightly so, due to increased awareness that there is a need to respond to the roots of terroristic activity rather than merely focusing on stopping attacks. Countering Violent Extremism or CVE is a holistic approach which attempts to examine and address the causes and factors that lead to individuals accepting extremist ideologies. One challenge that has arisen in CVE is attempting to pinpoint the causes of violent extremism, which are often multi-faceted. Therefore, any claims of finding the major “cause” would be overstated due to the possibility of the driver being caused by another unseen driver, or at least of pinpointing one main driver where many are, in fact, at play. The following introduction on the drivers of VE will outline the different arguments on the main “drivers” of VE, and critiques the oversimplification that often plagues CVE projects on the “drivers” and common understanding of the “causes” of VE.

Violent Extremism (VE) is in fact a complex phenomenon, which is not caused by any one driver but rather is the result of many intersecting and self-reinforcing drivers. There is also not a “sure path” for extremist tendencies. There exists a common misconception that unemployment or economic under-development lead directly to extremism as a main factor, but there is no clear evidence for this. In most cases this driver is merely one among many drivers of radicalization. In general policymakers should be aware of the problematic nature of focusing on large-scale contextual push factors (poor service provision, unemployment, etc.)

A useful model that has been constructed for thinking about the complex web of factors that may lead to extremist tendencies is the so-called three-tier model, with situational factors predominant at the macro/national/community level, social/cultural factors at the MESO identity group level, and individual factors at the micro level.<sup>2</sup> While the evidence proving the importance of certain factors is a topic to discuss, experts generally agree that the process of radicalization is a social process, i.e., the involvement of others is crucial. This view sees so-called “lone actors” as exceptions to the rule.

In terms of what will be called in this paper “drivers” towards extremism, there are drivers whose influence is commonly overstated or even mistakenly identified. For example, ideas of masculinity and education level do not seem to influence people towards extremism. But on the other hand, high-quality education from the early years

<sup>2\*</sup> USAID, Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism, pg. 28, online accessible at: [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pnadt978.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadt978.pdf)

onwards is the best protection against social exclusion, which has been associated with extremism.<sup>3</sup> Another commonly overstated driver is attendance to Madrasas (Islamic high schools). Even though there are some non-formal extreme Madrasas, particularly in Middle East countries such as Saudi Arabia or Iran, which play a role in driving people towards extremism, in context of Macedonia, the teachings are sourced to the Hanafi school of thought and fall under the management of the Islamic Religious Community, respectively. In fact, religious education can serve as protection against extremism.<sup>4</sup>

## Macedonian Context

This part of the report introduces the phenomenon of violent extremism in Macedonia. It does so by examining how violent extremism has affected Macedonia, and what the consequences of it are. Additionally, it investigates how violent extremism has managed to spread in Macedonia and particularly in the municipalities researched. Finally, it determines whether any efforts to research the driving factors of radicalization in Macedonia have been made.

Following the collapse of Yugoslavia and subsequent conflicts and civil wars, radical groups rooted in the Middle East focused on targeting this newly independent pool of countries. In Macedonia, a country with a multi-ethnic makeup and a population of two million, extremist groups have been successful in finding a ‘fertile ground’ in the post-Armed Conflict of 2001 period. This ground has over time been established in certain neighborhoods of the country, which resulted in a solid stream of recruits to terrorist groups fighting in Syria and Iraq<sup>5</sup>.

According to a policy paper published by Soufan Group, there have been in total 915 foreign fighters from the Balkans that have joined extremist groups in Syria (up until 2016)<sup>6</sup>. The age range of those joining is between 18 and 43 years old. As for Macedonia, the official statements show that 110 Macedonian fighters have been in the battlefields of Syria and Iraq. Moreover, 25 have been killed in Syria, and 86 fighters have already returned to Macedonia. However, the country’s approach remains repressive and mainly focused on legal and repressive measures, such as changes in the criminal law book and police arrests.

Moreover, the country’s effort to tackle this phenomenon has remained within the scope of the National Strategy for Fight against Terrorism for many years now. However, recently, the Macedonian government established a National Committee for PVE and Fight against Terrorism, which is currently working on a specific strategy on P/CVE. It is vital that their action plans correspond with in-depth research and analysis at the grass-root level.

<sup>3\*</sup> European Commission, “Supporting the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violent Extremism” p. 9, online accessible at: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/repository/education/library/publications/2016/communication-preventing-radicalisation\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/publications/2016/communication-preventing-radicalisation_en.pdf)

<sup>4\*</sup> USAID, Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism

<sup>5\*</sup> “Saving schools from violent extremism: a broader approach to CVE with a focus on educational capacities”, Samet Shabani, Analytica Think Tank. Online accessible at: [http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/extremism-en-updated-FINAL-web\\_ceb98.pdf](http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/extremism-en-updated-FINAL-web_ceb98.pdf)

<sup>6\*</sup> Richard Barrett, Foreign Fighters in Syria, Soufan Group, June 2014, online accessible at: <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>

## **Factors and drivers**

The main objective of this part of the study is to gain insight on the various factors and drivers that push people towards violent extremism in three selected municipalities in the City of Skopje (Cair, Saraj and Gazi Baba). This is important information for authorities in Macedonia in order for them to make tailored responses to the actual push factors of violent extremism. To discover the true factors and drivers is a complicated task and requires a holistic approach that looks at the topic from different perspectives. Taking this into account, this part of the study includes interviews with different society stakeholders (religious preachers, NGO representatives, high school and university teachers) and focus groups with youth from the target municipalities of this study, aged between 18 and 25 years old.

Through these tools, this part aims to help us to understand the push and pull factors for radicalization from the point of view of people affected by the phenomenon in various ways. This part of the study also aims to test certain hypotheses on possible drivers for radicalization, including socioeconomic factors, ideological factors, personal factors, and more.

The questions that we explore in this section are:

- What are the driving factors for radicalization in the city of Skopje (Municipalities of Cair, Saraj and Gazi Baba)?
- What is the perception that people have when it comes to these factors?
- How much do individuals think radicalization affects their social circles?

## High Schools under scrutiny

This section of the policy report contains analysis based on interviews with high school teachers. In total, eleven teachers from nine different high schools (within the target municipalities of this study and broader) were interviewed in order to provide a general observation about the phenomenon of violent extremism among pupils. Almost all of the teachers were open to discuss and share their concerns about this phenomenon. It was observed that they are aware of this issue but are lack the tools and knowledge necessary to address it when it comes to prevention or intervention in specific cases.

*“In my class hour I try to talk to them about the negative effects of violent extremism, but we as professors have not too much educative information about this topic. That’s why it would be good to organize lessons in classes, in which the students would be more informed and given advice.”*

*Interview with high school teacher from “Marija Kiri Sklodovska”*

Notably, all of the teachers expressed the idea that students are not sufficiently informed about values such as multiculturalism, solidarity and respect for others’ opinions. Even in ethnically mixed schools in which there is a curriculum in three different languages, a majority of the students do not interact with students from a different ethnic background. Moreover, during some joint activities between high schools held in Macedonian and Albanian language on raising awareness about multiculturalism, it is observed that students feel strange about participating to these projects. Thus, the presence of stereotypes about each other leads to a growing phenomenon of segregation and a fertile ground for extremist ideas at early ages.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the curriculum in many of the schools does not fit the narrative in which young people today live in Macedonia, especially if they are from different ethnic backgrounds and are not of Macedonian ethnic origin<sup>8</sup>. Many of the teachers believe that country’s educational policy does not have a strategy for how to address these young people and their frustration and fears. According to them, this situation works in favor of the extremist groups and their efforts to build stereotypes within youth against the country where they were born and the majority of the population in Macedonia. Thus, the analysis shows that one of the main pushing factors to violent extremism, particularly in multi-ethnic countries, is lack of promotion of intercultural dialogue at high-schools.

When asked whether students are sufficiently informed about violent extremism, the general observation of teachers is that they have a basic knowledge only from what they see on TV and social media. There are often discussions among students about extremist groups, based on some friend’s recruitment or a former foreign fighter or terrorist attack shown in the media, but not in form of a debate moderated by teachers. A remarkable finding is that teachers frequently follow their students on social media and interact in private with some them that post extremist ideas.

The teachers also stated that there is almost no discussion among the staff about this phenomenon. They sometimes touch on some cases of students in which they observe changes in terms of the students showing a tendency toward radical behavior, but it does

<sup>7\*</sup> Interview with high-school teacher from ‘Arseni Jovkov’ School of Economics and Law, conducted on 16.03.2017

<sup>8\*</sup> Interview with high-school teacher from ‘Cvetan Dimov’ Gymnasium, conducted on 01.03.2017

not go further than an everyday, informal chat with each other. Our main observation is that this topic is not perceived as a serious issue due to the small amount of cases that have happened in the past. However, there was only one case reported for the 2014/15 academic year (to Ministry of Interior Affairs by a teacher) that a teacher once spread flyers and books with extremist content among students<sup>9</sup>. Accordingly, there were some cases in which the board of the school warned some staff members due to complaints by some parents that they were talking about religion during their course. However, no concrete measures were taken with those teachers due to their employment being based on political affiliations with the local government.<sup>10</sup>

There have been seven reported cases in which students ended up either in the battlefield in Syria and Iraq by joining extremist groups or actively supporting them during their school life or afterward. The cases are as follows:

1. *"In the past, I had a student that was manipulated in terms of religion and ended up in extremist groups. He was a part of situations that showed violence and aggression in our community and other communities as well. I don't know exactly what happened with him but as I heard he is now gone to the places where the war is going on, but I say this with the biggest reservations as it is only by hearing, it was told to me that he was punished by the state before he went. His success in school was average in the very early stages, but after that he started to be manipulated by different groups. I was directly in contact with his family in a personal manner and the school as institution were as well. His relations with other students were good at the start. After a time he started to be imposing his religious ideas on others, he felt like a leader, conceited. He always did this on behalf of religion but he was misused by higher groups and persons that I don't know, but then his family claimed this, that my son is meeting too frequent with an unknown imam, I cannot control my child. I tried to give him a hand and retract him from the situation, but we ended up bad with the person and we didn't contact with him again, but his family has a great respect for my effort and contribution that I gave for him. Maybe his fate was like that. He was very good with the school's staff at the start till in a certain period, then he started demonstrating aggression, in fact he went around as if dominated by some other spirit. (Interview with high school teacher from 'Gjorgi Dimitrov' gymnasium.)"*
2. *"Over 300 students I have seen 2 cases in Facebook that students posted improper things regarding the latest happenings in Syria, and I approached them and advised them, there were cases they left the lesson to go for praying and I ask them why they do it, and I advise them that they are contradictory because they went out of lesson, of knowledge which is mandatory according to the religion, they have rowed mark 1s' in the diary but on the other hand they try to show that they are good Muslims. This is the bad understanding of religion for students."*
3. *"There was a student who, after finishing high school, was recruited, he was a very good student, we were shocked when we heard that he was recruited to go to Syria and he ended up there tragically." (Interview with high school teacher from 'Cvetan Dimov' gymnasium.)"*
4. *"I personally had an experience by contacting a parent of a student that started to decrease his success, but not because he didn't want to study but he start to classify the materials, by saying 'this topic is haram (forbidden) to study', and so he started*

<sup>9\*</sup> Interview with high-school teacher from 'Marija Kiri Sklodovska' School of Medicine, conducted in 01.03.2017

<sup>10\*</sup> Interview with high-school teacher from 'Zef Lush Marku' Gymnasium, conducted in 10.03.2017

*to be absent from the lessons, he started to make troubles. His parent said me that he tried to grab his son back from this group but it was unsuccessful, I encouraged his father to go on with this and also assist him in order to distance his son from these problems, and believe me or not we started to have success and the youth started to get back to normality, I want to say that there is reaction from their families because all families want for them to become a scientist and not an extremist.” (Interview with high school teacher from ‘Arseni Jovkov’ School of Economics and Law.)*

5. *I’ve heard about a concrete case of a youth recruited to Syria. This young man contacted his family and expressed that he is so regretful for going there and that he wants to come back, but he came to a tragic end. He was so young and I don’t know his success, but he was manipulated by the extremist organizations, because of the misuse with which he is dealing with religious issues. (Interview with high school teacher from ‘Vlado Taseski’.)*
6. *I had a student that was in the second year of studies, regular student in all the meaning of the word, he was fashionable, committed to the school, he always wanted to look good, he was accompanied with other students, doing sport, but with a background that I’ve never knew anything about, he was regular in the first two years, then he transferred to attending the last two years irregularly (only at exams) with the justification that he was so busy and had a family business and that he needed to help his family with the business, but he was regular in the exams afterward. Just after he passed the exams and finished high school, we learnt that he went in Syria and after a while we also learnt that he died there. That’s why I say that it is so difficult to observe the youth that support extremist ideas, even though I couldn’t meet him frequently in the last two years, I remember him that he was a good student. Interview with high school teacher from Arseni Jovkov.)*
7. *“Three years ago we had a student in the third year of his studies. It was April when he suddenly disappeared from school. Then he came again after seven months (in November), in the next academic year. I observed that he was much more arrogant in his manner towards professors and students as well. I asked my colleagues whether they have observed the same with him, and one of my colleagues told me that according to what he heard, that student has been to the battlefields in Syria and Iraq and had returned back after four months. Additionally, when I was a student myself at Arseni Jovkov Economic and Law School, some classmates that were involved with those extremist groups used to invite us to their religious sermons and outdoor activities after the lessons. I attended once, but after I realized they were the extremist group of ISIS, I started to distance myself from those classmates.” (Interview with high school teacher from ‘Zef Lush Marku’ Gymnasium.)*

These cases clearly show that there is not a certain profile of students that can become attached to a violent extremist group. However, teachers indicated the lack of communication with their parents and those with bad economic conditions as a general profile of those students. Accordingly, one of the considerable findings of this research is that all the teachers, without exception, stated that the key pushing factor of the youth to violent extremist groups is the lack of care from their parents. All of them complained that the vast majority of the parents never come to parents meetings in the schools, or never make contact with teachers in any form. Another factor that was emphasized by many teachers was the lack of extra-curricular activities within the school. The fact that violent extremist groups use outdoor activities after the lessons to recruit young people shows that it is a considerable pulling factor.

*"From 30 students, during one year a teacher got to know maximum 5 parents. The care of parents is very low about their children, so the defect is there: if one of the pedagogic trinity (school-student-parent) is not present, student can very easily deviate because there are many alternatives to this nowadays, parents are not informed where their children are going after the lessons."*

*Interview with high school teacher from Arseni Jovkov*

*"Other methods of manipulating are economic conditions, persons that are not cared enough about by their families, the extremist groups firstly observe the weak points and hunt them based on the situations that the persons have."*

*Interview with high school teacher from Gjorgi Dimitrov*

*"I think that the economic conditions are the main concern that they deceive and so recruit the youth, they fool them by promising a house for living and that they will have great living conditions, and another issue is that they convince them that it is 'sevap' (good deed) to go and save innocent people there and so fight against crimes and injustice in those places."*

*Interview with high school teacher from Maria Kiri Sklodovska*

*Students that have sympathy towards extremist groups came from 'tired families' where the students don't have good relations with their parents.*

*Interview with high school teacher from Cvetan Dimov*

*"Extremists frequently follow the weak points of instinct or those with bad economic conditions, they offer financial support in a 'sincere' way, but the consequences are the opposite. Someone has a problem with not taking care of themselves and their minds. Prophet Muhammad said the primary jihad is taking care of your family, if you help them you help the society, but someone else has a problem with their minds and infiltrate and give fake information, as we here are very good so we should save our brothers. Our first brothers are neighbors, relatives, someone from Skopje, from Saraj, etc., so I think we have very much more familiar and social problems here than dealing with other countries. The other method of misuse is that they say people 'we'll go to heaven if we fight injustice here'."*

*Interview with high school teacher from Saraj*

*Another method of manipulation by extremist organizations is the targeting of the youth that have a low level of awareness about social, educational, religious and patriotic awareness, once they get them in this manner they start doing separation in a religious manner and this really works.*

*Interview with high school teacher from Vlado Tasevski*

*"In my opinion, they find the most naïve persons that cannot think about the consequences of an issue, they find persons having problems with family, education or society, usually it is males they try to manipulate, maybe problems with relationships are also a factor, when a very important life goal couldn't be achieved they feel useless towards life, and then they think that other methods can solve the problem, maybe the idea that I can help someone, or they want to 'guarantee' paradise, and also the less knowledge they have about religion, so they start to take in wrong knowledge through these groups."*

*Interview with high school teacher from Panche Karagjozov School of Medicine*

When asked about prevention of violent extremism, there were various responses by the teachers. However, it was notable to observe that five of them proposed a lesson on different faiths and/or ethics within high schools, which will provide students with core knowledge about all religions. While some of them also proposed deep reform within the educational system in order to correspond the needs of today's realities in Macedonia, another teacher stated that the most functional way to raise awareness on this phenomenon would be cooperation with CSOs for organizing joint activities in and out of school<sup>11</sup>.

*"The most effective way used by extremist groups are different videos that are used to brainwash through sermons, some of them (the recruits) do it for existence, maybe they offer money, maybe it is only speculation, I think that the state is the main guilty party, they must prevent this phenomenon, we as a school try to discover this phenomenon and inform them, but they must discover the main actors and prevent these persons from manipulating youth."*

*Interview with high school teacher from Zef Lush Marku Gymnasium*

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Bajram Kadriu, conducted on 24.04.2017

## NGOs: Community engagement on CVE

NGOs are critical for CVE, as they are the grass root actor in terms of community relationships and engagement, and therefore for advising and support of the development of appropriate CVE initiatives. Having this in mind, this research has also focused on a grass root level about NGOs active in the three target municipalities. Interviews were made with five NGOs that are considered to be active in the field of youth, education, culture and humanitarian activities. Out of five NGOs, four of them shared their work with us, as is listed below\*<sup>12</sup>:

*"Forumi Rinor Islam (Islamic Youth Forum, IYF) is one of the oldest NGOs active in the three municipalities. It was established in 2000 in order to raise awareness among youth for civic engagement, Islamic principles and universal human values. Their target group are youth studying in high schools and universities. The activities of this organization include seminars, training, conferences, and lectures that promote Islamic values."*

*"LEGIS is an NGO situated in Cair Municipality. It was founded in 2009 as the initiative of five people. Its aim is education focused on youth, particularly in neighborhoods where Albanian ethnic citizens are dominant. Their main focus in recent years has included humanitarian activities, grass-root researches and awareness campaigns about refugees, namely the Syrian migrant crisis, which was also a popular topic in Macedonia, a transit country for the migrant wave. They were also very active in lobbying for the changes on legal status of migrants in the country. Their partners are mainly from Europe, in which through grants and different calls, they organize joint humanitarian activities for refugees and local people, respectively."*

*"RACIO is another NGO situated in Cair Municipality and was established in 2009. Their aim is to raise awareness of youth about civic engagement. Their main focus is in the field of personal development, education and culture. Related to this, they organize activities such as trainings on communication and conflict management, host essay competitions, etc. They are mainly funded by volunteer donor members active in the business sector. They aim to become known among youth in the three neighborhoods, and particularly by high school students."*

<sup>12\*</sup> (\*) – The brief descriptions of organizations are provided by the answers of the interview question 1: Please provide us a background of your organization (short history, activities, mission)

*"Fondacioni Albiz (Albiz Foundation) was founded in 2011 and is located in Saraj Municipality. It is a non-profit organization funded by the well-known local enterprise Dauti Komerc. The foundational aim is to promote corporate social responsibility and philanthropy through organizing educational, socio-economic and cultural activities with a target group being the youth. The foundation has defined three strategic goals: educational platform, cultural platform and socio-humanitarian platform. To achieve those goals, they carry out activities such as scholarships for students, trainings for personal development of youth, cultural awareness campaigns, and charity activities for people in need."*

When it comes to their perception of how much the community is informed about violent extremism, the organizations had differing views. The IYF view is that youth in Macedonia are facing many other problems and so, there is not too much space for them to get informed or even get engaged with violent extremist groups. According to them, even though there is a group that become informed from what they see on the internet and social media, most of them have a negative perception of violent extremist groups, or do not support them<sup>13</sup>. The representative of Albiz Foundation stated that violent extremism mainly touches the youth that have a low educational level and difficult social circumstances, or a bad past with their families. Stating that there were some cases among youth in which they ended up in a battlefield in Syria or Iraq, their perception is that the phenomenon of violent extremism has not surfaced in their municipality due to it being a very rural zone and because the community insists in practicing the 'traditional' Islam.

When asked whether they had conducted some activities in this regard, LEGIS stated that as an organization, they have focused their current activities and concentration mainly to the migrant crisis, in raising the awareness of the community on this, and also to humanitarian activities for local population. However, the representative expressed that they would consider partnership in small-scale projects or activities on CVE. RACIO mentioned some multicultural events through which they believe to contribute to preventing violent extremism as a final impact. IYF had organized religious sermons with different imams from different countries, in which they specifically talked about this phenomenon. Albiz Foundation and the anonymous NGO stated that they haven't been engaged in CVE activities.

However, violent extremism should be observed in a very specific manner, considering the social and political, as well as international, aspects because 'youth want a world with no injustices and with no dictatorships'. In another statement on what their approach is to violent extremism as an organization, it was stated that violent extremism should be treated very carefully and not only with finger pointing at Muslims. Additionally, when research on this topic is done, it should be carefully conducted and to not be meant as it is acceptable among the target group<sup>14</sup>.

All of the NGOs stated that they had never any contradictions with other organizations that do not agree with their approach to this phenomenon. Accordingly, all of them expressed that they had never been approached by youth in order to be asked help for clarification about recruitments in their neighborhood, etc. As for LEGIS, the general

<sup>13\*</sup> Interview with Fisnik Shabani, Head of Islamic Youth Forum, conducted on 02.03.2017

<sup>14\*</sup> Interview with NGO, conducted on 05.04.2017

problem of the society in Macedonia is that they do not perceive NGOs as ‘consultative body’ for their social matters, and there is no awareness of what an NGO is so they cannot consider their work. However, IYF stated that in general there are discussions among members about this issue, mainly based on comments about what they have seen on television<sup>15</sup>.

Having in mind their active engagement with youth, all of the NGOs considered that the biggest problems that are faced in the field of the civil sector for active participation in CVE, is the lack of cooperation with public actors, particularly in the target neighborhoods of this study. Moreover, they stated that the general problem in Macedonia is that CSOs are not supported by relevant state actors due to political affiliations/reservations<sup>16</sup>.

The comments about the main factors that make youth more likely to accept radical ideas were different among the NGOs. According to LEGIS and IYF, wrong ideological conviction is the main factor for radicalization and recruitment happens as a consequence. On the other hand, while the representative of Albiz Foundation expressed that the main factor is friendship, other NGOs were concentrated on push factors such as unemployment, bad economic conditions, low educational level and lack of opportunities<sup>17</sup>.

*“As I know from my surroundings (friends, relatives, etc.), there are some cases they told me about persons that went there. All of them went to Syria because they believed that it is the right thing to do in the name of God. There is a general perception that these guys go there for money, but it’s not true, there is no one that would want to risk their life by going to war in order to earn money, at least from many cases I know, financial support was not the primary reason, money for those going is considered only as an ‘added value’ on their journey to God”*

*Besnik Hamiti, LEGIS*

The general observation of all the NGOs is that the main driver of approaching the youth is in-person recruitment rather than ‘online recruitment’. On the other hand, no organization has provided a detailed description on whether there are differences among different areas (Skopje, Tetovo and Kumanovo) regarding this phenomenon.

*“Youth can easily be manipulated into accepting their ideas because generally there is no one to give them an idea, parents are ‘busy’ with work, and schools have a very low effect, so they use this gap professionally.”*

*Besnik Hamiti, LEGIS*

<sup>15\*</sup> Interview with Fisnik Shabani, Head of Islamic Youth Forum, conducted on 02.03.2017

<sup>16\*</sup> Interview with Besnik Hamiti, co-founder of LEGIS, conducted on 22.03.2017

<sup>17\*</sup> Interview with Fahmi Osmani, head of Racio, conducted on 03.03.2017

*“The effect of media and social networks has de-oriented the mass of society, but as for me it is so strange how a person in one year can change his opinions and go till the undesired end”*

*Fisnik Shabani, Islamic Youth Forum*

When it comes to the ways of preventing youth from becoming victims of violent extremism, the common approach was providing perspective in the homeland by ensuring qualified education and career opportunity. However, it was also stated that there is no need to for preventive mechanisms, for the reason that this topic should not be exaggerated because there are many issues to solve such as corruption, poverty, unemployment and the politicization of institutions<sup>18</sup>.

*“The only way to prevent VE is to provide alternatives, so the CVE procedure should not proceed by producing directly countering to those groups, but by finding different mechanisms that would indirectly have result, what I want to say is providing career opportunities for youth, betterment of educational system, etc.”*

*Besnik Hamiti, LEGIS*

*“If we work in alternatives to make youth more engaged in the society, that would have more effect on CVE rather than countering it directly, because violent extremism is not a significant problem in Macedonia and this (indirect CVE) would have more effect on society.”*

*Fisnik Shabani, IYF*

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<sup>18\*</sup> Interview with NGO, conducted on 05.04.2017

## What religious preachers say about CVE in Macedonia

Considering that violent extremist groups frequently refer to Islam as their source for legitimizing their acts, it was important to involve Imams as Islamic religious preachers in this study, in order to provide clarification on this issue. Additionally, it was very useful to provide community dynamics of this issue in their respective municipality.

Thus, the Islamic Religious Community was approached to provide a list of ten imams to in order to conduct interviews with them. Among the ten provided names, three interviews were conducted. Two refused to be interviewed because they claim not to have sufficient expertise to talk about this issue. For the remaining five, contacts were requested from IRC but there was no response from them about it.

According to Prof. Dr. Fahrudin Ebibi, Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies, terrorism and any derivative act of violence have no place in Islam. Accordingly, he expressed that those that establish the violent extremist groups themselves are aware of this, but they form terrorist groups for larger material interests. He stated that extremist ideologies started being leaked into the community in Macedonia in the early 1990s, under the guise of CSO activities. He claimed that their main goal was to disrupt the functionality of IRC by conducting activities which are foreseen to be held by this institution. When asked why violent extremism is continuously associated with Islam and whether he agrees with the terms 'Islamic extremism, Islamist terrorism, or radical Islam', he expressed that there is a continuous tendency of the Western world to link terrorist acts with Islam by creating stereotypes, especially through media. Ebibi also noted that in many of the courses within their curriculum, they provide students with knowledge to differentiate between exaggerative acts and Islamic norms. However, he marked that they do not specifically touch upon the issue of violent extremism because according to his opinion and also the institutional approach, there is no discussion and even need to have such course/curriculum/topic in their respective faculty, because it has not any link with Islam and its studies<sup>19</sup>.

Dr. Fatmir Zaimi also expressed that imams in Macedonia have been working productively with the community in keeping it resilient against violent extremism since the beginning of the war in Syria. He stated that there are 100 mosques in Skopje under the umbrella of IRC, and they have continuously discussed the phenomenon of violent extremism through religious sermons. Thus, they have raised awareness about being vigilant against this phenomenon. He also noted that it is unacceptable to consider Macedonia as 'producing' of violent extremists because of incidents in two mosques that happened in past years<sup>20</sup>.

Imam Shaban Tairi from the Municipality of Saraj also stated that Islam does not recognize any sort of extremism. He also expressed that prophet Muhammad strictly reacted to those who had exaggerated in practicing the Islamic rituals. Accordingly, Tairi stressed that according to the Shariah (Islamic Law), the act with the highest penalty is the act of terrorism, or killing innocent people. When asked about the drivers of violent extremism in a certain neighborhood, he said that direct contact seems to be very rare. Tairi mentioned that there have been cases before the Cell 1 and Cell 2 operations, in

<sup>19\*</sup> Interview with Prof. Dr. Fahrudin Ebibi, conducted on 17.07.2017

<sup>20\*</sup> Interview with Dr. Fatmir Zaimi, conducted on 08.05.2017

which some extremists have been gathering in cafés where they tried to encourage the youth to go to Syria. However, these public meetings stopped after the operations. Bearing this in mind, he stated that the duty of the intelligence services is to identify those persons that spread such ideologies.

*“I always say to youth in sermons ‘it is easy to die for religion, but it is more difficult to live and represent it in good manner. It is our obligation to teach the people how to live with Islam, and not to die.’”*

*Shaban Tairi, imam at Municipality of Saraj*

Based on his observations about some that are involved in extremist groups from his neighborhood, Tairi stated that their common point was that they had no knowledge of religion before they joined those groups. In addition, he expressed that all of them previously had conflicts and problems with their families. That is why, according to Tairi, the very first push factor to violent extremism is the psychological circumstance of feeling extremely emotional in terms of becoming regretful and unhappy with the past.

*‘The feeling of having done a lot of bad deeds makes them feel that they can only be forgiven by God if they start to extremely practice rituals and thus, compensate the ‘lost time’ in the past. In this way they transform from one extreme to another extreme. So this makes them seek a new ‘legal’ adventure and they find it in extremist narratives spread especially through social media nowadays.’*

*Shaban Tairi, imam at Municipality of Saraj*

Tairi claimed that almost everyone’s first touch with radical ideas from those cases that he knows, were the religious sermons that they have been watching through social media. He pointed out that the number of participants in the religious sermons of some known extremist imams is 10 to 20, but in social media they have an outreach of approximately 70,000 views per video. That is why, he stated, the Islamic Religious Community should increase its public appearance through online capacities because according to him, the majority of the religious sermons watched on social media by the neighborhood community are from those with radical ideas. He clarified that it is just because there are very few channels promoting the ‘traditional Islam’, and not because the community supports them.

When asked about his communication with the community (whether community asks about this phenomenon), he pointed out that they were frequently asking about clarifications whether it is religiously justified to join violent extremist groups in order to fight in Syria at the very beginning of the war, back in 2011. Notably, Tairi expressed that he was threatened by some extremists in the neighborhood because of strictly and publicly criticizing violent extremist groups such as ISIS and Al-Nusra. This case was lately reported to the Ministry of Interior Affairs.

Tairi also expressed that extremist imams use a manipulative manner of interpretation of the Shariah (Islamic Law) in order to legitimize certain Islamic norms that are forbidden. He stated that it is easy for them to do because they bear in mind that the audience is relatively un-equipped with knowledge about those certain topics of Islam. According to him, another considerable manifestation is that in many videos and sermons

by self-proclaimed imams that support extremist interpretations, it is observed the style of sermons with titles such as ‘deviated imams, sold imams’ by alluding to the ‘traditional’ imams. Additionally, Tairi pointed out that there are many books that are published without any institutional approval and that state officials should take measures to prevent those.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the interviews with IRC imams, two other religious preachers from Salafi school of thought, Bekir Halimi and Omer Bajrami, were also interviewed. It is important to notice that these two do not have official permission from the IRC to be preachers in mosques.

Omer Bajrami was born in the Municipality of Saraj in Skopje, in 1985. He started hifz (memorizing of all Quran) when he was ten years old and finished it in twenty months. Afterward, in 2003, he graduated from the ‘Alaudin’ Madrasah (high school for Islamic studies) of Prishtina. Once he graduated from Prishtina, he finished his theological studies at The American University of Cairo. He studied there for 6 years. After finishing his studies, he came back to Macedonia and started to hold weekly sermons at NGO Rinia Islame – Saraj (Islamic Youth) and in many mosques in home and Europe. He is also a writer of books, and in particular poems and ilahi (Islamic religious songs).

When asked about his perception of violent extremism, Bajrami mentioned a quote of Prophet Muhammad stating that ‘Extremists are defeated!’ which was repeated for three times by prophet himself, in order to stress the importance of keeping the balance. That’s why, he stated, every exaggeration, whether in terms of conviction or practice, is considered extremism and thus, it is strictly forbidden in Islam.

On the question about the reasons of mentioning ‘Islam’ when violent extremism is referred, and whether he agrees with the terms ‘Islamist extremism/Islamist terrorism/radical Islam’, Omer Bajrami expressed that attacks towards Islam by non-Muslims start with those kind of ‘namings’, through which afterward they try to justify it by claiming that they are only against a certain group, and not Islam itself. He stated that ‘there can be extreme Muslims but there is not an extreme Islam’<sup>22</sup>.

According to Bajrami, the issue of extremism in Macedonia is exaggerated in comparison with the reality, because the country has never experienced a terrorist attack. When it comes to recruitments, he stated that it is another issue which has to do with personal manner. Accordingly, he expressed that ‘the way to Syria was ‘opened’ for everyone in the very beginning of the war, but the strategy of the country has afterward changed’.

When asked what his view is on the recruits of violent extremist groups to Syria or Iraq, or whether he justifies it, he stated that he is continuously trying to stress to his followers that ‘we cannot solve the problems of Arabs; their problems have a long history and they are quite complexed’. He added that ‘there are other ways to help Muslims, but not by going in their lands without knowing their language and culture. It is better to serve Islam from the homeland.’

According to Bajrami, the most important driver for the recruitment of young people to violent extremist groups is online content. Linked to this, he expressed that there are youngsters that if they could find a way, they would now go to Myanmar (having in mind that the crisis with Myanmar Muslims was current in the days when the interview was conducted) after seeing pictures and watching videos on how Muslims were being

<sup>21\*</sup> Interview with Shaban Tairi, imam at a mosque in Municipality of Saraj, conducted on 22.05.2017

<sup>22\*</sup> Interview with Omer Bajrami, conducted on 30.08.2017

massacred by state forces.

Bajrami said that imams in Skopje have talked about the ongoing war in Syria, but there was no imam that had made a call to go to fight there. According to him, if there was some imam that did so, the number of recruited people would have been much bigger.

When asked whether he had ever heard or experienced some concrete case in which someone ended up in Syria from his relatives/neighborhood, Bajrami stated that there are very few cases he has heard about in the past. Accordingly, he expressed that it is impossible to talk about a certain profile of people who join violent extremist groups in order to fight in Syria or Iraq, because as he stated, ‘there are some very rich and someone poor, some highly educated and some with a very low level that joined at the battlefield’. He also added that those joining have no previous criminal records. Bajrami re-stressed that the issue of recruitment is not a real problem in society because it is at ‘individual dimension’, and not in a structured organized way.

Finally, Bajrami noted that the key role for prevention of violent extremism can be played by imams through holding religious sermons in mosques and high schools.

Another interview was made with Bekir Halimi, considered as the pioneer of the Salafi movement in Macedonia, particularly in the neighborhoods of Cair, Gazi Baba, and Saraj.

Bekir Halimi was born in Skopje, in 1971. After graduating from the Madrasah (high school for Islamic studies) of Skopje, he finished his theological studies at the University of Jordan. After returning to Macedonia, Halimi’s main occupation was translating religious books from Arabic to Albanian. He is the founder of the ‘Nun’ Publishing House, and the founder of the monthly ‘AlbIslam’ magazine.

Asked on why he is accused to be linked with violent extremist groups, Halimi stated that he was one of the first imams to criticize violent extremism, even in 2003 when Al-Qaeda was a famous terrorist organization. Accordingly, he expressed that all of these critics from the early 2000s about Al-Qaeda and today about ISIS are available publicly online. Thus, Halimi claimed that in this regard he has always tried to ‘help the community’ in order to prevent this phenomenon in the country, and paradoxically is always being accused of supporting terrorism, particularly regarding financing. He noted that the security officials can have access to financial sources (incomes, transfer of money, grants provided, etc.) of NGOs and observe the transparency of his organization. However, he linked these accusations to his political conflict with the Albanian political party (ruling in the last decade) and also his disagreements in the past with Islamic Religious Community, that both, according to him, tried to expose him as an extremist, especially in the eyes of the international community in the country.

Halimi claimed that he politically supported the Albanian political party in the past, even by recommending his followers to vote for them, as it was ‘the national cause of the time’. However, according to him, this political establishment later ‘deviated by participating in corruption and some other ‘harams’ (forbidden things in Islam)’; these were the reasons he stopped supporting this party. In this regard, Halimi is observed to have a different approach from far-extremist Salafi groups such as ISIS that are known to strictly forbid voting in the ‘non-Muslim’ countries.

Accordingly, when asked about the ideological differences between him and violent extremists, considering that both refer to the same scholars with Salafi ideology such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Kayyim Al-Jawzi, Halimi expressed that it is the matter of interpretations and the way of commenting on their approaches in accordance with today’s reality.

When it comes to recruitments from the country in recent years, Halimi said that

in Macedonia there is no certain organization or place where violent extremists gather. He claimed that there are very few persons that make recruitments and those that do are in tight relation with intelligence services. Accordingly, Halimi claimed that he is a witness that those persons were freely travelling in and outside the country, while he is limited of travelling outside the country by the state officials. He also stated that the number of recruitments in Macedonia is lower in comparison with those of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to ‘the stronger voice of imams from Macedonia in order to stop youth from being manipulated’<sup>23</sup>. Halimi also noted that he had been threatened when he publicly criticized recruitments to violent extremist groups that would fight in the battlefield of Syria and Iraq.

Bekir Halimi expressed that a trigger for recruitment is the direct contact. According to him, online content only feed the process of recruitment. Commenting about the current situation with this phenomenon, Halimi stated that the arrested individuals in the Cell 1 and Cell 2 operations will be considered as ‘heroes’ by their fellows once their sentence is completed. That is why, according to him, the state officials should immediately start to make rehabilitation programs within prisons. Accordingly, Halimi expressed that there should be preventive measures in high schools through different activities in order to raise their awareness, though involving teaching of faith and through outdoor activities.

## What does the academic community in Macedonia say about it?

The phenomenon of recruitments to the battlefield in Syria and Iraq and in general violent extremism have also gained attention from academia in the region of Balkans. Therefore, this research aims to touch upon the understanding of academia in Macedonia about this phenomenon. Thus, this section of the report focuses on the approach of university professors in Macedonia regarding these issues. Three interviews were conducted in order to get a better understanding of the issue from the perspective of academia. The selection of professors was based upon their academic and professional background on topics such as identities, social movements, sociology and the engagement on this topic up until this point.

Assoc. Prof. Besa Arifi expressed that the issue of violent extremism is not a new phenomenon being faced in recent years, and in particular gaining public attention only after the Cell 1 and Cell 2 operations. In her opinion, Macedonia has dealt with the phenomenon of violent extremism in different forms and not ultimately having to do with religion. Accordingly, Arifi stated the different types of violent extremism, such as that motivated by far-right groups, , can be seen even today , pointing out the violent incidents that happened in the Assembly of Macedonia on 27 April 2017, in which numerous deputies on the side of the political opposition were physically attacked and injured<sup>24</sup> by sympathizers to the far right. Moreover, Arifi expressed that the emergence of far-right violent extremism in Macedonia, in particular with the incident of that night, was motivated by Orthodox clerics that held sermons during the protests that lead to the violent incident.

Besa Arifi noted that she could distinguish the different forms of violent extremism in the country based on the actions of their proponents: the religious form acts outside

<sup>23\*</sup> Interview with Bekir Halimi, conducted on 28.07.2017

<sup>24\*</sup> More than 70 injured as protesters storm Macedonia’s parliament and attack politicians and police, accessed on: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/27/protesters-storm-macedonia-parliament-social-democratic-leader/>

of Macedonia rather than here, and the paramilitary form is focused on recruitments of militants for participation in ISIS or previously to other illegal formations such as in the case of the Ukrainian revolution. The latter is, according to her, more present in the country, because it is supported by certain political establishments.

Arifi also focused on the global factors that trigger extremist ideologies, and particularly on the non-functionality of the educational system. However, she also stressed the foreign influence of certain Middle East countries through religious sermons. According to Arifi, the Islamic Hanafi School of jurisprudence in Balkans has been targeted for many years now by proponents of the Wahhabi ideological approach, a move supported by certain countries in the Middle East. Considering that this is a process of decades, Arifi pointed out the 'indifference' or even 'stimulation' on the part of the state towards this phenomenon. In this regard, Arifi stressed that drivers such as online sermons on recruitments, books, and flyers have been very easily accessible since the 1990's and continue to be so today. According to her, this shows that the state deemed this situation convenient in that, based on the expansion of this type of extremism in certain neighborhoods, it would be easier to mark certain ethnicities as a whole for political interests. Arifi mentioned the Monstrum Case in which five citizens from Macedonian ethnic background were murdered on 12 April 2012. Following the incident, five citizens of Albanian ethnic background were sentenced to life imprisonment. The Minister of Interior Affairs of the time, Arifi says, blamed radical Islam through a press conference only two hours after the incident without showing any proof and so, violated the Principle of Presumption of Innocence and demonstrates the phenomenon of political exploitation mentioned earlier. Moreover, Arifi claimed that all facts on this case are based on 'secret witness', which implicates a politically orchestrated case and therefore to misuse of the topic of violent extremism. Arifi also stated that there is always a potential for violent extremism to emerge in the Balkans, because the persons that were involved in the previous wars of the region have never gone through resocialization.

According to Arifi, state officials should surely work with those former foreign fighters that are regret their participation in the war in Syria and Iraq, to find alternatives for the resocialization of these persons. Arifi claimed that arrestment would let them become more extremist than they were before. Another focus of Arifi was on continuous community work in coordinated way, in which trust in the state should be vital, as it has been harmed in all aspects. Accordingly, she claimed that there are religious organizations that community sees as more reliable and trustworthy than the Islamic Religious Community as a representative body. That said, according to Arifi, the IRC must approach them as cooperative organizations that would together work on de-radicalization and re-socialization programs. The final mechanism for prevention of violent extremism proposed by Arifi was having lessons on the identification of this phenomenon applied in elementary schools. She stated that it must be taught that extremism is not a religion and it should not be considered as such<sup>25</sup>.

On the other hand, university assistant Lura Pollozhani stated that the phenomenon of violent extremism is a very serious issue that is somehow 'swept under the rug' by relevant institutions and other political actors. According to her, there is a significant lack of debate in society and other stakeholders about this issue. She claimed that in comparison with Kosovo, Macedonia has remained behind in taking into account this phenomenon, which is continuously growing on the ground. Similarly to Arifi, Pollozhani claimed that there is a political approach by state institutions to this issue, due to this phenomenon

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<sup>25</sup>\* Interview with Besa Arifi, Assoc. Prof. at Faculty of Law at SEEU, conducted on 12.05.2017

being perceived as ‘the issue of the Albanian community and so the community itself should deal with it, rather than expecting the institution to take measures’. On the other hand, Pollozhani claimed that Albanian political parties have not shown any will to respond to this phenomenon, due to the fear of being misunderstood and marked by the conservative community as an anti-Islamic party and so, lose votes.

Pollozhani also indicated that Balkan societies are facing a period of identity crisis. As proof for this, she pointed out the continuous debates in Kosovo as being ‘religion vs. nationality,’ which, according to her, creates momentum for extremist groups to potentially gain attractiveness and support. Accordingly, Pollozhani noted that ‘wrong actions’ by state officials in Balkan countries made the community perceive CVE as ‘pressure on religious people’. Being so, she stated that this can cause many people to become radicalized just because they believe that someone from their ethnic/religious group is wrongly oppressed.

Pollozhani expressed that online propaganda is frequently used as a tool for first steps to extremism. According to her, people are manipulated through emotional videos about happenings in Syria, showing the Assad regime’s oppressive measures towards innocent people, and this indirectly begins to convince people that any group fighting against this regime is legitimate. However, Pollozhani said that violent extremist groups in the Balkans are more active on the ground rather than through online propaganda.

Pollozhani stated that another effective ‘pushing factor’ to violent extremist groups is the wrong comments of imams on topics that society deals with. According to Pollozhani, all religious preachers should be more careful regarding how they approach topics that have to do with current community needs and how they make interpretations of specific issues.

As for the prevention of violent extremism, Pollozhani stressed open debates about Islam and space for clarifications in certain topics. In addition, she pointed out the reformation of educational system through increasing the number of initiatives having to do with critical thinking as vital for the prevention of any phenomenon<sup>26</sup>.

Prof. Ali Pajaziti stated that in the social realities of Macedonia, there are extremisms of different natures, such as ultra-nationalism. In addition, there exists religious extremism, which is latent and sometimes manifests itself. According to Pajaziti, the main reasons for the expansion of violent extremism are the political instability that leads the youth to a non-perspective approach in their homeland, bad economic conditions and unemployment.

Similar to Arifi and Pollozhani, Pajaziti also noted that the online content is quite effective. He pointed out the visual materials (photos with quotes triggering emotions, videos, etc.) that ‘form an image of victims that need to be saved’ to the youth. Pajaziti stated that there is no discussion in Macedonian academia about this issue. He also singled out media literacy as important for improving discussions in this regard. According to Pajaziti, media actors in Macedonia expose this phenomenon without any expertise or investigative journalism, and without desk research about ‘extremist movements’, Islamic culture or civilization, dynamics of the Arab, Turkish and generally the Islamic world.

Pajaziti expressed that there should be institutional education about religions in high schools through textbooks that are written by experts in those fields. This, Pajaziti claimed, will prevent violent extremism that refers to any religion that is present in the country.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26\*</sup> Interview with Lura Pollozhani, Researcher at University of Gratz, conducted on 21.03.2017

<sup>27\*</sup> Interview with Ali Pajaziti, professor of Sociology at SEEU University, conducted on 10.04.2017

## Focus Groups

Having in mind the local dynamics of the issue, this research paper also aimed also dissect the approach of local citizens toward violent extremism. In order to look deeper within the current trends and overall situation on the local level, three focus groups were held in the respective target neighborhoods of this study. Taking into account the fact that the group most often targeted by violent extremist propaganda are the youth, including university and high school students, the age group for the three focus groups was 18-25.

The focus groups were moderated by the researchers of this study. There were 6 participants (3 females, 3 males) in the Municipality of Cair, 6 participants (4 females, 2 males) in the Municipality of Saraj, and 4 participants (4 males, 2 females didn't appear although they confirmed their participation) in the neighborhood of Gazi Baba.

The first part of the questions was general in nature, such as the participant's perspective on violent extremism, whether they discuss this topic in society, and their opinion on its main causes and drivers of its emergence. The second part of the questions was more specific in character, pointing out the local dynamics of the issue.

Being so, the main focus of the discussions was on the general observation of the local youth about violent extremism, and the current situation in their respective neighborhoods. In addition, questions were asked whether they had heard about or experienced any concrete cases of recruitments, without exposing identities of the persons and focusing only on the conditions that triggered their recruitment. Based on the cases, discussions developed about general and specific push and pull factors, drivers and also local trends. . Additionally, the discussion had a special focus on the approach of youth regarding ways of prevention of violent extremism.

A considerable observation from all the groups was that participants were clear-cut in differentiating between violent extremism as a phenomenon that results in recruitment, and radicalization as 'a phenomenon that does not ultimately means danger for society, as long as it remains within a personal dimension of choices and some acceptable collective activities'. Accordingly, their general perception was that practicing the very core rituals of a religion in a public space should be considered as within scope of the freedom of religion, rather than as a potential threat to secularism. Additionally, the low level of trust in public institutions, and in particular the lack of trust in the IRC as the representative body of the Muslim community in the country, were among other considerable findings from all of the focus groups. Linked to this, the vast majority of the participants believe that violent extremist groups have hybrid relations with the intelligence agency of the country. Another noticeable finding, similar in nature to the lack of public trust in institutions, is that almost everyone believed that when it comes to a general observation about terrorist groups active in the Middle East, they are all misused by big political powers for their own political and economic benefit. Those observations are based on some additional questions that were raised based on the dynamics of the ongoing discussion.

## Municipality of Cair

The municipality of Cair is the municipality with highest population density in Europe, counting 64.773 citizens in 3.52 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>28</sup> It is also important to mention that this official population number is from the last census taken in Macedonia, completed in in 2002. Having in mind that in the last fifteen years, there were massive constructions of new resident buildings within the same total area, it is considered that the level of population is larger today. Another considerable fact about the municipality of Cair is that following the 2001 Armed Conflict in Macedonia, ethnic Macedonian citizens moved en masse from this neighborhood and it has become a predominantly Albanian living area. It is also notable that one of the mosques that the IRC have publicly complained about in 2015 due to not having control due to its occupation by extremist groups, is Jahja Pasha Mosque, situated in this municipality.

Though they were the first conducted focus group, participants from the municipality of Cair were relatively open in their discussion. When asked about their perception of ‘violent extremism’, all of them made similar statements by pointing out the non-acceptance of and belief in demolishing the other’s view as the very core of the definition. However, one of the participants expressed that extremism that refers to religion emerges when religion is perceived as a political cause, rather than as a relationship between ‘The Creator’ and ‘the creature’. One of the participants noted that the phenomenon of violent extremism in Macedonia became a ‘hot topic’ in the community when Albania arrested some of the religious preachers due to reasons of violent extremism. Accordingly, they stated that the later similar arrests in Kosovo triggered frustration in the Albanian community of Macedonia due to their belief that some of those arrested religious preachers were innocent and couldn’t be labeled as linked with violent extremism. In their opinion, it is normal that recruitments to violent extremist groups such as ISIS or Al-Nusra are the main focus when ‘violent extremism’ is discussed, due to their media appearance on the global and local level. However, three of participants claimed that ‘violent extremism’ does not ultimately mean recruitment for them. They pointed out the latest protests by far-right nationalist groups that evolved with many occurrences of hate speech toward different ethnic communities in Macedonia.

Considering the difficult financial conditions of the youth in the country, some participants expressed that violent extremists exploited these conditions by making propaganda emphasizing that their so-called ‘Islamic State’ in the geographical area of Syria and Iraq is the ideal place for living, in which there are higher living standards due to financial management according to Shariah (Islamic Law). Being so, it is observed that ‘financial condition’ is a ‘catalyst’ of ideological conviction as a main pulling factor.

In addition, the participants’ view was that Islam in their community is perceived in a traditional manner, based only on what they hear from their parents and relatives, rather than being perceived based on deeper research and knowledge about it. Thus, according to participants, it becomes very easy for them to be manipulated by ideological extremist views.

Based on some cases they have heard or know about, participants mentioned the lack of care and education of parents as the main issue that triggered youngsters to extremist groups. One of the participants explained a case about a young from Macedonia that was used as a kamikaze by ISIS in the battlefield of Syria and Iraq. According to

<sup>28\*</sup> Official website of Municipality of Cair, accessed on: [http://cair.gov.mk/popullsia\\_cair.html/](http://cair.gov.mk/popullsia_cair.html/)

the participant, the young had a good level of education and economic conditions but was manipulated by his friends. Additionally, the participant stated that he was living alone, without having spent much time previously with his parents. Another participant expressed a case in which a student studying in the School of Arts became frustrated because of the ‘communist approach’ (referred by the participant) of professors and as a protest stopped his education and joined extremist groups.

Mentioning their own experiences, participants explained that the very first approach of the violent extremist groups towards youth in the community is very humanistic and compassionate. They noted that this is a very effective driver, particularly for those youngsters that have sense of lack of belonging to someone or somewhere. Additionally, they expressed that verbal contact, particularly after the prayer times, is an essential driver used by violent extremists in the community for approaching the youth. One of the participants explained that he had spent a lot of time with three friends whose family members, relatives or close friends have been or actually are in the battlefield of Syria and Iraq. Additionally, he claimed that some of his friends are involved with extremist groups, are robbers or users of drugs or alcohol while still being supporters of extremist ideas.

Finally, asked for their ideas about prevention of the phenomenon on a community level, participants expressed that there should be NGOs that implements bigger-scale activities that are attractive for youth and their engagement. Accordingly, participants expressed that state institutions should respond more “softly” to this issue as the ‘hard measures’ indirectly contribute to the expansion of extremism.

## Neighborhood of Gazi Baba

The neighborhood known as Gazi Baba, which is geographically mapped within the municipality of Cair and on the boundary with the municipality of Gazi Baba, is another highly-populated location. It is notable that Rexhep Memishi, a self-proclaimed imam who admitted to recruiting in his trial and afterward was sentenced to 7 years imprisonment, was holding weekly religious sermons on Fridays in the Tutunsuz Mosque, situated in this neighborhood. It is also important to point out that Memishi did not have official permission by the IRC to hold those weekly Friday services, the most-attended service by Muslims. Given that Memishi was influential in this neighborhood, it was desirable to have a separate focus group with youth particularly from this location.

The most important finding from this focus group was that since the arrests within the scope of the Cell 1 and Cell 2 operations, support of violent extremist groups in this neighborhood has drastically decreased. Based on the observation of the participants, many of their friends have cut ties with this group after the arrests. According to them, this happened because of raised awareness in public opinion about this issue. As a consequence, the intervention of parents towards those youth became more effective. However, one of the participants claimed that after the arrests, the number of those being recruited has increased due to the fear of being arrested as well. He stated that there are two persons he knew that had gone to Syria prior to the conducted focus group.

When asked about their general perception of violent extremism, one participant claimed that nowadays it has to do with the level of ideologies, which, in most of the cases, primarily manifests themselves within references to different ideological approaches of religion (practicing core religious rituals according to certain school of practice) and later expose their political goals (claiming establishment of a religious state). In the concrete

sample of ISIS, the group's ideology is based on two parameters: Wahhabi practice of faith and the belief in re-organizing Muslims within a certain state (Khilafah).

When asked about whether extremist groups have a certain target profile of potential recruits in their respective communities, all the participants claimed that they intently target youngsters that have a low level of knowledge about religion. Additionally, they claimed that extremist groups do grassroots research about some youth that they target by getting information about the target youngster's family. Accordingly, when asked whether they discuss this phenomenon with their relatives or friends, all of them claimed that they have never spoken about it at their house, but frequently with their friends.

When asked about some concrete cases that they might have experienced, one of the participants expressed that he lost three friends, who were living in the same neighborhood as him, in the battlefield of Syria and Iraq. He stated that all of them went there because of their ideological conviction to form a so-called Islamic State. However, he mentioned that the frustration they started experiencing after watching videos of the tortures orchestrated by the Assad regime and after listening to self-proclaimed imams' sermons about those tortures, was a crucial motivation for them to decide to join the war. While two of them were 23 years old, one of them was older (not specifying the age). In addition, he mentioned that all three of them had had problems with their families before they left. Accordingly, one of them went after he broke up with his fiancée, and due to this his own family had distanced him from the house.

Another case explained by a participant was surprising for the participant himself, because he stated that they met for a coffee the night before he went to Syria. While at the café, the former fighter mentioned nothing to the participant about his plan about going there. However, according to the participant, the friend very much regretted his decision to go and returned, but once he was back in Macedonia, he was arrested.

One of the participants stated that when he went to make his condolences to the parents of one of foreign fighters that died in the battlefield. His father felt proud of his son who had died. However, after a while the same parent suggested that youth should not do what his son did, and strictly not to join violent extremist groups.

In addition, another participant expressed that he has a friend that came back from the battlefield and is now in prison. Accordingly, he claimed that there are many others that want to come back as they regret having participated in violent extremist groups, but they are afraid of being arrested once they came back.

One participant explained that the prohibition of prayer rooms within high schools for students who wanted to practice rituals had negatively affected and frustrated them, setting them up against the school staff. He claimed that three pupils that he had met in the prayer room at the mosque started to get involved with violent extremist groups and changed their attitude towards their teachers.

Another notable case is that one of the participants had a friend that came back from the battlefield in Syria. This former fighter explained to him that he had killed a fighter in the battlefield, and when he opened the pocket of the fighter he killed, he found a small Qur'an in his pocket. This has made him very remorseful and thus, he started to think that he was being misused by ISIS. Afterward, the former fighter stated that he escaped from there because if someone is discovered seeking ways to leave, they are executed in public.

An interesting finding from this focus group was that the community stigmatization for some certain group of people such as those with special needs, or those suffering

from substance abuse, divorced people, etc. can be a pushing factor to violent extremism. One of the participants explained that a foreign fighter took his own brother in the battlefield with him just because the people from the neighborhood were mocking his brother for having Down syndrome.

One of the participants claimed that separating oneself from friends that start to get radicalized indirectly helps acceleration of the process of radicalization. He argued this with a case about his own brother. According to the case, the participant's brother started to separate himself a friend that had begun to join violent extremist groups. However, before they separated, they were discussing the recruitments. The radicalized person explained to him that his own brother had gone to Syria, and if he could, he would do the same. He also explained that before his brother went there, he gave a big amount of money to the family, which he got from violent extremist groups.

When asked whether there is a hotspot of violent extremist in their neighborhood, one of the participants claimed that extremist groups became more 'underground' after the Cell 1 and Cell 2 operations. A considerable trend is that according to a participant, the new way of chatting is through the online Sony Play Station system. Another interesting claim was that they also chat through sandwich papers in fast-food places in the neighborhood. Another mentioned trend was that the recruitments mainly happened during the last ten days of the fasting month of Ramadan, as those are considered to be the most emotional days.

Finally, some of participants stated that a specific national strategy for the prevention of violent extremism is needed, in which according to its action plan, there should be foreseen joint activities of religious communities, NGOs and high schools about raising awareness of this phenomenon.

## **Municipality of Saraj**

The Municipality of Saraj is the biggest municipality of Skopje, with total area of 229.06 km<sup>2</sup> and total population of 35,408<sup>29</sup>. According to the demographic information, there are (by percentage) 91.5 % Albanians, 3.9 % Macedonians, 3.2% Bosniaks, and 1.4% others.

In comparison with other focus groups, participants from this focus group stated that they debate about violent extremism with their families, as there are many youngsters that are affected by this phenomenon in their community. However, participants claimed that violent extremist groups usually approach persons with low levels of education and that are socially vulnerable.

Another participant expressed that she has talked about this phenomenon with her family, as one of her teachers tried to restrain her feminist activities. She also claimed that the professor provoked their students by stating that females do not have to be educated in school and shouldn't have contact with males. Moreover, another participant stated that a professor in the high school where she was studying (Arseni Jovkov High School of Economics and Law) disseminated some flyers about what the punishments are in hell. In the ongoing discussions on this, it was observed that students agree with receiving religious suggestions in a positive way, but not in the abovementioned nature, such as punishments or other discouraging statements.

<sup>29</sup>\* This number is according to the 2002 Consensus result of Rep. of Macedonia, online accessed on: [http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/kniga\\_13.pdf](http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/kniga_13.pdf)

The participants noticed that low awareness, lack of education, poverty, low religious knowledge, loneliness, and segregation from society are the main factors through which a youth may become affected by violent extremism. They also stated that the main drivers of recruitment in their community are outdoor activities such as picnics and trips. One participant expressed that there were some cases in which extremist groups helped some poor youth reconstruct their houses or buy cars.

However, participants also mentioned online extremism as a very important driver. One participant expressed that a female from this community has started her first contacts with violent extremists through Facebook. The participant also claimed that this woman was caught by police while trying to go to Syria. She was highly criticized by her family and relatives but she didn't stop her extremist activities and recruited two other female friends. According to the participant, the three of them were raped by those extremists. Due to this, according to the participant, she tried to commit suicide in that period.

Another participant stated that her relative was continuously listening to Rexhep Memishi's sermons that are still available online. She noticed many changes in his behavior. Additionally, she expressed that after a time he created a group with friends in order to attend outdoor activities of the violent extremists. Moreover, she claimed that he is being paid for this by extremist groups. She added that he has even stopped his high school education and hasn't finished yet.

A considerable finding was that the most effective timeframe of contact of extremist groups with youth is during the summer school holiday. According to a participant, one of his classmates used to be quiet and friendly but then experienced many changes during the summer time. He started to grow his beard and changed his clothing style in general. He also began not to talk with girls at all, even though he had been quite open with them before.

When asked about whether there is a hotspot of extremists, a place in which they gather in their community, participants claimed that there are some informal praying rooms used as 'alternative mosques'. When asked about why exactly Skopje and in particular their community is affected by this phenomenon, the participants stated that even though their community is the biggest in terms of territory, it is perceived as rural due to the poor local governance. This situation has led them to lack opportunities and become vulnerable to extremist groups.

Finally, the participants stated that there should be lessons on faiths in the schools in which students can get knowledge about religions from real sources. Another suggestion in regard to the prevention of violent extremism was supporting outdoor activities through NGOs active in the community.

## Online Propaganda

This part attempts to examine online extremist propaganda that targets individuals from Macedonia and the Western Balkans. This is carried out by following the activity on social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, where we will attempt to discover any possible extremist propaganda. After finding the extremist propaganda, our researchers report the content to the relevant social media teams with the aim being for the content to be removed from the internet.

Examining social media propaganda is also important as it gives us insight into the messages, narratives, and tools that extremists use when addressing potential recruits and followers. This provides for policymakers a better idea of how the pull factors for radicalization function, which in turn, allows for a better and more informed response to them.

The questions that we examine in this part are:

- What platforms do extremists use for communication with their followers and potential recruits?
- How fast and effective are the relevant social media teams at responding to our requests for removing the content?
- What are the types of messages that extremists send out?

Based on the interviews and focus groups, it is observed that violent extremist groups actively use Facebook as a communication tool with their followers. There are some fake profiles using non-existing names and surnames so that the individuals are not identified.

The content of materials used in social media differs by its audience. The content of the videos in YouTube is more targeted for the followers of the group itself. Specifically, there are many online materials identified as an open way for recruitment or propaganda of the group on YouTube. It is observed that calls to join the battlefield in Syria and Iraq are more apparent. There are also some videos exposing everyday life in the so-called 'Islamic State', in which the youth are encouraged to join the authority of Khalifa (Islamic Leader). The religious songs with lyrics encouraging fighting, exposure of the ISIS flame, movie scenes with fighting content, religious sermons with emotional moments that sometimes appears to be translated from Arabic (in case that the preach is not from a local preacher), are some of the common elements of those videos.

Figure 1 - YouTube channel with daily propaganda about ISIS

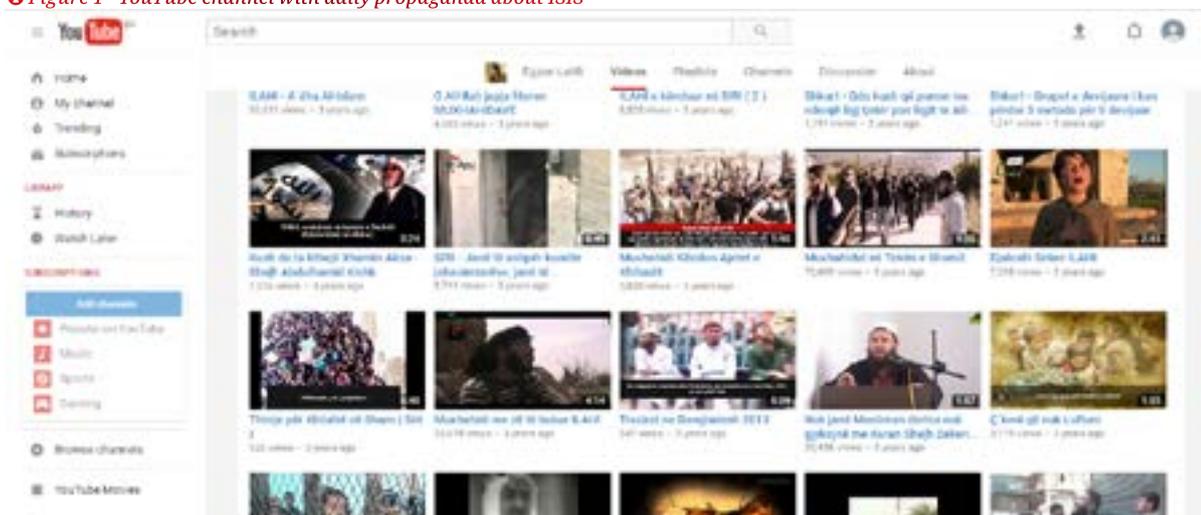
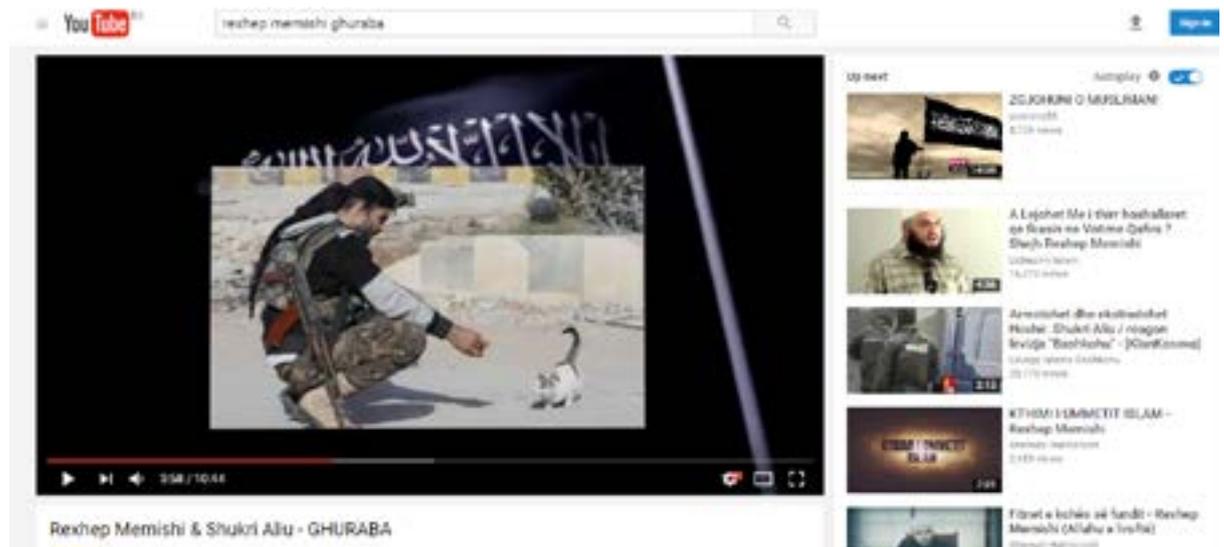
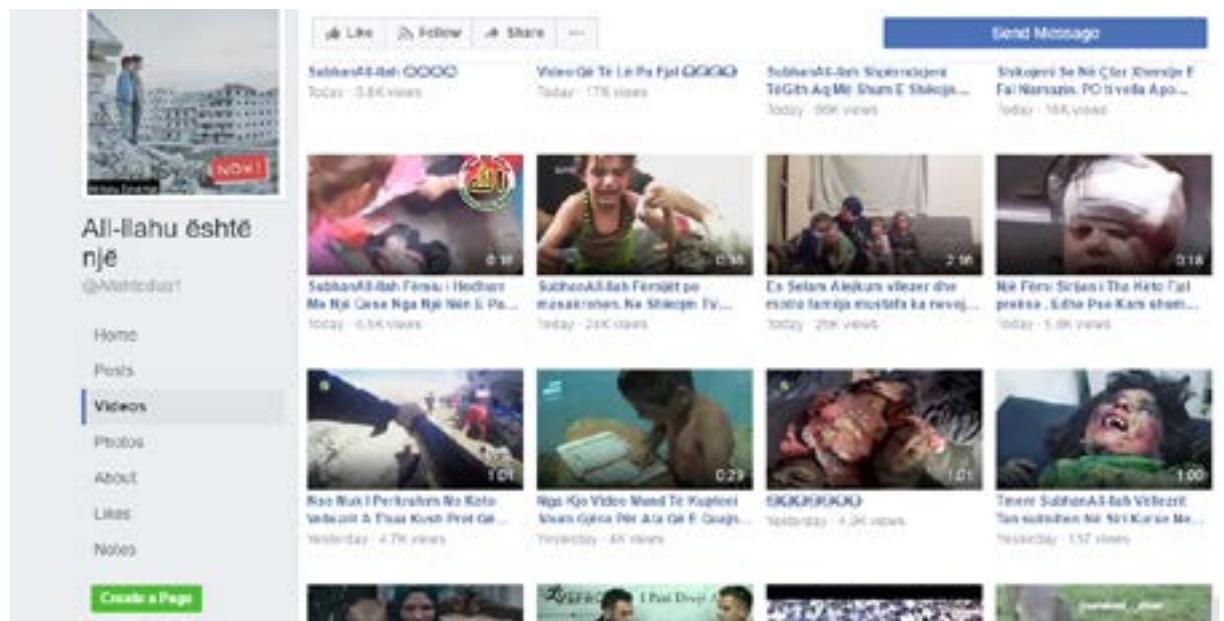


Figure 2 - YouTube video with propaganda about ISIS



On the other hand, the content in the Facebook pages is more about a broader audience of people, in which the main focus of the messages is generally the cruel mastered by Assad regime. There are many emotional videos from bombings, sequences from destroyed houses, children that starve, and texts from scholars that are mostly referred to by extremist groups.

Figure 3: Facebook page with hidden propaganda about ISIS



Another considerable finding is the title of the content. While the titles of the YouTube channels and videos are more concise about recruitments, the titles of the Facebook pages and videos are more about general values of Islam. Thus, it is observed that the target audience in YouTube is the extremist followers, while on Facebook is primarily the whole Muslim community.

Some of the YouTube channels, videos and Facebook pages are as follows:

| PLATFORM | NAME OF CONTENT  | TYPE OF CONTENT |
|----------|--|-----------------|
| Youtube  | Siria mes hadithit dhe realitetit (Syria between hadith and reality)   | Video           |
| Youtube  | Ghuraba (The strangers)  | Video           |
| Youtube  | Zgjohuni o Muslimanë! (Wake up O you Muslims!)   | Video           |
| Youtube  | Minbermedia  | Channel         |
| Youtube  | Agimi i Vërtetë (True Sunrise)   | Channel         |
| Youtube  | Rrezet e Dritës (Rays of Light)  | Channel         |
| Youtube  | Krenaria Islame (Islamic Pride)  | Channel         |
| Youtube  | Minarja e Bardhë (White Minaret)   | Channel         |
| Youtube  | Islami i Vërtetë (True Islam)  | Channel         |
| Facebook | E Vërteta e Qartë (The Significant True)   | Page            |
| Facebook | Hilafeti (Khilafah, Islamic type of ruling)  | Page            |
| Facebook | E Vërteta e Qartë 2 (The Significant True)   | Page            |
| Facebook | Lajme nga Vendi (News from the region)   | Page            |
| Facebook | Ligji i Allahut është Dritë (The Law of Allah is Light)  | Page            |
| Youtube  | Song for Osama Bin Laden in Albanian   | Video           |
| Youtube  | EbuAbdulalim   | Channel         |
| Youtube  | Mesime Teuhidi (Faith Studies)   | Channel         |
| Youtube  | Cila eshte e verteta per xhihadin ne Afganistan dhe ne Irak? (What is the truth about jihad in Afghanistan and Iraq) | Video           |
| Youtube  | Song   | Video           |
| Youtube  | Luanet e umetit (Lions of Ummah)   | Video           |
| Youtube  | Viedoislameteam  | Channel         |
| Youtube  | Ju pershendes me lot ne sy (I greet you with tears in my eyes)   | Video           |

Another considerable finding is that the YouTube channel titled “Mësime Teuhidi” (Faith Studies) uploads videos, with translation into Albanian, of self-proclaimed religious preacher Halis Bayuncuk (proclaimed as Abu Hanzala by ISIS).

Figure 3 - The Leader of ISIS in Turkey, Halis Bayuncuk (proclaimed as Abu Hanzala)



The abovementioned identification and reporting of the content to YouTube and Facebook was made in a one-month interval of time. Based on recent updates, among all reported, 5 Facebook pages, 3 YouTube channels and 8 videos have already been removed by the respective social media platforms.

The transcription of some video content that encourages recruitment to extremist groups is as follows:

Video: “Syria between hadith (quotes of Prophet Muhammad) and reality”

Preacher: Rexhep Memishi

Uploaded: June 2013

Sequence:

“We have stated in many sermons that Sham (the Levant) has experienced big traps by the enemies of Islam, the Sham (the Levant), that fruitful and blessed land, the place where the Muslims will gather before the Day of Judgment, and the place that is stated to be the land of fights, of the friends of God, the place of the Muslim men... The things we see there today are the culmination of what is known as Arab Spring, is the culmination of cruel tyrants that history has never seen before, against the cruel who feed on the blood of Muslim children... Do you think that God would let this blood be defeated?! Do you think that God will let the blood of the fighters in this holy land that is protected by Him?! There are no hadith (quotes of Prophet Muhammad) about a place more than about Sham. Ibn Taymiyyah has written a special book about Sham, and he lived there...

Prophet Muhammad has never talked with his emotions or conjecture, same as some think that the fighters in the path of God are people of emotions and only implementers of the plans of the enemies, same as they call the mujahids and friends of God that are now in the land in which they fight for God...

Whenever they see killed child, women, or a defeated elder, when they see poor peo-

ple, they go out and fight for the sake of God, but they are called by others as terrorist, as killers and manslayer, unfortunately even by Muslims.

*The ongoing in that holy place are vital, and what I see so far it is, in my opinion, a fruitful war.* This is a big war, it is a big fitnah (instigation) of this world but praise for Muslims. However, as this is the time of instigation, Muslims should be careful, as they may not know on which side they should be. We shouldn't be on the side of non-believers, of the Albanian speaking non-believers, of the persons that try to expose their selves as hodja (religious preachers), those hodjas that in the name of Islam, they follow the path of Dajjal (the Anti-Christ). And so, are you going to follow Dajjal?"

Video: "Wake up o Muslim!"

Preacher: Shukri Aliu

Uploaded: February 2012

"The example of our Ummah is like a ship, but this ship does not wave in the water of sea, but in the blood of its sons, whenever the blood diminishes, the ship starts to shake, and whenever the blood dries, the ship shatters. And this is why the ship of our Ummah is shattered, because the blood of the martyrs in the name of God is shattered. The fruit called Islam grows with the blood of martyrs, whenever we don't spill water in its core, the fruit of Islam started to become dry."

Video: "Question and answers"

Preacher: Rexhep Memishi

Uploaded: March 2011

**QUESTION:** Do you think that the latest events in Islamic lands are an issue of Jewish and Christians, having in mind that they have no reactions yet?

**ANSWER:** In regard of the latest event, we pray to Allah for helping the Muslims wherever they are, we pray that His word be the highest and the one of non-believers be the lowest. The non-believers indeed have plans and reactions, there are reactions... Their biggest fear is to not let Muslims take on leadership so that the Shariah of Allah could lead there. They want to let the systems, as they call 'democracy'. They want for those lands to be still the colonies of West, so that the blessings in this land remain to the favor of the West, but Allah is the One who will defeat them, and based on what the Prophet Muhammad has mentioned these are the last phases before the Day of Judgment, because it is the system of tyranny, and afterward it will be followed by Khilafah (Islamic type of ruling), same as it was in the time of Prophet Muhammad, and his successors Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. We pray to Allah that those lands will be transformed to rulings in which He will be satisfied, that's why we pray Allah that Muslims use this historical moment, *we don't stop Muslims from going and fighting for the change of dictators that fight against Islam and Muslims, that makes them betrayals and traps...*

**QUESTION:** If someone seeks to be martyr and goes to war with this aim, would Allah accept his prayer? I fear to die in a simple way, I desire to give my life for the sake of Allah so that Allah would be satisfied with me and my desire is to die as such, and not in a different way. However, I know that my parents would not let me do something like this. If I go there, is it halal (allowed in Islamic principles)?

**ANSWER:** Prophet Muhammad has stated that there are too many martyrs. He stated that whoever seeks to be martyr with much sincerity, Allah will provide that to him/her even if he/she dies in bed. This is what Prophet has said for those that are eager to achieve this grade, so it is a grade that Allah has praised those people. God has said in the Qur'an that whoever respects Allah and Prophet, they will be with those that Allah has blessed, with the good people such as martyrs and prophets. Those are chosen people, believers should always aim this grade, because the Prophet himself has said the culmination of Islam is the path of fighting for Allah. We pray Allah to make us one of those martyrs that Allah will be satisfied in this world and in the other."

Based on the abovementioned declarations, it is clearly observed that the self-proclaimed preachers show a tendency to encourage and recruit people for fighting in Syria. This clearly contradicts article 322-A of the Criminal code of Macedonia<sup>30</sup>. It is also important to notice that the emotional attachment is triggered through ideological approaches to religious notions. Thus, online propaganda, as an important driver to ideological conviction and a push factor in the process of radicalization, is a frequently used tool for accessing the masses.

When it comes to current prevention mechanisms, the Ministry of Interior Affairs of Macedonia has opened a new online platform within its official webpage, called 'Red Button', which aims to report of any relevant online content that is categorized as follows:

1. Abuse of children
2. Human trafficking
3. Hate speech or calls for violence

Considering the abovementioned content, it is important to include violent extremism as a specific category in this button. The specification of this sort of online content is vital in order to raise awareness about and sensitivity to this phenomenon in Macedonia.

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<sup>30\*</sup> Criminal Code of Republic of Macedonia, online accessible at: <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/untc/unpan016120.pdf>

## Opinion survey on CVE

This section of the report focuses on analyzing the results of the opinion poll about the societal dynamics of violent extremism. The survey aims to gain a deeper understanding of the community view on this phenomenon. Moreover, it attempts to identify the current resilience level of the community. It provides a general picture of public opinion about various elements that have to do with current state of violent extremism.

The survey consisted of 36 questions. After the demographic data questions (gender, group age, level of education, ethnic background, social status, monthly income), there were some general questions about current situation in the country (the most important issue, Euro-Atlantic accession, foreign influence, religion, etc.). Linked to this, the last part of the questionnaire focused on specific topics that relate to the phenomena of violent extremism (factors, drivers, resilience, re-socialization, returned foreign fighters, legal consequences, etc.).

This survey was carried out in the three target municipalities of this report. It was conducted with 1050 samples, 350 sampled per municipality, consisting all group ages and ethnic backgrounds, as well as those from both urban and rural areas. The period in which the survey took place was 29 November – 3 December.

### **DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

The demographic profile of the total number of respondents was as follows: 47 % of the respondents were female, while 53 % were male. In terms of group ages, 6.6 % were 20 or younger, 30.9 % of them were 21 to 35 years old, 35% were 36 to 50 years old, and 27.6 % of them were 50 or older. The respondents mainly had completed only high school education (63 %), followed by those with a completed undergraduate degree (18.5 %). Only 2.3 % of them held postgraduate degree. In terms of ethnic background, 52 % of the respondents were declared as Albanian, 39 % Macedonian, 3.4 % Turkish, 1.7 % Bosnian, and 3.9 % were recorded as others.

The respondents were from different social strata. While 33, 6 % of the respondents were employed in the private sector and 13 % in the public sector, 27, 8 % of them were unemployed. The percentage of retired persons was 11, 4 %, and students were 6, 9 %.

## Data results and analysis

### **GENERAL SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY**

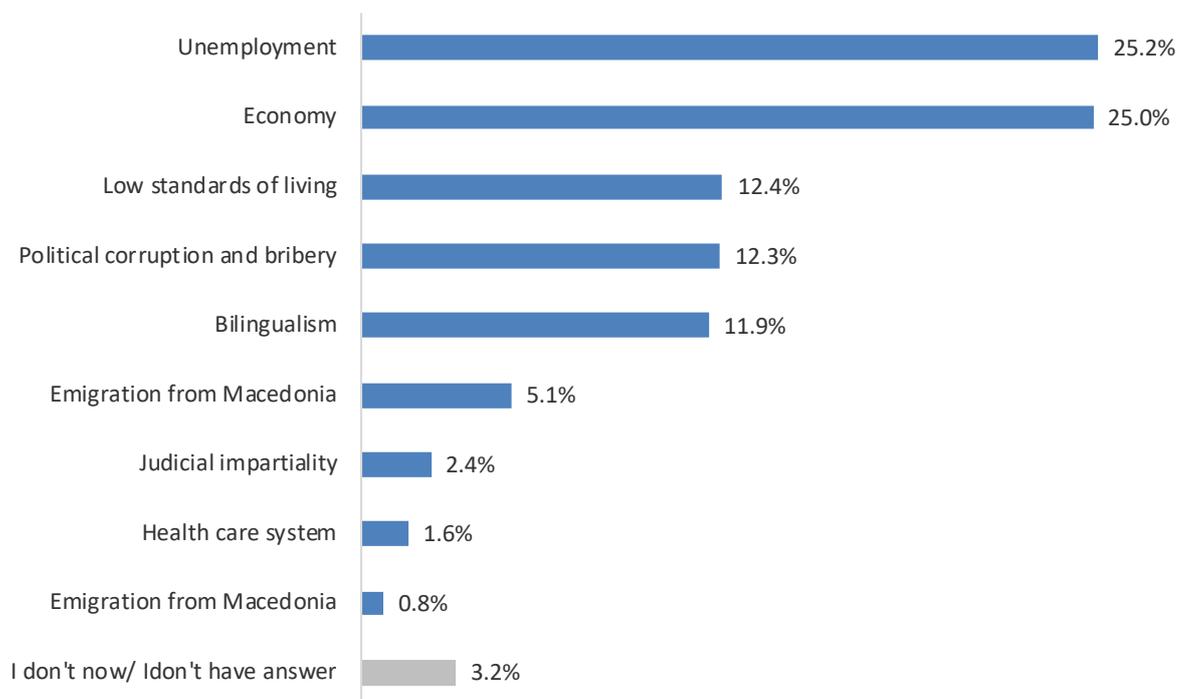
The respondents were asked to give their opinion about several topics that regard the current political situation in the country. Thus, in the question about what the most important problem is that needs to be solved in Macedonia, half of the respondents addressed unemployment (25.2%) and the economy (25%). It is also important to mention that majority of these answers came from the group age 21 to 35 years old.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of the respondents (83%) believe that Macedonia is a multi-ethnic country. Asked whether Macedonia is a safe place to live, 58% of them answered positively. According to their views, political instability (46%) and conflicts among ethnic groups (28.5%) are the biggest security threats of the country. Nationalistic violent extremism (8.4%) and international terrorist groups (3%) were among other considered security threats. Asked whether they consider NATO as an international orga-

nization that might help to solve these threats, 60% of the respondents confirmed that it would. Linked to this, 78.6 % of the respondents supported the integration of Macedonia within NATO. Accordingly, support for EU integration was counted as 83.5%.

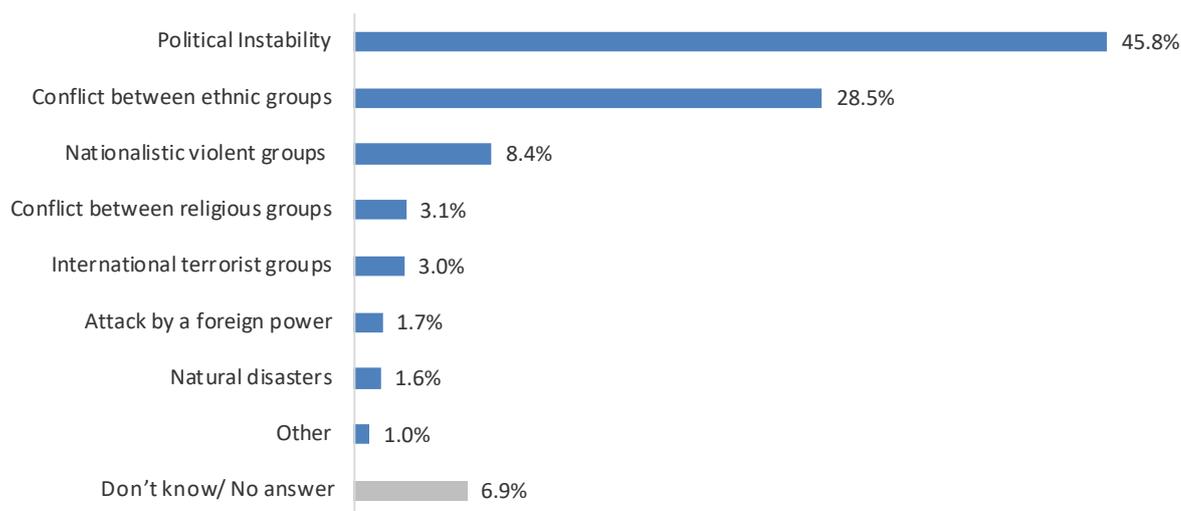
**"In your opinion, what is the most urgent problem of the country that needs to be solved?"**

Graphic 1: Results from the question "According to you, which is the most urgent problem that the state needs to solve?"



**"In your opinion, what is the biggest security threat facing the country?"**

Graphic 2: Results from the question "According to your opinion, what is the greatest security threat that the state faces?"

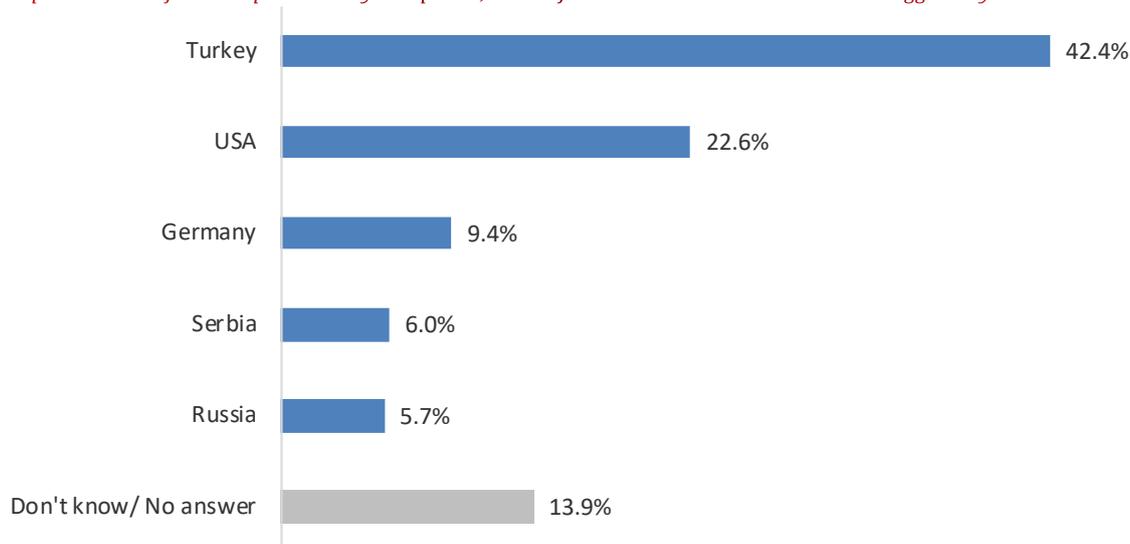


## FOREIGN INFLUENCE

According to the respondents, the countries that provide the most aid to Macedonia are Turkey (33.6%), the EU (24.8%) and the USA (15%). Linked to this, 42.4% of them believe that Turkey is the most important ally of the country, followed by the USA (22.6%) and Germany (9.4%). However, 47% believe that 'Macedonia belongs to West', 11.3% think that 'Macedonia belongs to East', and 24.3% stated that 'Macedonia does not belong neither to West nor to East'. This shows that in general, the community in Macedonia does not perceive Turkey as an Eastern country.

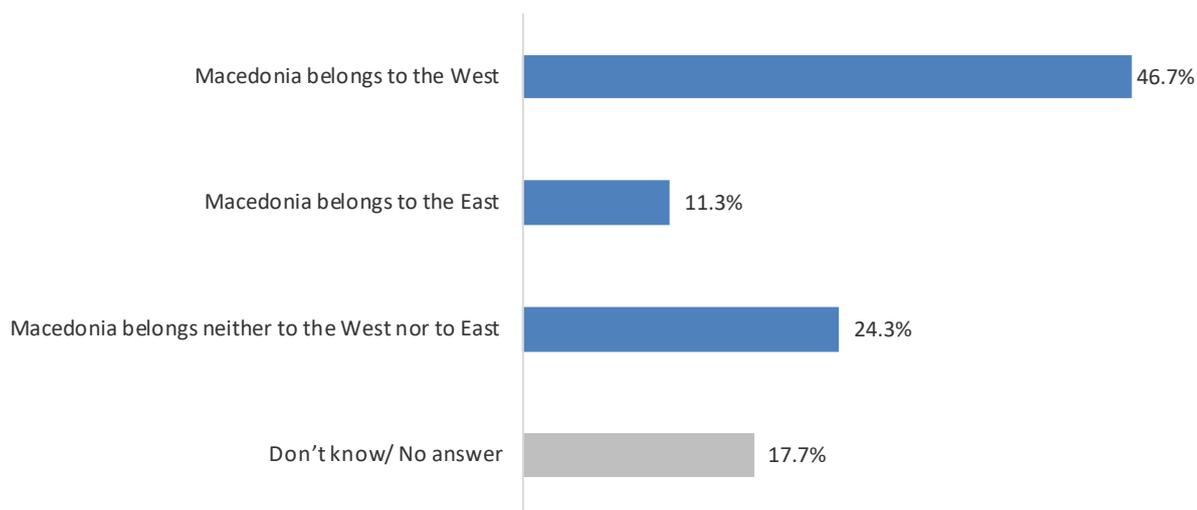
### **"According to your opinion, which of the belowmentioned countries is the biggest ally of Macedonia?"**

**Graphic 3:** Results from the question "In your opinion, which of the listed countries is Macedonia's biggest ally?"



### **Which statement is closest to your opinion?**

**Graphic 4:** Results from the question "Which statement is closest to your opinion?"



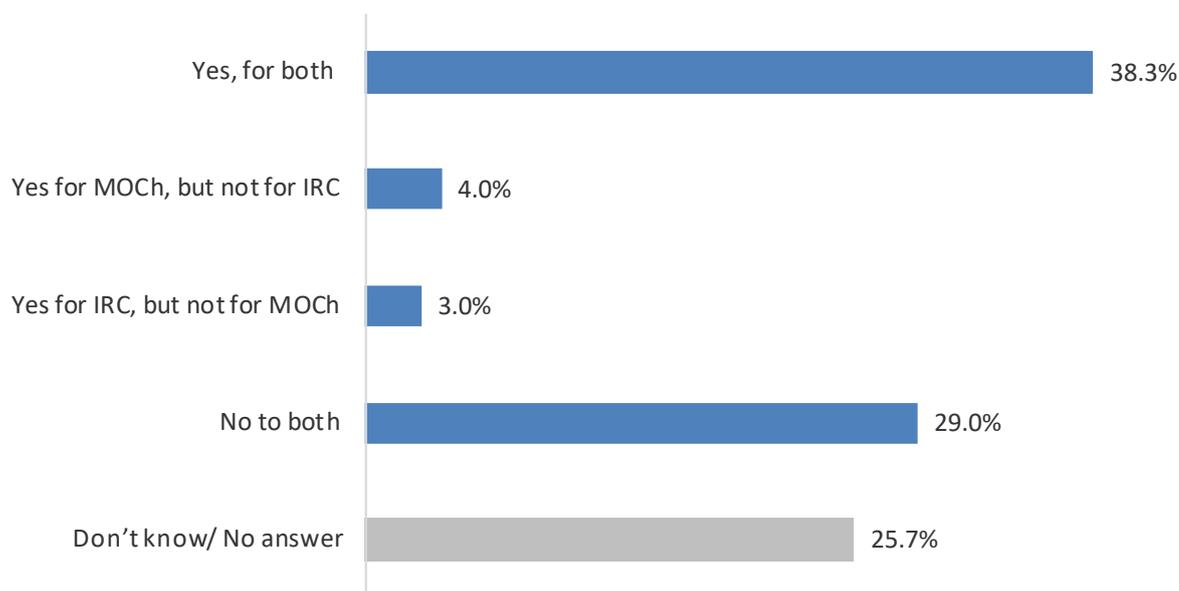
## RELIGION

When asked to choose the statement that best describes their attitude to religion, 54 % of the respondents stated that religion is important to them and they consider themselves to be religious. Accordingly, 23% declared that they are religious and accept everything that their religion teaches. Also, 19% stated that they are not religious but religion is important to them. To sum up, to 96% of the respondents, religion is considerable in their life. Only 2 % of the respondents declared themselves as not religious and being against it (the 2% remaining had no answer). However, if they would have to choose between secular and religious state, 64.3% of all respondents prefer secular, while 20.8% prefer religious (15% had ‘no answer’).

When asked to evaluate the importance of religious communities, 20% of them considered it as high, while 45 % of the respondents considered it as important but not too exaggerated. Accordingly, 38.3% of the respondents think that Macedonia should provide a legal status to the Macedonian Orthodox Community and Islamic Religious Community as public institutions. It is also important to mention that 29% answered negatively and 26% had no answer to this question. Linked to this, 55% of the respondents think that religion plays a role in Macedonia’s politics, while 31% think the opposite.

### ***Do you think that Macedonia should provide a legal status as public institutions to Macedonian Orthodox Church and Islamic Religious Community?***

**①** *Graphic 5: Results from the question “Do you think that Macedonia should provide a legal status as public institutions to Macedonian Orthodox Church and Islamic Religious Community?”*



## ***VIOLENT EXTREMISM***

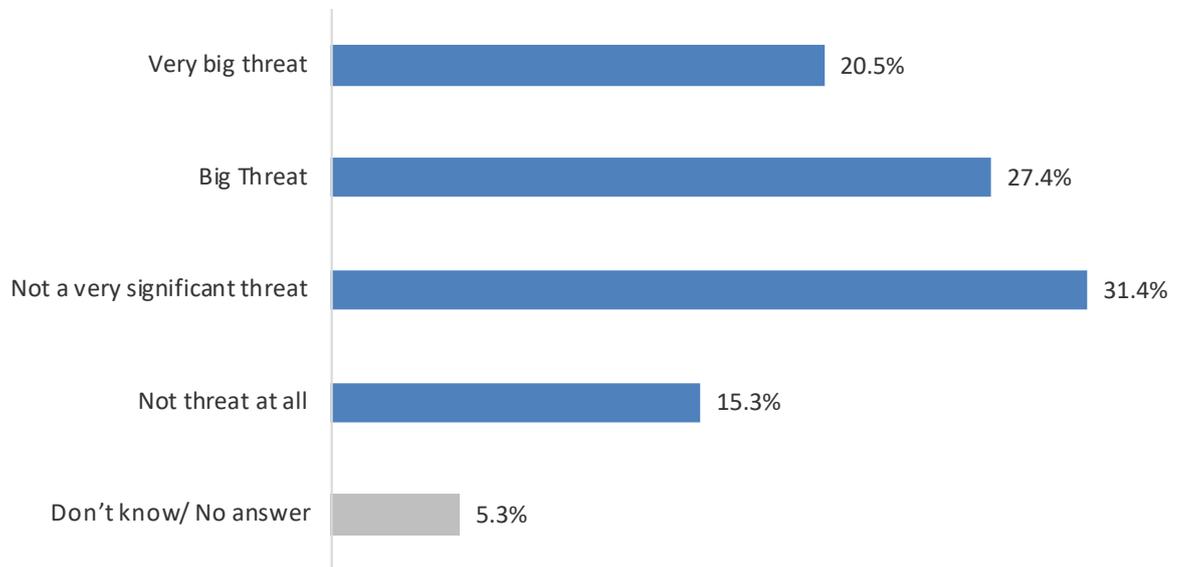
A set of questions about violent extremism, with a concrete focus on ISIS, were asked to the respondents. According to the results, half of the respondents consider ISIS a threat to Macedonia (very big threat-20.5% and big threat 27.4%), while the other half think that it is not so (not a significant threat-31.4% and not a threat at all-15.3%). Another considerable differentiation in this regard is that 64% of Macedonians consider ISIS as a very big or a big threat, while 59% of Albanians do not consider the situation as threatening.

When asked how effective they consider the state's measures to counter violent extremism to be, 43% considered them very effective or somewhat effective. On the other hand, 44% of respondents consider that the measures of Islamic Religious Community to counter violent extremism are less effective or not effective at all.

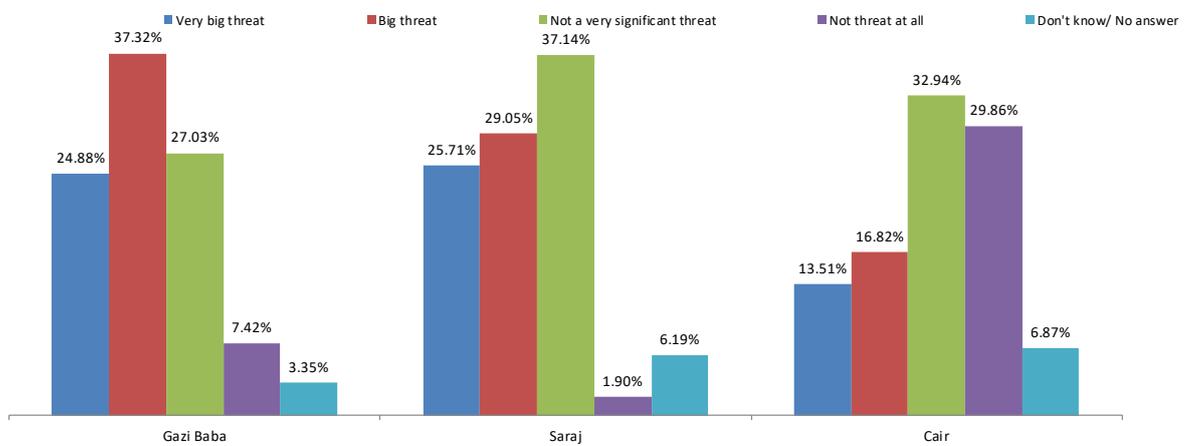
A considerable finding from this opinion survey is that the community in these three municipalities makes a clear distinction between ISIS and religion. According to the results, 60.2% of the respondents do not consider ISIS a religious group, while 21.2% considered it as such (18.6% had no answer). It is also important to emphasize that 75% of respondents from Municipality of Cair answered 'no' to the question whether they consider ISIS a religious group.

**To what extent do you think that extremist groups as ISIS are threat to Macedonia?**

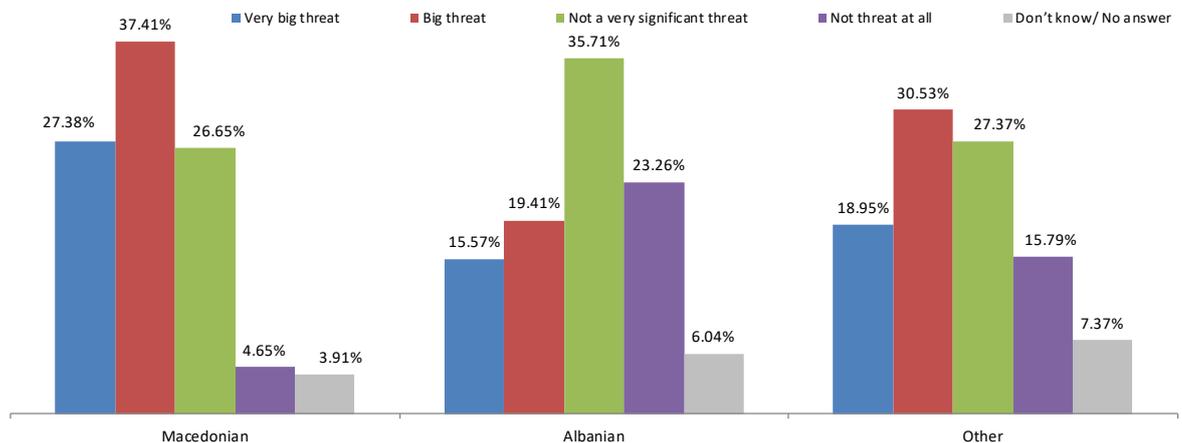
**Graphic 6:** Results from the question “To what extent do you think that extremist groups as ISIS are threat to Macedonia?”



**Graphic 6.1:** Results according to municipalities

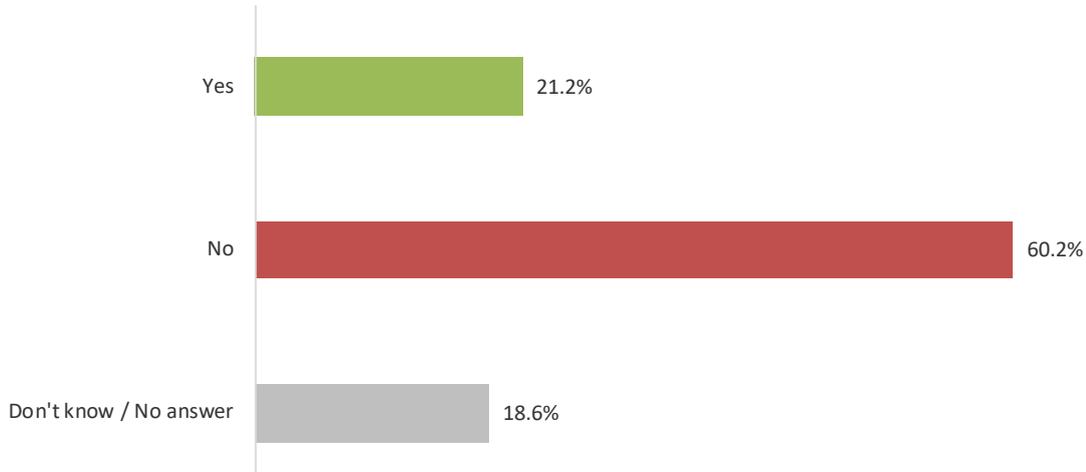


**Graphic 6.2:** Results according to ethnic background

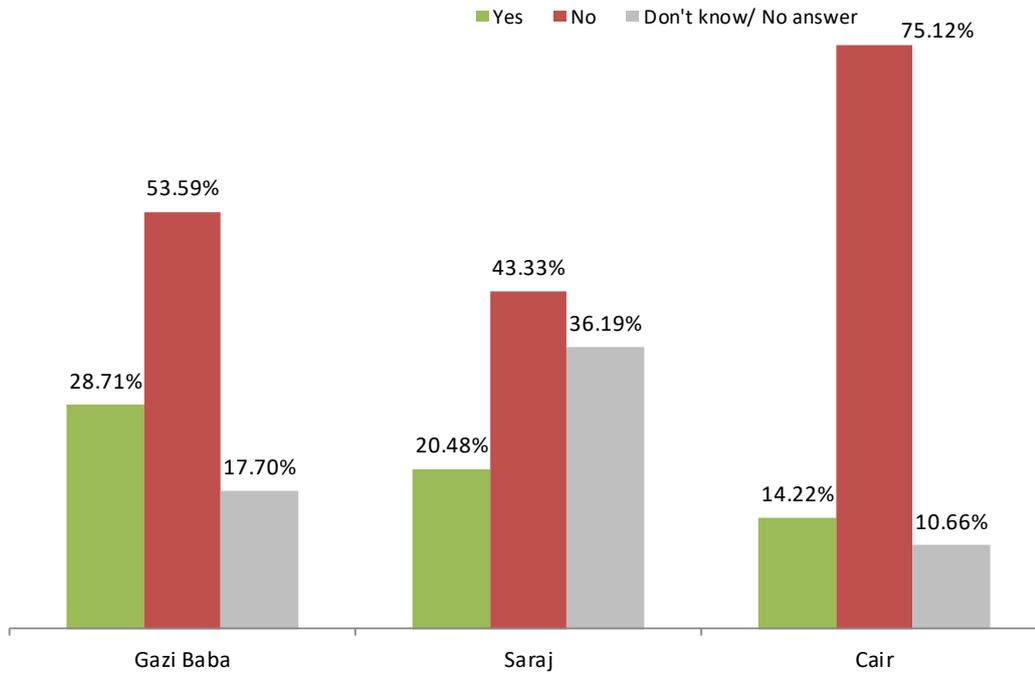


**Do you consider ISIS a religious group?**

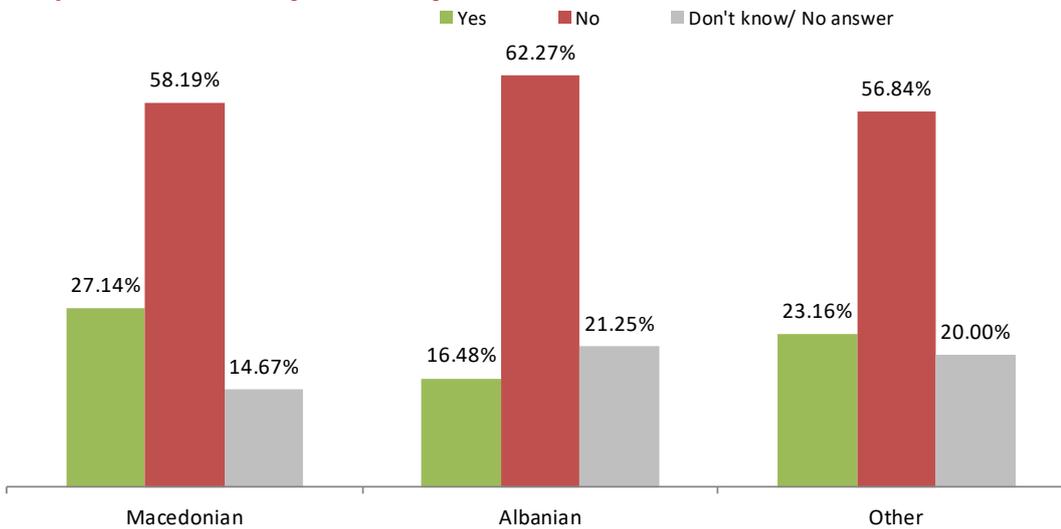
**Graphic 7: Results from the question "Do you consider ISIS as a religious group?"**



**Graphic 7.1: Results according to municipalities**



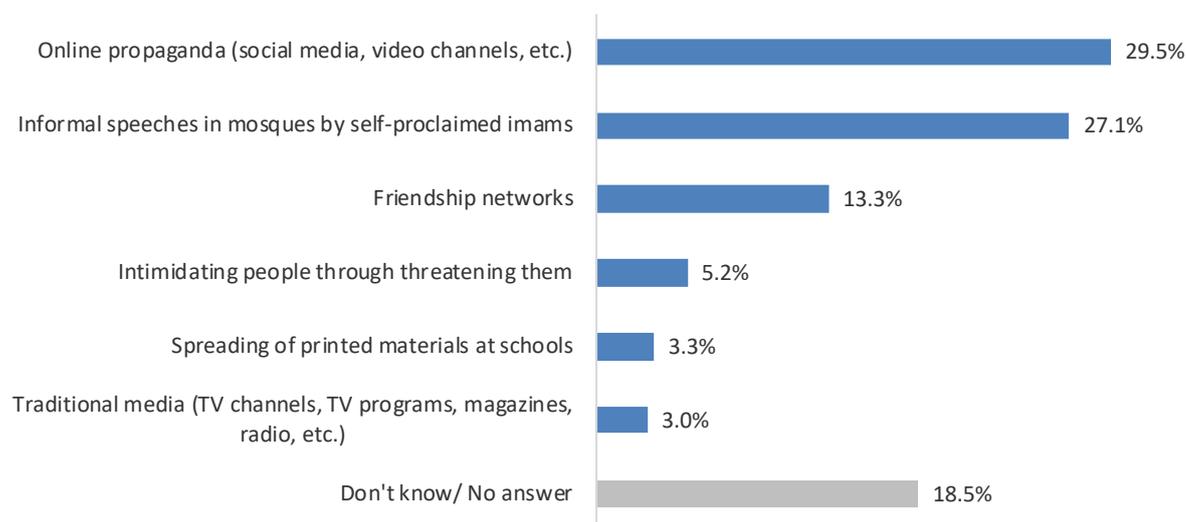
**Graphic 7.2: Results according to ethnic background**



When asked to indicate the most significant factors that triggers the youth to join ISIS, economical reasons (47.9%), ideological conviction (24.7%) and lack of education (10.1%) were the three most answered among eight options. When it comes to the drivers of extremism, 29.5% of the respondents pointed out that online propaganda (social media, video channels, etc.) is the most effective way used by ISIS to spread their ideology and recruit young people. The second most considerable driver was informal speeches in mosques made by self-proclaimed imams (27.1%). Friendship networks remain as the third most effective driver (13.3%). However, it is interesting that even though ‘informal speeches in mosques by self-proclaimed imams’ was the second answer in overall terms, it was the most selected option in Municipality of Gazi Baba in terms of municipalities, and by Macedonians in terms of ethnic background of respondents.

**According to you, which of the below is the most effective way used by extremist groups to spread propaganda and recruit youth to their group?**

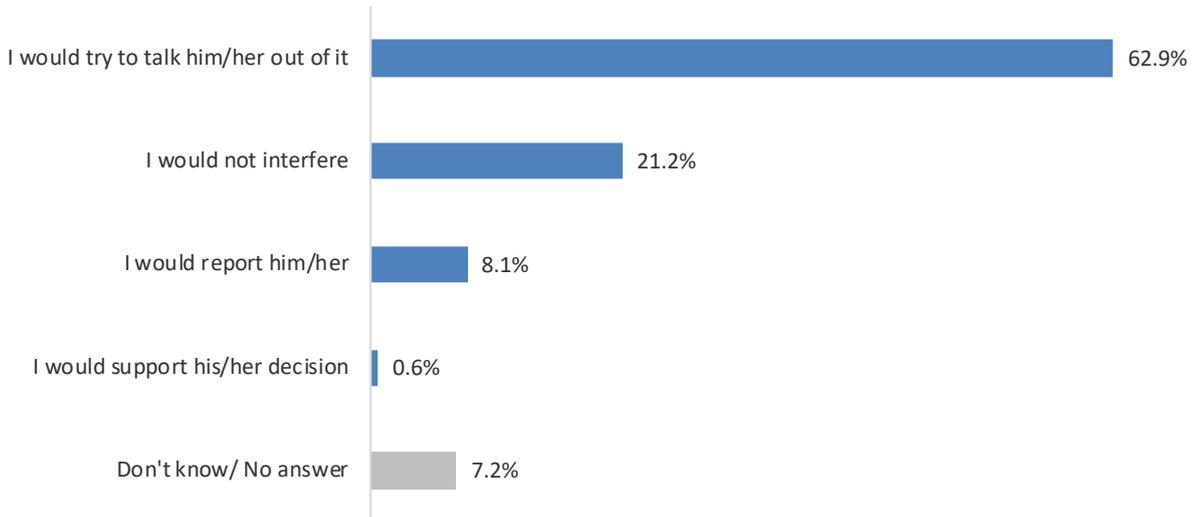
**Graphic 8:** Results from the question “According to you, which of the below is the most effective way used by extremist groups to spread propaganda and recruit youth to their group?”



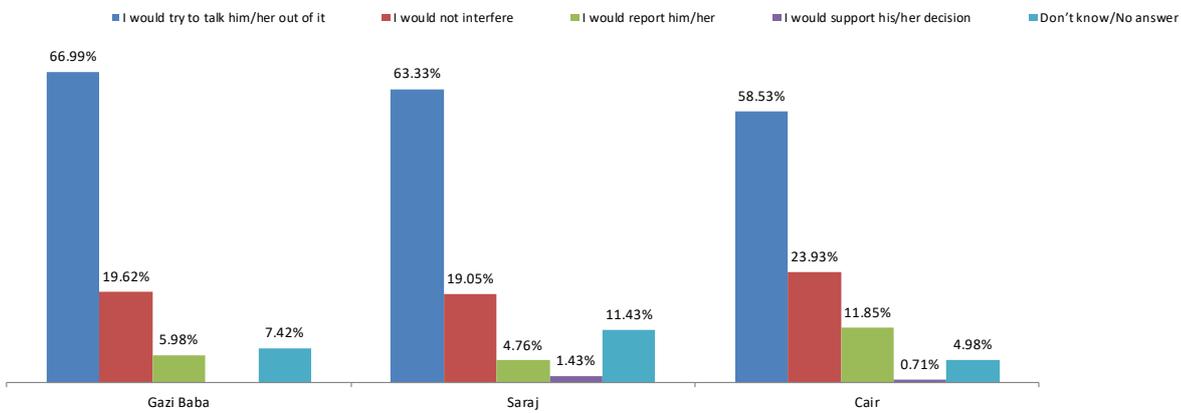
Another very important finding of this opinion poll was about the resilience of the community towards this phenomenon. Specifically, the respondents were asked about how they would react if a family member or friend of theirs showed an interest to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq, 63% of them stated that they would try to speak with them in order to turn them from their decision. Linked to that, 8% stated that they would report this to officials. Therefore, considering that both are mechanisms of taking action against recruitment, the overall percentage of resilience in total is 71%. In this regard, it is important to consider that the low amount of those who would report this case to officials (8%) point out the lack of trust in public institutions. On the other hand, 21.2% of them stated that they would not interfere and 0.6% would support their decision (7.2% had no answer). In terms of municipalities, 73% of respondents from Gazi Baba, 71% from Cair and 68% from Saraj stated that they would either try to speak with them or report to the officials. In terms of ethnic background, 76% of Macedonians and 78% of Albanians stated that they would do the same.

**If someone close to you, such as a family member, relative or friend, indicated an interest in leaving to fight in Syria and Iraq, what would you do?**

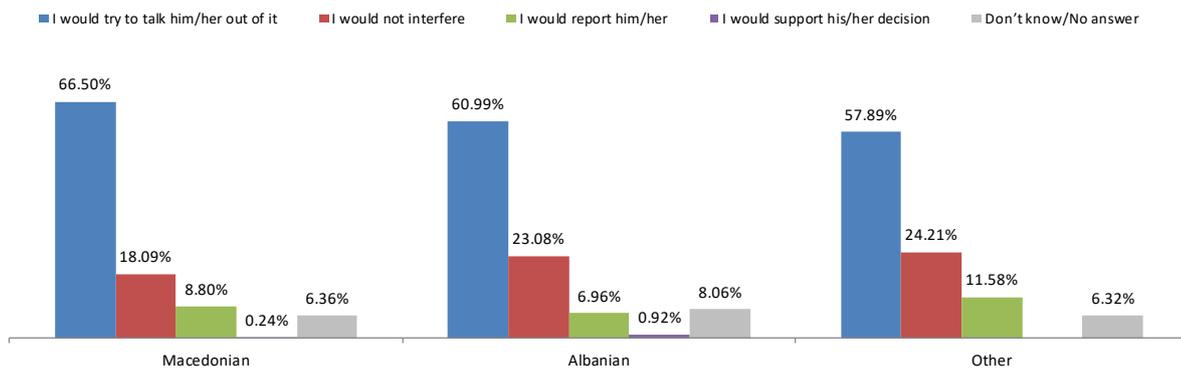
**Graphic 9:** Results from the question “If someone close to you, such as a family member, relative or friend, indicated an interest in leaving to fight in Syria and Iraq, what would you do?”



**Graphic 9.1:** Results according to municipalities



**Graphic 9.2:** Results according to ethnic background

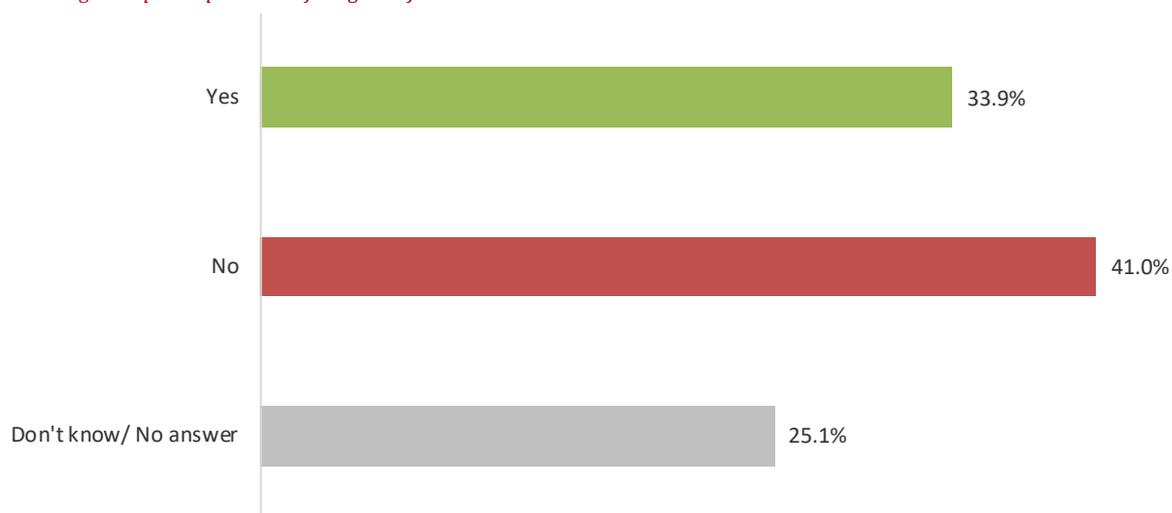


Regarding the question whether they believe that returned foreign fighters are a potential security threat to Macedonia, almost half of the respondents (48.2%) answered ‘Yes’, while 34.1% answered ‘No’ (remaining 17.7% answered ‘don’t know’). Interestingly, when asked whether the government of Republic of Macedonia should help its citizens to return from Syria and Iraq if they are regret having participated in extremist groups, 51% of them answered positively to this. This is especially significant in respondents from Saraj (71%) and Cair (64%) in terms of municipalities. In terms of ethnic background, majority of Macedonians (44%) stated that they should not be supported for being returned, and second most common answer was 30%. On the other hand, 71% of Albanians support their return if the foreign fighter is regretful.

When asked to which extent they would support or oppose legal consequences, including imprisonment penalty, for citizens that return from foreign conflicts, 55.6% support, while 19.5% oppose these consequences (remaining 25% had ‘no answer’). However, when asked whether they would support the imprisonment of citizens that are regret having participated in foreign conflicts and thus came back to Macedonia, 41% of them answered ‘no’ to this question. (The other 34% answered ‘yes’ and the remaining 25% answered ‘don’t know’). In terms of ethnic background, the majority of Macedonians support imprisonment (44%) even when foreign fighters are remorseful and come back to the country, while more than half of Albanians (54%) oppose imprisonment in this condition. It is also considerable that as the age increases, the support for these imprisonments increases.

**Would you support imprisonment if the citizen regret to participate in the foreign conflicts and returned to Macedonia?**

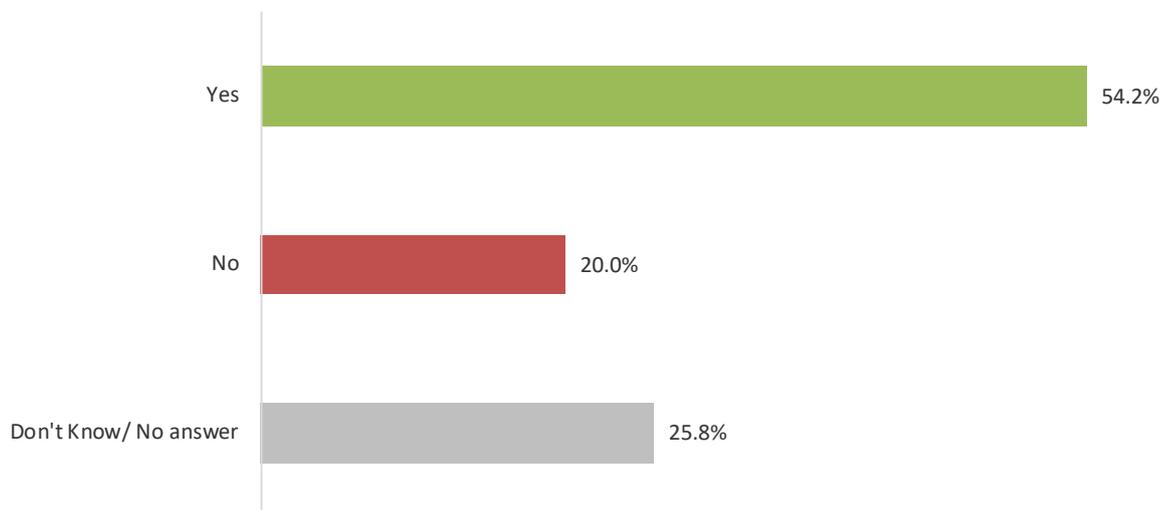
**Graphic 10:** Results from the question “Would you support imprisonment if the citizen regret to participate in the foreign conflicts and returned to Macedonia?”



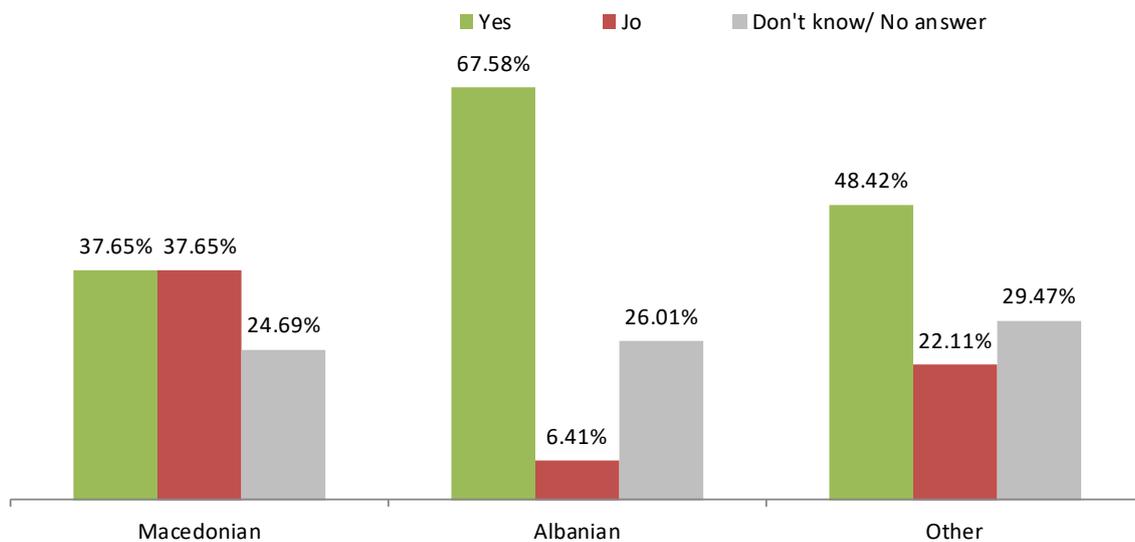
Regarding the question whether they are for or against rehabilitation and re-integration into society of the citizens that are returned, more than half of the respondents (54%) stated that they would support those programs. However, it is considerable that in terms of ethnic background, Macedonians are halved in their answer, while the majority of Albanians (68%) are for these kind of rehabilitation and re-integration programs.

**Would you support or oppose the rehabilitation and re-integration into society of Macedonian citizens who return from foreign conflict?**

**Grafika 11:** Rezultate nga pyetja “A do ta kishit përkrah ose kundërshtuar rehabilitimin dhe re-integrimin në shoqëri të qytetarëve të Maqedonisë që kthehen nga konfliktet e huaja?”



**Graphic 11.2:** Results according to ethnic background



In general, the opinion poll results show that there is an already existing resilience in those three municipalities when it comes to the phenomenon of violent extremism, in particular against ISIS. On the other hand, the differentiation in attitudes of ethnic backgrounds in many of the questions about violent extremism shows that the issue of ISIS is perceived as a problem of a certain ethnic community.

## Conclusions

Following the battles in Syria and self-proclamation of so-called 'Islamic State', the phenomenon of recruitments to violent extremist groups from Macedonia has reached its zenith. However, this research study shows that after the Cell 1 (August 6th, 2015) and Cell 2 (July 9th, 2016) Operations, the trend to join the battles in Syria and Iraq has decreased. On the other hand, some of the findings show that the violent extremist groups have become more 'underground' in terms of their functionality and communication on the local level. Nevertheless, this research study also shows that the perception about 'violent extremism' in the country has gained a new dimension since the start of the Macedonian political crisis in the past two years. . Following the calls by previous government officials of the country to join the protests of far-right extremist groups<sup>31</sup> and the subsequent brutal attack at the Assembly of Macedonia in April 27th, 2017, the issue of 'violent extremism' is perceived as a phenomenon with different natures, that according to the findings, does not ultimately have a focus on recruitments by ISIS and Al-Nusra.

The key findings of this study also refer to an already existing resilience of communities, but this resilience is not based on functional cooperation among the community itself and other stakeholders, and in particular the public institutions. The main reason for this is the low public trust in institutions due to the previous politicization of judicial cases, and the politicization of public administration, and particularly of the high schools on the local level. Employments based on political affiliations/nepotism unearthed the problem of employing profiles that, based on the findings of this research, in some cases appear to be critical for triggering extremism itself among high school pupils. Within this background, it is important to consider that any future activities in terms of prevention of this phenomenon in local level should primarily be based on trust-building among stakeholders.

The outdoor activities are another highly marked trends in terms of the drivers for the process of radicalization and gaining new potential followers for violent extremist groups. The lack of school involvement in providing youth engagement through extra-curriculum activities, insufficient capacities and low interest in local NGOs let the violent extremist groups be active in this regard. Thus, building capacities for local high school to organize such activities is critical for creating preventive mechanisms in the community. Religious preachers are also important stakeholders in strengthening capacities in community resilience against violent extremism. They can be the frontline profiles for prevention of this phenomenon, particularly on the local level. Considering that high school teachers stressed the importance of providing knowledge about religions from official sources by structuring it within curricula, it points out a social dynamic with a focus on cooperation between religious communities and high schools.

The opinion survey analysis show that the community is in support of a legal framework for the foreign fighters that regret having been involved in violent extremist groups and returned to their homeland. This may help building trust between state officials and the community. Moreover, it can also help to contribute to the existing community resilience with community policing. This research study has also exposed the importance of focusing on online propaganda in local languages. It is observed that online content that is available on social media tools such as Facebook and YouTube plays a 'catalyzing' role in the process of radicalization among youth. Thus, countering online radicalization through reporting of content to the relevant authorities is crucial for the security officials of the country. Moreover, it is also important to focus on local fake profiles that are active in online recruitment. Accordingly, establishing online counter-narratives in local languages is vital for building online resilience.

<sup>31\*</sup> Meida statement of Nikola Gruevski, former PM and leader of VMRO-DPMNE, online accessed on: <http://sitet.com.mk/gruevski-jas-veruvam-vo-mojot-narod-i-na-kraj-kje-pobedi-makedonija> (Nikola Gruevski: I trust to my nation and Macedonia will win in the end)

## **Recommendations**

### **GOVERNMENT**

- To provide a legal framework for former fighters that regret joining violent extremist groups, with respect to specific conditions, such as not having previous criminal records. A good practice in this regard is the Effective Repentance Law of Turkey that was implemented for Kurdish terrorist organization PKK former fighters. Accordingly, the former fighter should show willingness to cooperate with public institutions in PVE activities (e. g. organizing an informative meeting with high schools in which the former fighter will share his/her personal experiences with students)

### **MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE**

- To organize informative events for raising awareness about violent extremism and the role of teachers in the prevention of it.
- To organize joint activities/events with NGOs about the importance of youth engagement in P/CVE.
- To include in the curriculum basic knowledge about religions and their importance in building peace and social cohesion in communities.
- To enhance capacities of high schools to organize outdoor activities with students based on their preferences and interests.
- To raise awareness of the importance of communication of parents with high-school teachers through changing the model of parents meetings, in which the class teacher should visit the parents in their respective houses.

### **MINISTRY OF INTERIOR AFFAIRS**

- To enhance trust-building in the community by organizing joint events with local high schools (e. g study visits to MOI) and CSOs about the importance of public security and the prevention of violent extremism.
- To re-structure communication with local stakeholders and establish mechanisms for steady cooperation with them. The Community Policing model can be a good practice in this regard.
- To include ‘violent extremism’ as a specific topic for reporting within the Red Button mechanism available in the official webpage of the Ministry.

### **NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR PVE AND FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM**

- To develop capacities in countering online radicalization.
- To organize joint activities with relevant stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, religious communities, NGOs etc., in addressing the main factors and drivers that leads to violent extremism.
- To propose legal changes to the law that criminalize participation in foreign

wars, article 322-a, which would allow certain professionals (religious, social, health workers or specialized persons that would be responsible for de-radicalization activities) to approach foreign fighters without being prosecuted for not reporting them to the authorities.

- To monitor and evaluate the implementation of action plans that are foreseen within the CT/CVE strategy
- To consider religious communities as one of the crucial actors in the PVE activities.

### **RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

- To organize joint events and statements about cooperation for the prevention of any type of violent extremism and also fostering interfaith dialogue activities through organizing conferences on this topic.
- To establish online platforms in which the clergy from different religious backgrounds will give messages in local languages about countering violent extremism and importance of social cohesion and community resilience.
- The Islamic Religious Community (IRC) should be more active in interaction with the Muslim community through online features (e. g. Establishing an online 'Question & Answers Platform' about informing the local community about the issue of violent extremism)

### **NGOS**

- To be more active in involvement to P/CVE projects.
- To organize activities and campaigns that will raise the awareness of youth engagement in security and prevention of violent extremism.
- To cooperate with National Committee for PVE and the fight against Terrorism for implementation of the Action Plans that regard the community level.

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### **INTERVIEWS**

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- Interview with high school teacher at Marija Kiri Sklodovska School of Medicine, conducted on 01.03.2017
- Interview with high school teacher at Zef Lush Marku Gymnasium, conducted on 24.04.2017
- Interview with high school teacher at High School of Saraj, conducted on 03.03.2017
- Interview with high school teacher at Arseni Jovkov School of Economics, conducted on 17.03.2017
- Interview with high school teacher at Arseni Jovkov School of Economics, conducted on 17.03.2017
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- Interview with high school teacher at Vlado Tasevski High school, conducted on 03.03.2017

- Interview with high school teacher at Panche Karagjozov School of Medicine, conducted on 17.03.2017
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- Interview with Fisnik Shabani, Head of Islamic Youth Forum, conducted on 02.03.2017
- Interview with NGO representative, conducted on 05.04.2017
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- Interview with Ali Pajaziti, professor of Sociology at SEEU University, conducted on 10.04.2017





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