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Institutional Responses to Radicalization and Violent Extremism in North Macedonia (2017–2022)

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Abstract: This article aims to test a preassigned set of drivers of radicalization and violent extremism (VE) at the macro-level of North Macedonia: that is, institutions and institutional responses. The drivers are developed by the H2020: CONNEKT (Context of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies) project team. The article dwells upon the new institutionalism theory and triangulates 22 expert interviews with a close reading of the official documents and specialized reports about the state. Drawing upon those materials, we discuss the policy shift towards several of the so-called non-traditional drivers of radicalization and VE. Ultimately, the expert interviews showcased that the latest preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) policy changes in North Macedonia suffer from a lack of consensual understanding of the main operational categories and a weak efficiency and implementation of both the national strategy and the relevant action plans.

Keywords: North Macedonia, PCVE, macro-level drivers, radicalization, violent extremism

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Introduction

Today's Republic of North Macedonia, the former southernmost Yugoslav federal unit, got its political sovereignty after the successful independence referendum in September 1991. Even though successful at avoiding the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, a violent conflict between the Macedonian state security forces and Albanian radicals broke out in 2001. After this episode, settled by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), a power-sharing model was introduced in the state which is, heretofore, applauded in the scholarship as a successful de-escalating tool via political decentralization and inclusiveness (cf. Bieber 2008; Ilievski and Wolff 2011; Horowitz 2014). Just five years after the conflict a rightist political turn took place, followed by a decade-long amplification of the ethno-centered, exclusivist narratives and divisive discourses in the public sphere. Against this background, as we note in the next section, tensions between the two dominant ethnic communities in the state, the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority, have escalated in several violent clashes.¹ In the mid-2010s, the so-called Balkan refugee route triggered a major state security challenge and it informed much of the recent security-related debates in the state.

The key juncture in the recent history of North Macedonia is certainly the state's accession to NATO as a full member state in March 2020. This breakthrough came after the Greco-North Macedonia's Prespa Agreement in 2018 and Bulgarian-North Macedonia's Friendship Treaty in 2017. Amid the focus on good-neighbourly relations, the two accords broached security-related issues: both were signed in the name of strengthening regional security and projected closer interstates cooperation within the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe among the others. However, after the signing of the Bulgarian-North Macedonia Treaty, Bulgaria blocked North Macedonia's EU accession expecting the latter to meet its interpretations of history and memory. The bilateral tension was eventually settled at the end of the 2022 French Presidency of the EU Council, and the state adopted the redesigned negotiation framework for EU integration, although it has not yet officially started the accession negotiations.

In this context, North Macedonia sought to redefine its national strategy for countering terrorism and battling radicalization. From 2017 onwards, the then newly elected government introduced several new documents and institutions – that will be discussed in detail below in the text – with the main rationale behind this programmatic shift being the catching up with the regional trends, as well as meeting the international community's and the state's strategic partners' guidance. In this article, we aim at analysing the recent political and policing turn in preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) in

1 As per the latest population census in North Macedonia from 2021, 58.44 percent of the total resident population declared themselves as Macedonians, 24.30 percent as Albanian. In terms of religious affiliation, 46.14 percent declared themselves Orthodox Christians and 32.17 percent as Muslims.

North Macedonia via a set of seven preassigned drivers of radicalization and VE developed by the H2020: CONNEKT's team (more in Vidal i Bertran 2020). We therefore base this macro-level analysis on a set of 22 expert interviews and a close reading of the official documents and specialized reports about the state, drawing upon the new institutionalism theory (both discussed in the next but one section). We discuss the findings within the framework of the seven drivers and evaluate the institutional responses to radicalization and VE in North Macedonia in the final section.

Radicalization and VE in Post-2001 North Macedonia: Contexts, Literature Review, and Institutional Setting

With the bulk of minority groups' demands institutionalized with the OFA in 2001, violent extremism in the state was to a large extent settled – yet, the state faced several security challenges across ethnic and religious lines in the course of the next two decades. The loudest cases involved, anew, Albanian rebels and Kosovar-Macedonian cross-national network of Albanian radicals: on 12 April 2012, five Macedonian civilians were killed near the lake of Smilkovci, in the vicinity of Skopje, an attack which the Macedonian Ministry of Internal Affairs defined as a “deliberate terrorist act aimed at destabilizing the country” (Jakov Marusic 2012). In early May 2015, a shoot-out between the Macedonian forces and the self-identified ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army erupted in the town of Kumanovo, taking the lives of eight policemen and 10 militants and leaving 37 officers hospitalized. As an outcome result, 28 men were arrested and charged with “terrorism-related charges” by the Macedonian authorities (Jakov Marusic 2015). The critical context for both the cases was the major wiretapping scandal involving high-officials of the government which in turn provoked protests leading to snap elections in 2016 and a governmental change in 2017. The Kumanovo shootout occurred in the midst of the anti-governmental protests and was hence speculated to be orchestrated as a “distraction” (Arifi 2018). The wiretapped materials led to a new case regarding the killings at lake Smilkovci, which was eventually finalized in 2021, confirming to a large extent the previous sentence albeit the accusations by the opposition for a political involvement in the killings.

The most recent wave of Muslim radical groups in North Macedonia was pinned down to the names of two influential imams in the state. According to Qehaja and Perteshi, the two imams have both “embraced a violent form of fundamentalist Islamic ideology and spearheaded the creation of youth groups, bringing in jamaats or para-jamaats”. Many of the activists in those networks went to Syria and Iraq, while “the rest continue to spread the fundamentalist ideology through online content” (Qehaja and Perteshi 2018). In 2017, a report by the Soufan Center (2017) counted 135 Macedonian citizens as foreign fighters in the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) between 2011 and 2016. The latest research, conducted in the wake of the disintegration of the ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq, shows a clear decline in the number of Macedonian foreign fighters by citizenship from 2017 onwards (Kambovski, Georgieva, and Trajanovski 2020). These de-

partures “effectively stopped” in 2018 according to Stojkovski and Kalajdzioski (Stojkovski and Kalajdzioski 2018).

Although the state did not, heretofore, ban any political party on the grounds of spreading “anti-democratic ideology and violence” – an active legal mechanism in North Macedonia’s legislation (Bourne and Casal Bértoa 2017) – several fringe organizations, which oftentimes evoke violent symbols and use militant discourses and hate speech, are operating in the country. Zdravko Saveski notes that the common feature of the “Neo-Nazi and Islamic fundamentalists” is the very fact that they are “very obscure and absent from the public sphere” – while in recent years, their presence on social media became much increased (Saveski 2021, 100; see, as well, Demiri, 2022). As of the mid-2010s, there has been a tendency of registering so-called “patriotic organizations” in the national registry of non-governmental organizations, many of which were instrumental in the infamous storming of the Macedonian parliament, also known as Bloody Thursday (more in Neofotistos 2019). This event happened after the parliamentary majority elected an ethnic Albanian as a Parliamentary Speaker on 27 April 2017: 16 people were found guilty and charged with 211 years in total for “terrorist threat to the constitutional order and security” (Stojančova 2019). In December 2018, the Macedonian Parliament came up with an amnesty for those who did not organize or participate in violence on 27 April 2017, just prior to the voting for the constitutional changes related to the Prespa Agreement.

Starting from 2017, the state revisited its agenda on PCVE and sought to catch up with the regional state policies in these regards. This initiative culminated with the forming of a special body and two strategic documents which will be thoroughly discussed below. In other words, the last three years, or the period from 2017 and the governmental change in North Macedonia up until nowadays, are focal for the implementation of a new, redesigned policy towards PCVE and the reforms in the security sector. The new state approach had the so-called “soft measures” of PCVE – which involve a wider social engagement and non-traditional security actors – high on the policy agenda, aligned with the so-called “hard measures” of PCVE – which in theory refer to a set of coercive actions (Huq 2016). The previous PCVE approach was depicted as a “series of repressive measures”, with the change of the Criminal Code in 2014 towards criminalization of direct or indirect involvement in foreign battlefields as an example alongside several “institutional irregularities” occurring during the mid-2010s (Shabani, Kadri, and Veli 2019, 8).

The state’s Police Strategy for Development 2016–2020 is another illustration in these regards as it denotes intelligence institutions as the main agent in the fight against terrorism (Ministry of Interior 2016, 13) – a prevailing approach in the 2010s.² Hence, the key institution-building events were the formation of the National Committee for Prevention of Violent and Counter-Terrorism (NCCVECT) and the Office of the National Coordinator for CVE and CT (NCoCVECT) in 2017, as well as the subsequent National Strategies

2 The EU-funded strategy developed in cooperation with the OSCE, however, projects decentralization of budget, activities, and training, as well as various capacity-building activities (2016).

for Counter-Terrorism (2018–2022; NSCT) and Countering Violent Extremism (2018–2022; NSCVE). This set of institutions complemented the already established Ministry of Justice's Directorate for Execution of Sanctions (DES) which is the most relevant state institution for compiling the data of people found guilty of issues related to terrorism, the Intelligence Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Military Service for Security and Intelligence within the Ministry of Defence (cf. Kambovski, Georgieva, and Trajanovski 2020). Civic society organizations (CSO), religious institutions and international organizations active in PCVE in North Macedonia will be discussed in the relevant subsections below.

Research Design: Theory and Methodology

This article draws upon new institutionalism as a joint theoretical framework. Contrary to the more traditional takes on institutions, the new institutionalism theory highlights the norm diffusion (inter-institutional and international), institutional memory and routines (cf. March and Olsen 2006). A turn to the individual agency as proposed by the new institutionalism theory, allows us to assume the norms, values and identities as formative features that guide the work of the structures (more in Kapidžić, Hirkić, and Turčalo 2025). Hence, this approach provides a decent toolbox for approaching the recent institutional changes and the institutional responses to radicalization and violent extremism in North Macedonia; it allows us to understand the norms and values behind the institutional work, the knowledge-transfers, the rationale behind certain decisions, the agency of particular entities and, ultimately, the key changes in the early years of their implementation. Lastly, although there are several studies which deal with the institutional PCVE work in North Macedonia, this is the first study which employs the new institutionalism theory and the first to depict the various patterns of behaviors within the institutional practice and the immediate challenges.

We do, moreover, in line with the introductory article to this special issue (Kapidžić, Hirkić, and Turčalo 2025) and the general framework provided by the CONNEKT project, distinguish between state institutions, societal institutions and international institutions. Hence, we approached 22 experts and interviewed 12 representatives of the relevant governmental institutions, 6 experts from the civic sector, and 4 experts affiliated with academic and research-oriented institutions - all of them active in North Macedonia. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the course of October and November 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as one-on-one online interviews and via a specially designed online questionnaire (an online researcher-administered survey). All the interviewees are anonymised in the article. We also mapped the key institutional documents and conducted a close reading of those very documents and the relevant and specialized reports about radicalization, violent extremism and political violence in the state. The documents are pointed out in the relevant subsections related to the particular driver of radicalization.

Macro-Level Drivers of Radicalization: An Overview

The seven drivers of radicalization which are analyzed by the CONNEKT project members are: transnational dynamics, religion, culture, territorial inequalities, political grievances, digital literacy and economic deprivation. As analytical categories, the drivers allow both a better grasp of the dynamics in the national context and a better comparison with the other national case studies. This study applies the seven drivers to the national context of North Macedonia.

Transnational Dynamism

The role of the strategic partners of North Macedonia was crucial, both in the facilitation of the aforementioned reforms in the security sector and the subsequent capacity-building processes and in the preparation of the non-governmental actors and their involvement in the new platform for PCVE.³ North Macedonia had successfully cooperated with its transatlantic partners in the global fight against terrorism even before 2017.⁴ This cooperation also extends to North Macedonia's membership in the Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL), a Financial Action Task Force (FATF)-style regional body, North Macedonia's Financial Intelligence Office's membership in the Egmont Group and state's approval of joining the G-7 24/7 Network. One of the civic sector experts interviewed for this article reaffirmed the agency of the international partners in the change of financial-flows-monitoring related to sponsoring radicalization (Interview 20, November 2020). Back to NCCVECT: it had heretofore organized several workshops, meetings, and twinning activities with the state's strategic partners (Interview 3, November 2020). Its work has been so far praised in foreign outlets: *Just Security*, New York University School of Law's outlet, endorsed the Committee's "whole of social rehabilitation and reintegration plan" – an initiative hinted as "a model for other Western countries" (Rosand, Ellis, and Weine 2020).

Moreover, international partners are also significant as they provide financial means for implementing various PCVE-related projects in the civic sector and facilitate the regional cross-national cooperation in PCVE. According to Besa Arifi, professor of criminal law at the South East European University and an expert in violent extremism, the OSCE Mission to Skopje, USAID and the U.S. and the British Embassies in Skopje were instrumental agencies in these regards. They helped – not only with financial support – but also in terms of logistics – by bringing the "local institutions, civic society organizations (CSOs),

3 A brief contextual note: the policy change came after the demise of the ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq and the decline of foreign fighters from North Macedonia from 2017 onwards. As of 2019, 11 citizens of North Macedonia were charged for their military activities abroad with 33 years of total imprisonment.

4 For an overview, see the most recent U.S. Bureau on Counterterrorism published in October 2019 (Bureau on Counterterrorism 2019).

religious communities and academia” into the institution-building process (Arifi 2019, 29). As for the latter, several of the interviewed experts – from different sectors – noted a relatively developed regional cooperation, both on state and non-governmental levels (Interview 10, October 2020; Interview 13, October 2020; Interview 17, October 2020; Interview 5, November 2020; Interview 1, October 2020). NCCVECT’s role, as well as the two National Strategies, is rather descriptive and does not clearly call for action regarding the institutional, interinstitutional, and the work on the PCVE in the civic sector, which was highlighted as one of the major shortcomings by several informants active in the non-governmental sphere (Interview 10, October 2020; Interview 13, October 2020; Interview 17, October 2020). Besides, it was also stressed that increased donor’s attention to the radicalization processes – especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disinformation narratives which followed, and which will be covered in the section on digital literacy in the text – the topics of PCVE are being picked up by an ever-growing number of CSOs which not always have the proper expertise to work in the sector (Interview 1, October 2020).

Religious Factors

As per its biennial Strategic Plan (2020–2022), the Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG) associates participated in the formation of NSCT and NSCVE in 2018. The CRRCG is an independent state agency dealing with the religious issues in the state, with a director appointed by the government. Even though the notion of “radicalization” is mentioned only once in the document – in the section of future “Possibilities” for the CRRCG – the work of the Committee has had a broader scope ever since 2019. Here, besides the role of a facilitator of the dialogue between the various religious communities in North Macedonia, CRRCG also aims to gather information from the religious communities on the eventual radicalization of individuals or groups and follow the work of the officially registered religious communities and cooperates with the state’s security forces (Questionnaire 18, November 2020).⁵

The situation on the ground reveals that, on the one hand, major religious institutions are working in the direction of PCVE, while on the other hand – religious-based violence and “radical interpretations” of certain denominations are still present (Saveski and Sadiku 2012; cf. Qehaja and Perteshi 2018). These two tendencies were stressed in several reports: the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation in the course of early 2010s, as well as, more recently, the Association for Democratic Advancement Democracy Lab, in cooperation with the Berlin-based Berghof Foundation, noted that the Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia is losing support among its constituencies which in turn paved the way for “non-traditional” interpretations of the traditional-in-North-Macedonia, Hanafi school of Islam (Morina et al. 2019).

5 Also see Komisija za odnosi so verskite zaednici i religiozni grupi 2019.

As an illustration for the first point, one can refer to the 2017 US country report on terrorism, which highlights that the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM) “incorporated counter-narratives into Friday sermons with Muslim worshippers” and “conducted one CVE training session for approximately 12 imams” (Bureau of Counterterrorism 2018, 100). The ICM, in cooperation with the Al-Hilal charity foundation, launched a project which had the goal of countering the narrative of “a distorted version of Islam preached by the radicals” (Selimi and Stojkovski 2016, 28). Most recently though, several organizations have noted a dozen religiously-motivated incidents in the course of 2019 (see, for instance, the Helsinki Committee’s 2019 Annual Report on Hate Crimes in North Macedonia and the Annual Report for Human Rights in North Macedonia). Similarly, the 2019 US annual International Religious Freedom Report on North Macedonia showcases several other religious-biased incidents (2020). The Islamic fundamentalist interpretations in North Macedonia are well covered in the literature, both everyday functioning, role in radicalization, and transnational ties, while the Christian radical interpretations are yet to be subjected to research (see, as well, Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski 2018; Azinović 2018).

Our interviews showed that North Macedonia’s experts do not have a uniform opinion on interpretations related to religion and radicalization. We noted however that CSO and academia affiliates are more observant of the nuances of the role of religion in radicalization than affiliates of state institutions. This was not a clear-cut pattern though. The major institutional bodies, as per our informants, are well aware of these groups and their teachings and cooperate with the other relevant institutions, such as the officially registered religious communities and detention centres in North Macedonia, by sharing know-how and practices (Interview 4, October 2020).

On a different note, the CS experts stressed that the NGOs’ work generally focuses on prevention rather than the reintegration of the detained foreign fighters. Moreover, CS experts claimed that the work with the detained foreign fighters in North Macedonia should be done in cooperation with the relevant NGOs, as an already established practice in the region, to avoid recidivism issues (Interview 13, October 2020; Interview 17, October 2020). In these regards, an individualized program for violent extremist prisoners is already ongoing, which also includes an option for the inclusion of representatives of the officially registered religious communities in North Macedonia in the program. Meanwhile North Macedonia’s Ministry of Justice is currently implementing a regional project – funded by the EU and the Council of Europe – which focuses on enhancing penitentiary capacity in addressing radicalization in prison. In addition, the Macedonian Society of Penology, a non-governmental association of experts dealing with the topic of penology, is teaming up for the implementation of a program for the reintegration of detained foreign fighters and their families in the state (Questionnaire 12, October 2020).

Cultural Factors

For this article's purposes, we draw upon a broad understanding of the cultural drivers of radicalization, not only related to the notion of "cultural marginalization" (cf. Al Raffie 2013), but also evoking its understanding as a "pull factor" over identity-related issues (Nanes and Lau 2018).

We identified two parallel processes from the interviews we conducted: (i) one based on the aforementioned inclusivist political platform, the prevailing political paradigm as of the late 2010s, as well as the subsequent developments emanating from it, and (ii) the second which has the ethnonationalist political mobilization as its main trigger.

The governmental platform "One society for all" emerged during the long episodes of campaigning in 2016 and 2017 and had the goal of breaking with the "divisive policies, policies that stirred conflicts and split people along binary lines" and enshrining North Macedonia "as a civic state of all its citizens" (Vlada 2017). Even so the initial documents of this strategic platform do not refer to the radicalization processes in the state. Robert Alagjovzovski, one of the architects behind the strategy and, as of 2020, a National Coordinator for Development of Culture and Inter-sector Cooperation, claimed that the "de-stimulation of hate speech and violent extremism" was among the key factors behind the strategy (Civil Media 2020). Besides the rationale, Alagjovzovski, in late 2020, announced a stronger inter-institutional trust in the fight against extremism and the creation of a special police unit for primary and secondary prevention of extremism. This claim came after the set of strategic priorities of the new government in North Macedonia for 2020, with the state's "active involvement in the international fight against security threats" and PCVE high on the agenda (Civil Media 2020). The experts we interviewed reaffirmed these strategic goals from various perspectives: the so-called multiethnic police units, for instance, formed in the aftermath of 2001 ceased to exist in the 2010s, and, according to an interviewed expert in the relevant sphere, it is a prime time for their re-establishment (Interview 4, October 2020). On a different note, the strategy was criticized by emphasizing its main shortcoming from a PCVE perspective – the lack of expertise, human capital, and funding in this sector.⁶

The strategy was also identified as contrapuntal to the events from 27 April 2017 by the interlocutors, or the so-called "Bloody Thursday" – the infamous storming of North Macedonia's Parliament by Macedonian radicals (Interview 10, October 2020; Interview 13, October 2020; Interview 19, November 2020). As a result, 16 people were found guilty and charged with 211 years in total for a "terrorist threat to the constitutional order and security" (Stojančova 2019). Moreover, 95 people asked for medical help after the storming of which 22 were police officers and 3 MPs. This event was a juncture for the social and political developments in North Macedonia and a trigger for a particular paradigm shift

6 A recently published report by NEXUS – Civil concept, for instance, provided a number of 9 women within the 22 members of the NCCVECT (Pecova-Ilieska and Musliu 2020, 8).

in the public perception over radicalization and violent extremism in North Macedonia. All the interviewees dwelled upon this event and its aftermath, without a clear consensus on the means for the radical mobilization. One group would claim that the political ideology of nationalism was instrumental in the violent outcome of the storming, while another group did not link the national feelings and the violent behaviour, rather, it turned to the political context of the event. This form of radicalization was, in addition, picked up by the civic sector (cf. Mojanchevska, Jovanchikj, and Musliu 2020), while in practice, this paradigm shift is visible in the PCVE work in the territorial regions of North Macedonia which will be touched upon in the next section.

Territorial Inequalities

For territorial inequalities and their links with radicalization, we mapped three tendencies: (i) a prevailing societal, political and media focus on several Skopje-based municipalities and Macedonian towns; (ii) a “wider” approach by the state-institutions and the civic sector, that is, focused on locations beyond Skopje; and (iii) an anticipation of a critical shift in these regards. However, the lack of population censuses up until 2021 (the previous one being held in 2002) was a serious shortcoming in terms of a proper territorial, regional and cross-regional mapping of various socio-economic, developmental and educational phenomena in North Macedonia.

The first tendency is linked with a relatively older scholarly mapping of the major points of mobilization and recruitment of foreign fighters for ISIS and Al-Nusra (early 2010s), as well as a series of relatively recent events which re-confirmed the same municipalities as hotspots of violent extremism in the state. The municipalities in the foci, thus, are located in the capital city of Skopje (Čair, Gazi Baba, Saraj and Aračinovo) as well as the towns of Kumanovo and Gostivar. Several studies identified these locations as the main recruitment centers for foreign fighters (cf. Kambovski, Georgieva, and Trajanovski 2020). However, the scholarly literature does not provide a link between the territorial features of these locations and the process of radicalization. For instance, as noted by Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, the profiles of individuals arrested as part of the so-called Cells operations ranged “from a cab driver to a doctor, a goldsmith to a governmental employee” which the authors interpret as a suggestion that “the threat from violent extremism in the Macedonian context does not necessarily fit one singular socioeconomic background” and location (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski 2018, 12).

However, a series of events reconfirmed several municipalities as hotspots of violent extremism in the state. In 2015, a shootout in Kumanovo between the state forces and Albanian radicals (self-proclaimed National Liberation Army) resulted in 28 arrests and charges for terrorism-related charges by North Macedonia’s authorities. In February 2019, North Macedonia’s Ministry of Interior issued an official statement claiming that “the police stopped an attack by ISIS supporters planned to occur in the Republic of North Macedonia” (Radio Free Europe 2019). After the initial media attention, no other information

followed it being stressed that further information might be sensitive. Several Embassies in Skopje warned their citizens of the risk of a terrorist attack in the country. Finally, in April 2019, the State Counter-Terrorism Agency suppressed a group of 9 who led illegal workshops and sold illegal weapons in Skopje, Tetovo, and Kumanovo (Stankovikj 2019).

These municipalities are thus subjected to a closer observation by the state institutions and the civic sector while the municipality governments themselves are also working in the direction of PCVE. As an illustration, as per the official websites, the municipalities of Aračinovo, Čair, Gostivar, Kičevo, Kumanovo, Ohrid, Struga, and Tetovo are part of the Strong Cities Network – which provides a platform for a knowledge transfer and sharing of experiences with PCVE.

The major institutional body, NCCVECT, aims to cover the whole territory of North Macedonia and, heretofore, has worked in 14 municipalities – mostly with a higher multi-ethnic proportion and municipalities with a dominant ethnic group. To put that into context, as per the latest change in the number of municipalities in 2013, North Macedonia has 80 municipalities. A mere proportion is not a good pointer in these regards: according to a majority of the experts, the territorial dispersion is well covered in the state work and the civic sector's work on PCVE.

On a different note, other municipalities than the aforementioned are recently gaining traction within the media and the civic sector. On the one hand, several experts pointed out that radical interpretations of Islam appeared in the non-Albanian-dominated municipalities in the eastern parts of North Macedonia mostly among the Roma and Turkish communities. Further work in this regard has yet to be conducted. On the other hand, after the 2017 storming of North Macedonia's Parliament, many experts identified the cities of Prilep and Bitola, dominated by Orthodox Christian Macedonian population, as places that are to be closely watched and approached with a relevant PCVE methodology.

Political Grievances

We approach the political grievances' driver as a response to a lack of political representation and, more specifically, as a trigger to individual or groupist radicalization "in response to political trends or events" (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008, 419; cf. Simmons 2014).

Post-Yugoslav Macedonia did not, heretofore, ban any political party. Nevertheless, the state has a legal mechanism for banning anti-democratic ideologies and political platforms which promote violence. As aforementioned, after 2017, several fringe organizations appeared in North Macedonia, oftentimes evoking symbols of violence and hate speech. Moreover, in the aftermath of the storming of the Macedonian parliament, several incidents appeared in the Macedonian media which can be attributed to radical nationalist interpretations. In January 2019, two brothers, former rappers, attacked a police officer and were immediately arrested. The brothers, nowadays also famous for their national-

istic political activism, attacked the officer after a political protest (Radio MOF 2019). In March 2019, the leader of the Macedonian Christian Brotherhood, a far-right formation, was arrested after his public threats to the erstwhile Prime Minister of North Macedonia (Netpress 2019). On a different note, several recent reports on radicalization and violent extremism in North Macedonia stress that the Islamic radicals do not show an ambition to pose political claims in the state (Saveski and Sadiku 2012).

The issue of political grievance does hold a longer pre-history in North Macedonia, however. In these regards, one can stress that after the 2001 conflict, the OFA, and, especially, after the so-called 2007 May agreement, the Albanian minority in the state secured a stable political representation in the state system. The Democratic Union for Integration, an Albanian political party in North Macedonia formed in 2002, was largely constituted of former National Liberation Army members and, heretofore, has been part of almost all the ruling coalitions over the post-conflict period. What remains a serious problem though, is the weaponization of the public discourse across ethnic, national, and cultural lines, which, in turn, contributes to a multilayered process of radicalization. A recently edited volume on the symbolic divisions in North Macedonia after 2017 showcases that these divisions are present as interethnic contestations and intra-ethnic ones (Todorov and Bliznakovski 2020). All the interviewed experts agreed that there are many dividing lines in the contemporary Macedonian society, yet, they claimed that serious work by state-institutions and the civic sector is being conducted in these regards.

Digital Literacy

To better understand North Macedonia's institutional work over digital literacy, one should briefly consider media literacy development in the Macedonian public, institutional, and legal infrastructures. As a general remark, media literacy in North Macedonia started gaining traction in the late 2000s after an impetus from the civic sector, yet, "the interest of the institutions for the media literacy remained marginal, while the citizens have a very low level of understanding the meaning of the concept and its significance for the democracy" (Nikodinoska, Milenkovski, and Vasilova 2018). Digital literacy in the state follows a similar pattern of underdevelopment.

The 2010s were a crucial decade as they witnessed the creation of media literacy legal and institutional frameworks and its operationalization in practice in North Macedonia. To commence with the former, the key state institution responsible for developing and promoting media literacy is the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services – a non-profit regulatory body established in 2013. The Agency was empowered with the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services in force as of early 2014, which vests the Agency with a "direct obligation to promote media literacy, cooperating with all the relevant stakeholders" (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia 2013). It developed a Program for Promoting Media Literacy in the Republic of Macedonia 2016–2018 in 2015 (Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services n.d.). In March 2019, the Agency

published a Media Literacy Policy and the new Regulatory Strategy for the Development of Audio and Audiovisual Media Activity 2019–2023 (Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services 2019). Both documents aim at building the Program and have a goal to continue undertaking activities to “raise media literacy among different target groups.” As of 2017, the Agency initiated the Media Literacy Network of the Republic of North Macedonia, an open platform of 35 entities: state institutions, two private higher education institutions, 18 civil associations, and nine media outlets.

Macedonian legislation, however, does not clearly define the notion of media literacy. The 2014 Law does not define it at all; it just delegates the role of “promoting media literacy” to the Agency and the role of “creating and emitting programs related to the encouragement of media literacy” to the public broadcaster (Official Gazzette of the Republic of Macedonia 2013). Nikodinoska, Milenkovski, and Vasilova also note that this vague depiction led North Macedonia’s ministries for education and information society to focus on IT skills training and prequalification, rather than the digital, or as frequently depicted in the Macedonian legislation, “the media and information literacy” (Nikodinoska, Milenkovski, and Vasilova 2018).

The situation on the ground mirrors this institutional approach; media, information, and digital literacy indexes are at the bottom of the regional scope. According to the Media Literacy Index 2019, published by the European Policies Initiative of the Open Society Institute – Sofia, North Macedonia holds last place among 35 European states, or the lowest resilience potential to deal with disinformation and its effects (Lessenski 2019). The direct consequences of this low resilience potential were observed during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in North Macedonia when various disinformation narratives started circulating in social media (Krstinovska 2020). At the same time, 9 out of 10 informants believed a piece of fake news, and even so the government issued its first “anti-infodemic measures” in mid-March 2020. Sanda Svetoka, a Senior Expert at NATO StratCom COE, reaffirmed the low level of media literacy in the state, stating that this vacuum is used by many foreign “malign actors” (Svetoka in Gjorgjievska 2020).

Besides the low index rate of digital literacy, it is worth mentioning that North Macedonia is frequently tagged the “land of the fake news” after it gained global attention for the clickbait industry located in the state and its engagement, among others, in U.S. elections (Cvetkovska et al. 2018). However, the clickbait phenomenon has a much wider set of consequences for Macedonian society. For instance, only in the course of 2020, as noted in the series of monthly reports by NEXUS Civil Concept, the media sensationalism was present in recidivism cases.

Several authors, organizations, and all the experts we interviewed mapped the linkages between various radicalization processes and low digital literacy indexes in the state. Qehaja and Perteshi, for instance, in a 2018 report on extremism in North Macedonia, stressed that the spread of “fundamentalist ideology through online content” remains one of the major challenges for the state. They also mentioned the media in a list of “violent

extremism and terrorism threats” for the state and assumed a proactive role of the state, a “social and collective responsibility” in the preservation of the “cohesion of the society” (Qehaja and Perteshi 2018, 9). In the last years – parallel to the launch of the EU Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans – one can note a clear intensification in work on digital literacy and its role in the radicalization processes by state-institutions, such as the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (which organized training on media literacy, oftentimes in cooperation with international organizations such as UNESCO), but also in the non-governmental sector. For instance, NEXUS Civil Concept organized an online workshop for sharing best practices on the reporting of violent extremism and terrorism, returnees and their family members in November 2020. The Fighting Fake News Narratives platform, developed by the Citizens Association Most, is frequently debunking radicalization and violent extremism related disinformation narratives from the traditional and new media, while the Centre for Social Innovations Blink 42-21 published a video game which has a goal of strengthening community resilience.

As for the major challenges in the digital literacy area – our informants stressed the lack of experience in work with PCVE and the lack of proper audience targeting in the media and digital literacy projects (Interview 9, November 2020; Interview 10, October 2020; Interview 17, October 2020; Interview 1, October 2020; Interview 8, November 2020; Interview 2, October 2020; Interview 5, November 2020; Interview 6, November 2020).

Economic Deprivation

The economic drivers towards radicalization have been discussed in several reports published in North Macedonia. A recent report published by the NGO NEXUS Civil concept showcased that, in most cases, the families of convicted foreign fighters in North Macedonia “were receiving or at some point in their lives received some kind of financial assistance such as welfare assistance, child allowance, etc” (Vanchoski, Shikova, and Musliu 2020, 33). On a different note, one recent event, revealed by the local media, was a reference point for countering the assumption that that radicalization goes hand in hand with economic deprivation. Namely, in September 2020, German police prosecuted and charged three persons for terrorism. The leader was a Macedonian-born son of a well-known doctor in North Macedonia, owner of one of the largest private hospitals. However, this incident did not alter the work of the relevant institutional bodies’ agenda: the major focus of the new set of “soft measures” is now set on capacity-building, raising awareness, and the involvement of a broader network of stakeholders and local actors. NCCVECT, for instance, coordinates this process as of 2018.

Economic deprivation was frequently brought in line with the issues of reintegration and resocialization of foreign fighters. NCCVECT, again, approaches the reintegration and resocialization as tertiary prevention (with the rising awareness as a primary and identification of first signals of radicalization as secondary prevention) and coordinates an inter-sectoral working group which is to deliver a more detailed plan for the reintegration-

tion of foreign fighters from North Macedonia. The plan would also envision cooperation with an interdisciplinary group of experts – among others, social workers, psychologists, doctors, and members of the local governing bodies. In the meantime, the civic sector has conducted several research reports consisting of interviews with foreign fighters and their family members in North Macedonia and a set of positive practices of reintegration and resocialization from EU member states opens up various sets of questions in these regards.

Conclusion

With the establishment of NCCVECT, as well as the subsequent NSCT and NSCVE, North Macedonia is unarguably catching up with the PCVE agenda of neighbouring states predominantly from the Western Balkans. From a state-institutional perspective, this setting paves the way for a regional PCVE action plan, among other initiatives, as well as a better cooperation, knowledge-transfers and sharing of know-how and positive practices. From a civic sector perspective, the present network of experts and institutions provides a good platform for a cross-national and transnational work on PCVE.

From the expert interviews, we conclude that the new model suffers – at the present stage – from (i) a different understanding of the operational categories in the new PCVE strategy (which in turn results in a weak inter-sectoral coordination and communication between the state and the civic sectors) and (ii) a weak efficiency and implementation of the national strategy and the relevant action plans. As per a recent comparative report on the regional PCVE policing, a similar lack of concrete measures was identified in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even so, the state had established these institutions and plans several years earlier than North Macedonia (cf. Morina et al. 2019; Kapidžić, Hirkić, and Turčalo 2025).

The aforementioned set of recent events contributed to a certain shift in the experts' and, not entirely, institutional work on PCVE. Here, the major tendency is the shift from the set of more "traditional" drivers – such as the religious factors – towards the "newer" ones for the Macedonian context – such as cultural factors. However, we also observed that there is an insufficient targeting of the digital literacy as a driver for radicalization. In general, what was referred to as a paradigm shift in the work on PCVE in North Macedonia – the new focus on radical-right and ethno-nationalist provoked political violence – was clearly delineated as such by the experts active in the civic sector, while it was also mentioned as such by the other experts. What is to be expected is a broader work in these direction – by both the civic and the state sectors.

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