

# Accounting for the Difference: Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism in Kosovo

Rudine Jakupi & Garentina Kraja

Country Case  
Study 3

### About this report

This country case study on Kosovo was produced, alongside three others covering Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, in the framework of a participatory research project on “Opportunities for Preventing Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans”. Together with four local research partners, we explore why some communities are particularly affected by individuals inspired by and/or joining the Islamic State (IS) or other similar violent extremist groups, while other communities may show greater resilience to the same phenomenon. Based on the research findings, the project partners will conduct policy outreach and local dialogue initiatives, in cooperation with local stakeholders and affected communities, in order to explore and develop strategies to prevent violent radicalisation in the Western Balkans.

### About the authors

**Rudine Jakupi** is a researcher with the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. She holds a Master’s in International and European Relations from Linköping University, Sweden. Her research interests include countering violent extremism and radicalisation, human rights, gender and security.

**Garentina Kraja** is a researcher, policy consultant and lecturer. She served as foreign policy and security adviser to Kosovo’s President Atifete Jahjaga from 2011 to 2016. Previously, she worked as the Associated Press correspondent in Kosovo from 2000 to 2007. She graduated cum laude with BA and MA degrees in political science from Yale University.

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**Berghof Foundation**  
Altensteinstraße 48a  
14195 Berlin  
Germany  
[www.berghof-foundation.org](http://www.berghof-foundation.org)  
[info@berghof-foundation.org](mailto:info@berghof-foundation.org)

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# List of Abbreviations

<b>BIK</b>	<i>Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës</i> (Islamic Association of Kosovo)
<b>CSOs</b>	Civil Society Organisation(s)
<b>CVE</b>	Countering Violent Extremism
<b>ECIKS</b>	Economic Initiative for Kosovo
<b>F(T)Fs</b>	Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters
<b>GCERF</b>	Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund
<b>ICITAP</b>	International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (US Department of Justice)
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>IS</b>	Islamic State
<b>KLA</b>	Kosovo Liberation Army
<b>KCSS</b>	Kosovar Center for Security Studies
<b>MOI</b>	Ministry of Interior
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NGO(s)</b>	Non-governmental organisation(s)
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>PVE</b>	Preventing Violent Extremism
<b>SMEs</b>	Small and Medium Enterprises
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>US</b>	United States (of America)
<b>USAID</b>	United States' Agency for International Development
<b>VE</b>	Violent Extremism

# Executive Summary\*

To date, radicalization, violent extremism and the foreign fighter phenomenon in Kosovo have been studied mostly by looking at the individual push and pull factors that have led over 300 men from Kosovo to join the ranks of the “Islamic State” in Syria and Iraq. While these factors have been studied through the perspective of individuals caught in structural deficiencies in the context of an ever-shifting geopolitical landscape, limited space has been allotted to the study of the community-level factors and actors that have rendered some societies more resilient and others more vulnerable to violent extremism.

By focusing on the legacy of two distinct communities in the last six years since the appearance of violent extremism in Kosovo and the trajectory of their conduct over this period, this study seeks to shed light on the central role that formal and informal structures embedded in the communities have in preventing and countering radicalisation and violent extremism. This shift in scope dilutes some of the previously held notions that weak education and lack of economic development are key determinants for the appearance of violent extremism. The report also undertakes preliminary research on the role, if any, that political extremism plays in fuelling religiously based violent extremism by studying the dynamics in a third, ethnically diverse municipality affected by violent extremism. Overall, the report looks at the role that mayors, religious leaders, civil society organisations, political representation, community ties and national narratives play in creating counter-narratives, and how various community stakeholders understand and conduct their responsibilities.

These dynamics in Kosovo reveal that the prevention of violent extremism was not merely accidental and not always curbed due to the diligence of law enforcement authorities or their reaction, but dependent on the social cohesion of the community, the relationship between various formal and informal structures and their determination to preserve their monopoly of power.

The study finds that resilience amounts to aggregated action by local actors to act against violent extremism, while it defines vulnerability as a community’s reluctance or lack of mobilisation to intervene or engage pro-actively in addressing violent extremism. It puts forth the argument that the trajectories and experiences that these communities will ultimately have with radicalisation will be profoundly shaped by restoring agency to leaders and community influencers who currently lack mechanisms or incentives to react in the face of such challenges.

To properly address the problem of VE, this study offers these recommendations:

- 1) Future programmes should be tailored to the community they target. They should be based on the needs, the power relations, dynamics (whether formal or informal), and the structural design of the particular community where the intervention takes place;
- 2) The aim of such programmes should be to foster a culture of communication, coordination and collaboration between the main stakeholders in the community and to create trust between the different community leaders.
- 3) The main aim of such programmes should be in social integration of youth, specifically the young who sit at the margins of society;

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# 1 Introduction

This report is a qualitative study that sets out to understand and contextualise the community-level dynamics in areas that were either affected or unaffected by violent extremism in Kosovo in the course of the last six years.

So far, most of the research into violent extremism conducted in the Western Balkans builds upon the push and pull factors (UNDP 2017c) that have incentivised dozens of individuals across the region to join terrorist organisations in the Middle East, primarily in Syria and Iraq. Both countries are experiencing protracted civil war and political unrest that have turned them into symbols of ideological battlegrounds of the early 21st century.

To date, in Kosovo, the majority of these research efforts focused on the identification of commonalities between foreign fighters. This growing literature has looked into the profiles of those that have joined the Islamist terrorist networks as foreign fighters. It surveys their socio-economic backgrounds, trajectory of religious adherence, education and exposure to the propaganda of the Islamic State in order to find cues that would explain the triggers, individual-level motivation and circumstances that have appealed to a set of individuals within Kosovo's society to take up such a cause. These studies have also shed light on the nature of the threat, the recruiters' origin and their cross-regional ties, which have helped conclude that, in most cases, the threat of the "Islamic State" in the region was externally driven.<sup>1</sup>

The scope of these studies has yielded a better understanding of the push and pull factors that motivated individuals across nations in the Western Balkans to join the Islamic State group. However, the potency of the threat that violent extremism posed to the fledgling democracies and mapped the region as fertile ground for recruitment continues to present one of the most daunting puzzles that has challenged the nascent governments, the countries' international backers and law enforcement agencies: Why did countries in the Western Balkans, both secular and pro-Western, become susceptible to violent extremism? Moreover, if the violent extremist phenomenon has been widespread within the countries of the Balkans, what were the specific circumstances that have enabled or prevented it?

In this study, researchers explore the in-country dynamics that may have encouraged or prevented violent extremism in a particular setting. The change of scope from individual factors to community-based actors and factors that determine the path to radicalisation is likely to provide policymakers with urgent answers on targeted interventions that would address structural weaknesses and bolster particular strengths that may make communities at best resistant, or at the very least, better equipped to deal with future threats to their security. Hence, the goal of this research is to identify the factors that make communities vulnerable or resilient, and to try to gauge, through a plethora of actors, the impact of such factors on the prevention of violent extremism.

The remainder of this report will discuss the research design and terminology adopted for the purpose of this research (Section 2), the country background (Section 3), the key findings on factors and actors influencing community resilience or vulnerability to violent extremism (Section 4), an assessment of PVE programmes as well as their potential linkages with peacebuilding initiatives (Section 5), and finally some concluding observations and recommendations (Section 6).

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1 For further reading on the context of Kosovo's foreign fighter phenomenon, see Kursani (2015) and Shtuni (2016).

## 2 Research Design and Terminology

### 2.1 Case selection

In developing the research design for this study, the researchers have initially sought to close an important gap identified in research studies on Kosovo on what accounts for the variance in the spread of violent extremism across the country. The fieldwork then narrowed down on three municipalities to investigate community-level factors that may have driven this phenomenon.

To establish areas affected and unaffected by violent extremism in Kosovo, researchers used the spread of foreign fighters as a key indicator. To start, the researchers mapped the origins of the foreign fighters from Kosovo geographically. The data on the hometowns of the foreign fighters was obtained through Kosovo Police records containing information on the origins of 190 foreign fighters from Kosovo that joined IS and other terrorist organisations from 2012 through to 2016.

While most of Kosovo appears affected by the phenomenon, the municipality of Deçan stands out as an administrative unit with no recorded or known case of a foreign fighter to have joined the Islamic State or other terrorist organisations operating in Syria and Iraq.

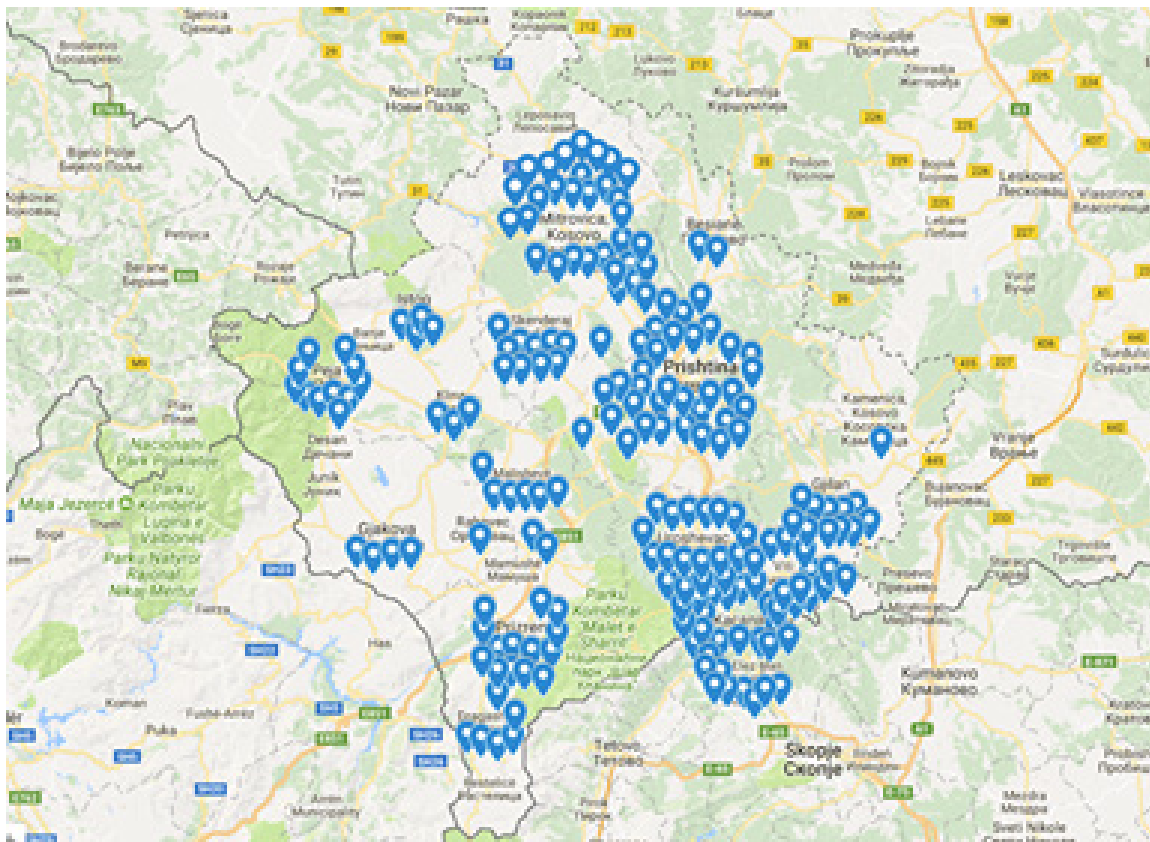


Figure 1: Map of suspected foreign fighters and their geographical distribution in Kosovo<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This map was constructed by KCSS relying on a detailed Kosovo police database provided to KCSS of suspected foreign fighters and their places of origin.

In contrast to Deçan, researchers chose the municipality of Hani i Elezit with eleven foreign fighters that joined ISIS – the municipality with the highest number of foreign fighters per capita in Kosovo.

Geographically, the western municipality of Deçan and the eastern municipality of Hani i Elezit are situated at two opposite sides of Kosovo. A closer look at the socio-economic and geographical characteristics of the two municipalities allowed the researchers to identify several commonalities between the two and control for several indicators, such as economic development, unemployment rate, ethnic composition and religiosity.

Controlling these indicators helped researchers identify other factors and actors that set apart these two municipalities and may account for their distinct experiences with violent extremism.

## 2.2 Research questions

Two aspects stood out in the course of the early stages of the research. First, most of the reports conducted in Kosovo that traced the trajectory of foreign terrorist fighters from Kosovo and their adherence to IS found that the recruitment effort in Kosovo was not homegrown but driven externally. It stems primarily from a specific network of imams from Macedonia with ties to Kosovo whose past education arched back to networks of support and education in the Middle East and Gulf countries. To assess the dynamics of radicalisation and violent extremism in Kosovo, it is therefore important to understand the nature of recruitment in Kosovo.

Secondly, the researchers also looked at the developments in the Islamic community of Kosovo specifically. The institution, though legally an informal organisation, regulates the conduct of imams and the network of mosques in Kosovo and occupies an important place as a moral compass for the Islamic community in the country. Given this undisputed role in the religious life of Islamic followers in Kosovo, the researchers found it central to this study to understand what was the role of formal Islamic institutions in the wake of the appearance of violent extremism and how this role translated into day-to-day activities in the communities affected by violent extremism and IS sympathisers.

The contextualisation of the role of the Islamic Association of Kosovo together with the mapping of the distribution of the foreign terrorist fighters, paved the way to the second stage of the research. This stage centred on the thorough study and analysis of two municipalities that showed similar characteristics but had very distinct experiences with violent extremism. In addition, the report explores a third municipality solely for the purpose of researching the potential link between political extremism and religiously based violent extremism.

The leading research questions that guided the fieldwork in these three municipalities were: **What are the key factors of community resilience or vulnerability to individuals and groups developing violent extremist beliefs and joining violent extremist groups? What actors influence community vulnerability or resilience to violent extremism, and how do they shape such dynamics?**

Given that the context in which violent extremism appeared in the Western Balkans is undergoing a renewed ethnic polarisation, one that has further stoked the already abundant nationalist rhetoric, as part of this study researchers have sought to explore **whether there is a link between religiously-based violent extremism and ethnically-driven political extremism in a third community that has been a hotbed of ethnic divisions since the end of Kosovo's war.**

In the final chapter of this report, the researchers turn to the country-specific prevention strategy to compare and contrast the findings of this study with the prescriptions of the problem in the strategy. Namely, the study **will assess the relevance of the PVE programmes in Kosovo to address current factors that contribute to resilience and vulnerability to violent extremism in the country and will provide recommendations on how to include such insights in amended strategies.**



## 2.3 Definition of terms

In defining the notion of *community*, researchers relied on the administrative map of Kosovo, which divides the country in 38 distinct municipalities as the country's main organizing unit. Each municipality is defined by administrative boundaries, centred on a larger administrative town with a set of comparable state institutions. Further, the decision to use municipalities as comparable units enabled the researchers to operate on already defined communities and their local identities, without engaging in an arbitrary construct of communities and their boundaries.

This initial definition of administrative "community" confined by clearly marked boundaries then allowed researchers to explore the commonalities and differences between religious and non-religious members of each community within those administrative boundaries. Researchers asked members of the focus groups to order their identities as they saw fit. The rationale for investigating "the pecking order of identities"<sup>3</sup> is based on the shifting nature of identity and the study's bid to compare the relevance of groups' stated identity in describing their attitudes toward violent extremism.

By using the same indicators in the affected and unaffected municipalities, researchers were then able to compare the findings across the studied communities, but also the attitudes of religious and non-religious communities in the two municipalities.

The analysis of *affected and unaffected communities* is based on the number of foreign fighters present in municipalities in Kosovo. While "affected" and "unaffected" are not synonymous with resilience and vulnerability, as the findings in the remainder of this research analysis will show, a municipality is *resilient* following the community's intervention or active engagement of various stakeholders of the community vested with some authority to either prevent or counter violent extremism. Therefore, resilience assumes awareness of the problem by various stakeholders in a community and their aggregated action to act against a certain phenomenon. It also includes the community's attitude toward such a phenomenon and their reaction in the wake of the emergence of the violent extremism activity, or events perceived as leading up to its appearance.

In contrast, *vulnerability* is a community's reluctance or lack of mobilisation to intervene or engage pro-actively in addressing violent extremism. This could be a function of the lack of mechanisms necessary for mobilisation, the lack of incentives to work together, or of tensions between stakeholders that prevent them from addressing comprehensively the challenges a community may face.

*Actors* are defined throughout the study as a plethora of leaders at the municipal level who are vested with a degree of local authority and are engaged with the community on daily basis. They include organisations such as the Islamic Community representatives (head imam and the head of association's local branch), mayors, other municipal authorities, NGOs and social influencers such as local activists.

*Factors*, on the other hand, are defined as circumstances that arise directly or indirectly from the intervention or non-intervention of actors that may account for some of the differences observed in the affected and unaffected municipalities. They include behaviour and response of and by municipal authorities and other key individuals and organisations to challenges that arise in the municipality.

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<sup>3</sup> "The pecking order of identities" is inspired by Andreas Wimmer's study (2002) in which he discusses the making of modern communities.

## 2.4 Methodology

In this study, researchers employ new data interpretations and freshly collected inputs through 15 semi-structured interviews and seven archived interviews<sup>4</sup> in three municipalities with various municipal authorities ranging from mayors to police commanders, religious leaders and civil society activists. For the purposes of additionally informing this study, four focus groups were conducted. The researchers also drew on the findings of one focus group conducted in the context of a different project by KCSS in Mitrovica.

The interviews were supplemented by a detailed review of the Kosovo police database of foreign fighters, and an in-depth study of the relationship and network between recruiters and recruits in Kosovo (constructed through court transcripts to gauge their proximity and reach to the affected community).

A brief comparative analysis of a set of general indicators was also conducted. The analysis compares socio-economic characteristics of foreign fighters from the affected municipality to the general country sample of foreign fighters, political representation, international donor presence, state investment in the affected and unaffected municipalities, results from annual barometers that offer a year-to-year comparison of the population's trust toward various religious and state institutions, cultural calendars as a proxy to the type of identity that municipal authorities foster in a particular community, and a review of records on religiously-based incidents in the affected and unaffected municipalities. The various datasets and information collected were then used to construct a narrative of local dynamics between various actors and the factors that their interventions produce.

Concerning ethical requirements, finally, both members of the research team have completed Human Subject Research trainings in their previous education. Ahead of every interview and focus group, the researchers have clearly stated the purpose of the study and they have recorded the interviews and discussions only with prior consent of the parties. They have also given the stakeholders the choice of anonymity should they desire not to be identified by name for the purposes of this study.

## 2.5 Limitations

The study of the community-level factors and actors that contribute to shaping resilient and vulnerable communities is a unique angle through which the topic of violent extremism is pursued. As discussed earlier in this report, most of the prior research conducted on this phenomenon focused on individuals motives and incentives to join IS and other terrorist organisations.

The lack of prior community-level research means that the researchers have to develop a qualitative research design in pursuit of the questions set forth in this study of the phenomenon, to build a credible foundation that would eventually enable a quantitative approach to the foreign fighter phenomenon. Due to these constraints, the study's generalizability is limited.

However, while qualitative methods are generally considered to be less generalizable than quantitative methods, in this case they allowed the researchers to collect in-depth information about the dynamics between various actors and the interplay of various factors at the local level. Such a study sets the scene for the future use of quantitative methods to test various associations.

Issues of access to data, or dearth of baseline data and research, presented a further limitation. For example, the researchers' review of actors, such as the Islamic Association in Kosovo, has had to rely mostly on newspaper reports and commentary as no prior scholarly articles have been produced that would offer a solid foundation on the nature of the organisation and its structural challenges.

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<sup>4</sup> These are interviews conducted over the course of KCSS research in the past six years with key senior stakeholders related to PVE and CVE efforts, community leaders and foreign fighters. The researchers in this study utilised those interviews as they studied the landscape and prepared the interview protocols.

## 3 Country Background

### 3.1 Overview of research on radicalisation and violent extremism in Kosovo

Based on KCSS databases and drawing from police investigations and court transcripts, from 2012 to 2017 around 400 Kosovo citizens have travelled to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. Out of these 400, 250 citizens are considered foreign fighters whereas the rest are women and children. So far, around 75 Kosovo citizens have been killed in Syria and Iraq. However, there has not been an official confirmation regarding the death of these individuals in the conflict zones. Most of the foreign fighters from Kosovo have travelled to the combat areas in Syria and Iraq during 2012 to 2014, mostly before the so-called “Islamic State” was established.

Until 2017, around 130 citizens are reported to have returned to Kosovo, out of which 117 are men and the rest women and children. As of 2017, around 120 to 160 Kosovo citizens are still in Syria and Iraq, the majority women and children. Kosovo’s government has officially expressed the will to take them back and it has already put contingency planning in place for the return of these citizens to Kosovo. However, to date their return has been impossible due to Turkey’s refusal to grant them permission to enter its territory.

Kosovo’s law enforcement has responded to the threat of violent extremism and the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Around 63 individuals are currently being held in custody, two are in house arrest, 83 are under ongoing investigations and around 168 are fugitives of the law on charges related to violent extremism in Kosovo.

In line with these actions, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) revoked the ‘working permit’ of 16 NGOs in Kosovo in 2014, which according to the MOI were suspected of funding terrorist activities in the country, resulting in their closure. Because of these actions, the number of foreign fighters from Kosovo declined significantly. In 2016 and 2017 there were no reported attempts of Kosovo citizens joining terrorist organisations as foreign fighters.

In 2015, the Kosovo Government approved the National Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism.<sup>5</sup> The National Strategy sets out different actions and activities that need to be undertaken by several institutions in Kosovo with the aim of preventing violent extremism. A large part of activities of the Strategy fall under the mandate of the Ministry of Education with the aim of raising awareness against this phenomenon, but also enhancing the role of critical thinking in preventing extremist ideologies in Kosovo. Furthermore, Kosovo has drafted and adopted several other legal and policy documents, including the Law against Terrorism, the Strategy against Terrorism, The Law on Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism.

Besides focusing on countering and preventing violent extremism, Kosovo’s government is particularly challenged by the needs of reintegration and re-socialisation of foreign fighters. The majority of the returnees are men who upon their return have been prosecuted and incarcerated. None of the women has been prosecuted mainly due to their non-combatant roles as most of them were found by the justice system to have been forced to join their husbands in the battlefield (Jakupi and Kelmendi 2017).

The returned former foreign fighters pose a challenge for the security authorities as some of them have combat skills, are trained to use weapons and have connections with international terrorist networks. They also might radicalise other members of their communities.

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5 For more information, see Government of Kosovo (2015).

## 3.2 Contextualising the Islamic Association of Kosovo (BIK)

The first cracks that have brought to the surface a clash of Islamic ideologies in Kosovo date back to 2008 when the country's Islamic Community Association, known as Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës (BIK), faced a crisis of legitimacy.

As the organisation that oversees local mosques, selects the clergy and orders the theme of sermons (Friday prayers) throughout Kosovo, BIK held uncontested power in organising the religious affairs of Muslim believers in Kosovo.

Two schools of thought emerged within BIK shortly after the end of the war in 1999 and the beginning of democracy in Kosovo: those who believed that Kosovo should continue to promote its own brand of Islam based on the Hanefi legacy of the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled the area for nearly five centuries, and those that wanted Kosovo to open up to various external influences. The latter perceived Kosovo's Islamic community as part of a global Islamic entity no longer constrained by the boundaries of the nation. According to BIK officials, it was the government's negligence to heed their warnings on the infiltration of various radical imams that challenged BIK's authority that brought about such crisis of legitimacy within the ranks of Muslim followers. While the government does not technically concern itself with the work of religious associations as they function as associations that are independent of the state, officials at BIK perceive this as a rule-of-law matter because of the potential ideological danger that this challenge to their authority posed.

As stated by an interviewed BIK official, *"The biggest handicap for BIK was the great space that was accorded to people from Macedonia, but also within Kosovo who were challenging BIK... As soon as you tell people 'do not follow the people from BIK because they are haram, kafirs, that they are corrupt, that they are (loyal to) Hashim's or Ramush's<sup>6</sup> and if you do this systematically it will eventually impact the people. ... They told followers that it didn't matter who were the people preaching, the only thing that matters is the words of the prophet. They had an open field."*<sup>7</sup>

Prior to international intervention and the introduction of democracy in Kosovo, religion and the influence of religious communities was mostly limited to the private sphere. With the introduction of democracy, the public sphere in Kosovo, just like elsewhere in countries in transition, opened up to various ideological influences and actors that pursued their agendas by taking advantage of free speech, freedom of association and guarantees of religious freedom.

A power struggle ensued. Representatives of BIK's moderate current found themselves increasingly under attack for advocating against foreign preachers who would make their way to Kosovo mosques and funding to construct atypical mosques that now dot the landscape in Kosovo (Musliu 2008). In 2011, the establishment at BIK purged a whole cadre of Islamic professors at Kosovo's main public university to replace them with its own backers (Schwartz 2011). Following these changes and tightening the grip at the helm of the institution, BIK authorities moved to change its statute, removing a clause that limited the mandate of the head of the institution (Rexhepi 2013). Though controversial and embattled, the current head of BIK, Naim Ternava, is serving his third 5-year term in office.

But the breakdown in BIK's authority had ramifications well beyond the institution's headquarters in Prishtina. A set of illegal mosques and breakaway preachers, who would ignore BIK's authority, would appear in parts of Kosovo, making use of alternative means, such as online presence and summer camps, to attract a young body of followers. In other towns, preachers from places as far as Pakistan and as close as Macedonia would address the zealous crowds who took to mosques in larger numbers after the war. Over time, their influence grew in number and in the frequency of the incidents between two currents inside the BIK.

<sup>6</sup> The interviewed BIK official refers to a string of Arabic words that are commonly used in the Albanian language as slurs. The official also mentions the first names of two Kosovo politicians, the current President Hashim Thaçi and the current Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, in reference to how their opponents sought to discredit BIK officials by portraying them as close to the state authorities.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with BIK senior official in Prishtina conducted on July 17, 2018.

According to BIK officials, part of the blame lies with Kosovo's government for not acting against such external religious influence that swept the country immediately after the 1998-1999 war with Serbia, in the early days of the establishment of the UN protectorate over Kosovo and the following years as local institutions began to take shape. As claimed by a senior BIK official,

*“It was a real neglect by Kosovo’s government for not responding on time. We sent dozens of documents to the government informing them on the activities of several associations. This began in 2003-2004. For the first time the state responded in 2005 by adopting a law that banned cultural associations from organising religious activities in local cultural centres or municipal buildings as it was earlier practiced. ... This is how the ground was laid for the bad seed.”<sup>8</sup>*

In some cases, local municipal authorities did not consult BIK on such religious activities held by various associations, often stripping them of any say on these gatherings.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

## 4 Key Factors and Actors Influencing Community Resilience and Vulnerability

This section will present the data collected through 12 months of research and analysis in three municipalities in Kosovo. The data and their contextualisation are presented as follows:

- 1) A comparison of two municipalities, one affected and one unaffected by the foreign fighter phenomenon, based on key indicators: number of foreign fighters per capita; number of recruiters and radical preachers prosecuted from the area;
- 2) A comparison of affected and unaffected municipalities based on socio-economic indicators: unemployment, economic development, political representation;
- 3) An analysis of the interplay of factors and actors at the municipal level and their impact on the vulnerability and resilience of the municipalities;
- 4) An analysis of the factors and interplay of violent extremism and political extremism in a third municipality, the ethnically divided city of Mitrovica.

The following sets of factors and actors will be examined:

### *Factors:*

- ≡ Presence of state institutions (responsiveness, political representation, trust)
- ≡ Religious institutions (relationship between various layers of BIK and local authorities)
- ≡ Community ties (presence of civil society)
- ≡ Identity and identification (“pecking order of identities”)
- ≡ Incidents

### *Actors:*

- ≡ Unauthorised religious establishments
- ≡ Donors
- ≡ Local community leaders and elected authorities
- ≡ Islamic Community
- ≡ NGOs

### **4.1 Affected and unaffected municipalities, a within-country comparison**

The recruitment patterns in Kosovo show a wide distribution of recruitment throughout the country. Yet, the contrast is stark: towns along Kosovo’s eastern border with Macedonia, where the initial foreign terrorist fighters and their recruiters originated from, have the highest number of foreign terrorist fighters



in proportion to the population size of the respective municipalities. Among the affected areas, the western municipality of Deçan stands out as an exception.<sup>10</sup>

To date, Kosovo's law enforcement authorities have identified 11 foreign terrorist fighters who joined IS from the municipality of Hani i Elezit, or one in 854 inhabitants, and some four recruiters from Hani i Elezit and the adjacent municipality of Kaçanik. By contrast, in the case of Deçan, authorities have no reported instances of foreign fighters from the area or any presence of recruiters.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, in addition to the number of foreign fighters, which is the key indicator used throughout this study to set apart the affected and unaffected communities, the number of ideologues and key recruiters who originate from the affected community appears to directly affect the levels of radicalisation and affect a community's response to violent extremism.

For instance, the main recruiter of IS in Kosovo was imam Zekirja Qazimi, an imam who preached at el-Kudus illegal mosque in Gjilan, and organised youth camps and sermons in the eastern municipalities, including in Hani i Elezit as early as in 2011.<sup>12</sup> Two other main recruiters and influencers from Kosovo – Lavdrim Muhaxhiri and Ridvan Aqifi, who later became senior IS leaders and the main protagonists of IS in the Balkans – came from Kaçanik and Gjilan respectively, but spread their network of recruitment throughout eastern Kosovo.

While Muhaxhiri and Aqifi were killed in Syria by US airstrikes, Qazimi was indicted, tried and convicted for recruiting IS members in Kosovo. He was indicted and convicted along with five other key recruiters, four of whom are either from Hani i Elezit or the neighbouring town of Kaçanik. Only one of the recruiters in the indictment is from Kosovo's central area of Drenica.

According to court documents, these top recruiters allegedly held strong ties to preachers in Macedonia and were the first to challenge BIK's authority through nongovernmental organisations such as "Rinia Islame" and "Nektar" as well as lectures delivered in illegal mosques and gatherings outside of the formal framework of religious authority. They also facilitated the departure of dozens of men from the area to join IS and handed out to them instructions and money.<sup>13</sup>

For example, in his defence at the trial, Qazimi denied any involvement in Syria, but revealed his network of influence, which included his work over the years with four non-governmental organisations active in the area, including "Nektar" based in Hani i Elezit.<sup>14</sup> He also conceded to knowing half a dozen Kosovo foreign fighters from their participation in his lectures in which he encouraged them to join IS and spread hate speech. The men were either fighting in Syria at the time or were killed in the battlefield.

In his recruitment effort in Hani i Elezit, he was aided by Sadat Topojani, a 34 year old English teacher from the town, who initially made several trips to the IS frontlines in the area of Aleppo and later returned to Kosovo to facilitate the recruitment effort. According to court transcripts, Topojani, in cooperation with Qazimi and key foreign fighters from Kosovo who were deployed in Syria, encouraged and coordinated the logistics for some 11 foreign fighters from the municipality of Hani i Elezit that joined IS and other groups in Syria from 2013 through 2014.

BIK officials claim that the reason for this higher level of radicalisation in the eastern part of Kosovo is a function of the influence that these men exerted through informal gatherings and ties, and by openly challenging the authority of BIK.

According to them, most of the influence came as a result of the ties between these municipalities to the Albanian community in Macedonia. The Albanian community in Macedonia has traditionally been more religiously conservative and under the influence of parallel religious structures that have operated unhindered

<sup>10</sup> No instances of foreign fighters have been reported in Podujevë, but the municipality borders Kosovo's capital Prishtina and it is unclear whether the members of its community were completely spared of radicalisation.

<sup>11</sup> Official police records obtained by Kosovar Center for Security Studies and background interviews with counter-terrorism officials in Prishtina, who discussed the recruitment distribution on condition of anonymity for the purpose of this report.

<sup>12</sup> Verdict released by the Basic Court of Ferizaj, PKR 54/15 on May 20, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

by Macedonian authorities for years,<sup>15</sup> more so than other Albanian-inhabited parts of the Western Balkans.

In the words of a local BIK official, *“The spirit of Kacanik, Hani i Elezit and Ferizaj is the spirit of Macedonia. You can’t divide a people with an axe. The friendships, the ties, the relations of this part of Kosovo have always been with Skopje (Macedonia’s capital). Until 1992, we had no notion of Kosovo. Which means our relations then and now are with Skopje. They’re familial ties, but also of business... I believe our problem is our ties to Skopje because of our proximity to it and in Macedonia a more religious spirit prevails.”*

This influence, according to at least two officials from BIK, has gone unchallenged by state authorities at the local and central level, allowing unauthorised imams external to the community, including from Macedonia, to extend their reach beyond the traditional boundaries set by BIK. In some instances, this challenge took the form of harassment.

*“Initially I was surprised by the incident in Hani i Elezit,”* a BIK official said, referring to an attack on one senior BIK official visiting the local mosque in Hani i Elezit. *“But then we realised that those people travelled to Skopje and other parts of Macedonia every night to attend lectures of unidentified preachers. Skopje was closer than Prishtina (for them).”*

The storyline is different in the western municipality of Deçan, where local imams and officials from BIK worked with local authorities early on to root out any challenges to their monopoly over religious affairs.

In the words of Deçan’s senior local official: *“Prior to extremism, they come in to install these (religious) currents, their network and then they raise recruits. But when these currents don’t manage to spread, recruitment becomes impossible.”*

According to local officials, because of their active and simultaneous engagement, no foreign fighter was recruited in the area and no influencers or recruiters were present in the municipality. The local authorities claim to have held full control over the mosques and reached out to the public to discourage and prevent informal religious gatherings of unauthorised preachers.<sup>16</sup> Researchers sought to independently verify this claim by using current police records of foreign fighters and interviews with law enforcement officials in Prishtina, who claimed that there was one instance of radicalisation originating from Deçan, but the suspect was radicalised elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

*“When the young followers began to challenge us, to tell us that we, the BIK preachers, don’t know how to properly lecture, that we’re not conveying the word of God accurately, I realised that the outside influence was here,”* a local BIK official in Deçan said. *“Their challenge of BIK was the first sign... But, we were very compact with one another. We did not allow them to come in. We worked with the jamaat.”*

The officials from BIK confess that they faced growing criticism from their followers, including demands to bring in preachers who had made their claim to fame on social media. *“They tell us why not invite the imams from the Internet. But we, the official imams, we will not allow that. Under no circumstance will we allow imams that are not from BIK to come here,”* this official said.<sup>18</sup>

The presence and the influence of the local recruiters in a community is also clearly laid out in the court transcript detailing the prosecution’s allegations and defence statements of at least two foreign fighters from Hani i Elezit. It reveals a tight-knit network of recruiters and recruits who relied on familial ties and their relationships to exert their influence and raise foreign fighters. One of the defendants claims that Topojani, a prominent recruiter in Hani i Elezit, encouraged two men to join the war in Syria through their participation in the local NGO “Nektar”, which appears to have acted as a front for violent extremist activities. The main preacher in the organisation where the men met was from Skopje, and it is from the ties forged there that trips to Syria to join IS were forged. Once there, the trip was further guided logistically by Muhaxhiri, another top recruiter and ideologue from the area.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For more on radicalisation in Macedonia see Qehaja and Perteshi (2018).

<sup>16</sup> Interviews with local BIK officials, imams and municipal authorities conducted by KCSS in December 2017 and January 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Background interview with senior counter-terrorism official in Prishtina, January 18, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with local BIK official in Deçan conducted by KCSS, December 20, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Court Verdict PKR 54/15, released on May 20, 2016 and Indictment PPS nr. 25/2015, released on May 7, 2015.



Municipalities	Hani i Elezit	Deçan
<b>Number of FTFs</b>	11	0
<b>Number of recruiters/preachers</b>	4 (Lavdrim Muhaxhiri, Zeqirja Qazimi, Ridvan Aqifi, Sadat Topojani)	None
<b>Presence of NGOs/informal structures/donations</b>	NGOs “Nektar” and “Rinia Islame”	None
<b>Incidents/hate crimes</b>	3 incidents identified (graffiti discouraging voting; clash between traditional and strict practitioners; car of imam set on fire)	1 incident/hate crime identified (graffiti with IS slogan written on the walls of 14 <sup>th</sup> -century Serbian Orthodox Monastery)
<b>Trust in formal religious structures*</b>	60 percent have little faith in BIK	52 percent have little faith in BIK

Table 1. Mapping of two contrasting municipalities: Hani i Elezit and Deçan. (Source\*: According to the Kosovo-wide KCSS Security Barometer, an annual survey measuring attitudes on a variety of security-related issues)

## 4.2 Affected and unaffected municipalities based on socio-economic indicators

The municipality of Deçan has 40,000 inhabitants (Kosovo Population and Housing Census 2011), with a population density of 141 inhabitants per square meter. The municipality has a 59 percent unemployment rate and a fairly underdeveloped private sector, which in this study is used as a proxy to account for the economic development and opportunity in the two municipalities. In Deçan, there are 43 private businesses for every 1,000 inhabitants, well under the Kosovo average of 76 private enterprises (ECIKS 2014).

Its ethnic composition is predominantly Albanian, with small pockets of Serb, Roma and Turkish minorities. It was among the areas most heavily hit by the 1998-1999 war in Kosovo.

While its population is predominantly Muslim, the municipality has remained an important site for the Serbian minority as it houses the 14<sup>th</sup>-century UNESCO-protected Serbian Orthodox Monastery of Deçan. Since the end of the war, the relations between the Albanian majority and the Serbian Orthodox Monastery have often been a point of inter-ethnic friction, but also of many internationally sponsored initiatives to foster interfaith dialogue between the various communities.

Deçan has a total of 17 mosques, which has been used in this case as a proxy to measure the level of religiosity in the municipality. There are no reported parallel religious institutions or unauthorised imams active in the municipality.

By contrast, Hani i Elezit was only established as a municipality since Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008. Until then the municipality and the surrounding villages were part of a larger administrative unit controlled by the adjacent municipality of Kaçanik. Despite its relatively short administrative experience, the municipality shares many characteristics with the municipality of Deçan.

The municipality of Hani i Elezit has 9,403 inhabitants. While smaller than Deçan in terms of territorial size and population, Hani i Elezit is comparable to the former due to its population density that nearly mirrors that of Deçan with 121 inhabitants per square meter.

The municipality has an unemployment rate of 53 percent and does better in terms of economic development than Deçan, with an average of 68 private enterprises per 1,000 municipality inhabitants (ECIKS, 2014).

In terms of ethnic composition and religiosity, Hani i Elezit is predominantly Albanian, with a small presence of Roma and other smaller minorities. It has in total 11 mosques, which in this study is used to establish the religious adherence of its inhabitants. There has been a reported existence of informal religious communities and unauthorised imams and religious groups operating in the area.

Most of the policy frameworks and research conducted on foreign fighters in the region identify poor education, lack of socio-economic perspective, deprivation and religiosity as the main push and pull factors among the individual-level reasons that have played a role in the recruitment of foreign fighters into violent extremist organisations.

To exclude any of these factors from consideration and to focus instead on community-level dynamics, the researchers compared these variables in order to understand their influence. As these indicators show, the two municipalities are comparable.

The initial comparison of these indicators in the municipality of Deçan and the municipality of Hani i Elezit, which shows Deçan's standing worse than that of Hani i Elezit, indicates that socio-economic indicators, such as unemployment and religiosity, are not explanatory factors for the presence of radicalisation. While they cannot be ruled out as overall contributing factors, on their own, these indicators do not explain the variation between the affected and unaffected municipalities.

Should previous conclusions on the motives of foreign fighters based on these indicators hold, the researchers should have observed a presence of foreign fighters in Deçan municipality due to a higher unemployment rate as well as a broader lack of economic perspective and higher rate of religiosity than in Hani i Elezit.

In addition, by controlling for unemployment and economic development in affected and unaffected communities, this study excludes explanations that recruitment in Kosovo was due to poverty or lack of economic opportunity. This is consistent with other general findings elsewhere that reject "greed"<sup>20</sup> as a key factor in IS recruitment.

### **4.3 Interplay of factors and actors and their impact in the vulnerable and resilient municipalities**

#### **4.3.1 Outreach and cooperation of local imams and elected municipal authorities**

In the municipality of Hani i Elezit, the authority of the local BIK establishment was challenged by imams from Macedonia but also other areas from within Kosovo, brought to preach in a bid to create cleavages and erode the unity of the community.

In 2006, a group of Muslim practitioners from the municipality unsuccessfully tried to overtake the local mosque from the BIK-appointed authorities. Such incidents were reported, yet local authorities and law enforcement agencies did not get involved and BIK mediators were mostly shunned and condemned as self-centred and corrupt.

Instead, the unconventional preachers – imams who were not authorised by BIK or who introduced a new interpretation of Islam, including new methods of prayer – met with the area's Muslim followers in private houses, outside mosques. In addition, literature that contrasted with the official guidelines as well as various organisations with ideological agendas proliferated unhindered by the state or the BIK, dividing the followers and undermining the credibility of the local imams who had served the community

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<sup>20</sup> The term "greed" refers to Paul Collier's and Anke Hoeffler's work (2004) on civil wars where they categorise the individual motivations to join an armed conflict through the prism of greed and grievance.

as part of the official establishment.<sup>21</sup> The new ideology, according to local BIK authorities, was driven externally and grew exponentially as the local appeals for help with authorities went unanswered.

*“We are from this community and we know the concerns of the people in ways that it’s impossible for politicians to know. I just came back from a wake<sup>22</sup> and I will go again. It just so happens that in a day we sit 4-5 times with 20 different people. This means that the influence of the imam is great. But, the political establishment denies this role to us. They can’t reconcile with this reality,”*<sup>23</sup> said a BIK official from Hani i Elezit.

Due to the long-standing cross-border ties between eastern Kosovo towns bordering Macedonia and the Albanian community in places like Skopje in Macedonia, traditionally a more religiously conservative community, controversial imams from Macedonia filled the void and began to carve out their influence in Hani i Elezit and the rest of the bordering area between Kosovo and Macedonia.

But it was not merely the external challenge posed by imams that eroded BIK’s authority and harmed the unity of the community of believers in Hani i Elezit. A series of informal and formal interviews painted a bleak picture of the fractured relationship between BIK’s local head imam and the organisation’s local head that was exploited by those challenging the organisation’s authority and its ability to organise the religious life in the municipality.

This mostly manifested itself through the creation of alternative spaces for prayer in private houses and youth camps that were outside traditional mosques and strayed away from BIK’s instruction of prayer.

*“The problem of extremism came gradually, it did not happen overnight. We ignore things, that’s our weakness because we think it’s just one or two instances. But they had time to focus on this, and on this only. How to win over a person, how to win over a young guy,”* a BIK official said. *“They became like leeches on the young.”*

In addition, the local elected authorities did not appear to reach out to those that displayed sympathy for alternative ideologies in Hani i Elezit and merely characterised them as outcasts, singling them out for their non-traditional appearance of sporting rolled up pants and long beards, which did not conform to the mainstream religious activities. Their outreach was limited to citizens’ requests and town hall meetings as foreseen by law.<sup>24</sup>

*“Usually, on top of public hearings that we’re obliged to conduct by law, we meet citizens on regular basis. They are free and it’s within their right to contact us for any problem they may have,”* a senior local official said, indicating a less engaged approach in addressing the challenges of the radicalisation.

By contrast, some 142 kilometres to the west in Deçan, BIK authorities claimed to have acted jointly with elected representatives to stamp out at the outset the voices that questioned their authority, perceived as the first sign of external influence on matters of religion. With criticism from the younger generation of followers who wanted different preachers levelled at official imams appointed by BIK, imams that served in Deçan acted in unison and in coordination with local municipal authorities decided to ban any lecturers that were not certified by BIK from having access to the community of believers. In Deçan, the imams and the mayor, for example, frequently met with the community, including town hall meetings but also less formal gathering such as weddings and funeral wakes, to warn of the danger posed by uncertified preachers. The measures involved daily meetings with youth, but in addition imams who had a younger following took to the social media – the preferred tools of communication for the youth in Kosovo – to post sermons to counter the appeal of preachers who reached out to this target audience through the Internet.<sup>25</sup>

*“We talked to the imams. They came to our meetings and I told them what I thought. I even told them that if they are such or they support these ideas, I would distance myself from them. And in a way they*

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21 Interview with local BIK official in Hani i Elezit municipality, conducted on January 12, 2018 by KCSS.

22 A wake is a family vigil organised on the occasion of someone’s passing when relatives and friends come to express their condolences.

23 Interview conducted on January 12, 2018.

24 Interview with senior local official in Hani i Elezit, December 21, 2017.

25 Ibid.

were under attack, too, perhaps indirectly, because they did not support these currents,”<sup>26</sup> a Deçan’s senior official claimed.

At times, the measures applied in Deçan to curb violent extremism were more extreme, with those that exhibited violent extremist tendencies or did not conform to the rules in the mosque forced out of the municipality.<sup>27</sup>

*“There were individuals who may have harboured more extreme ideas than others, but under the community’s pressure they left from Deçan because they were viewed differently by the public,” the official said. “It’s a problem to live in a society where you are viewed differently. And that’s how they were seen.”*<sup>28</sup> Municipal authorities are more cautious when they receive requests to build new mosques since they want to have confirmed information on the funding. Similarly, they weighed in to stop the construction of a mosque due to suspicious funding.

These heavy-handed interventions by the municipal authorities to actively prevent violent extremism from taking root in Deçan were corroborated by members of the religious community in the municipality, who credited the active outreach by imams in Deçan as the key measure that prevented the spread of violent extremism in their municipality.

*“We’ve worked a lot with the young generation. We received threats and insults, everything until we convinced them that this is not the way. We spent days and nights with the young, in the streets and everywhere in Deçan because this is a small community, but we’ve worked a lot on this. Undoubtedly we’ve been touched by this, but these are isolated cases and the hand of the state has had an impact,”* a BIK official from Deçan said, referring to the interventions by state authorities in clamping down on these networks. *“But should we have waited for the hand of the state, we would have had chaos here, because the state reacted later than it should have.”*<sup>29</sup>

In their view, while imams in other places in Kosovo lured their followers with sermons on the value of jihad, in Deçan the imams were explicit in denying that the war IS was conducting in Syria and Iraq was in any way a holy war.

*“The young followers were convinced that what’s happening there amounts to jihad. This is a conviction that was created by the imams of Kosovo. They spoke about the value of jihad, but the problem is that they didn’t talk about the rules. Jihad is lawful, Islamic literature is filled with arguments and we can convincingly say that what’s happening in Syria is not jihad... We must take the responsibility for failing to work intensively with the young,”*<sup>30</sup> a participant in a religious focus group in Deçan said.

Yet, this awareness and anxiety over the spreading of the radicalisation phenomenon in Kosovo appears to have wrecked the nerves of the community of believers. *“There are always reactions because something that we have not seen before came to us. The community reacted and they continue to do so. And it’s interesting to see that those reacting are the part of the community that does not pray. The problem is fear of the unknown.”*<sup>31</sup>

Some said they felt that they were constantly judged by older generations for their want to practice the religion, pray or sport a beard.<sup>32</sup>

One of the challenges, according to participants in the religious community, *“is the prejudice, especially toward the young, because if a young man begins to practice the religion he is judged mainly by the elderly because he attends Friday prayer, or he will be judged by members of the family for fasting. Or should we decide to sport a beard because we consider it a religious duty. We are constantly judged, people*

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26 Interview with senior official from Deçan, January 4, 2018.

27 Ibid.

28 Interview with senior local official in Deçan, January 4, 2018.

29 Interview with BIK official in Deçan, December 20, 2017.

30 Focus group with religious community in Deçan, February 12, 2018.

31 Interview with BIK official in Deçan, December 20, 2017.

32 Ibid.

*do not ask us for an explanation of the religious disposition but automatically ‘lynch’ us as an extremist.”<sup>33</sup>*

The developments starkly differ from Hani i Elezit, where the community remains split over the functionality of the local and central institutions, but somewhat united in their approval of BIK’s role as the main institution that tries to alleviate poverty in the municipality.

*“We lack the means for further development,” exclaimed one participant of the religious community. “We lack perspective... The negligence of the government has exacerbated the problem. If we talk about religious extremism, they often claim that our municipalities are most affected by it, but no one has given us a fund to reduce this problem. Even when big funds are given and our municipality stood to benefit, when the call for it came out those funds benefited Ferizaj, Prishtina or Prizren.”<sup>34</sup>*

### 4.3.2 Political representation and donor agenda

While both municipalities share the same administrative structure, the impact of institutions (actors), both formal and informal, the cooperation between them (factor), the attention accorded to them from central institutions (factor) as well as the style of governance of various stakeholders (actor) appears to have profoundly shaped the different trajectories in confronting violent extremism.

In this section, the researchers looked into political representation and international donor attention as another facet of factors that set apart the response of the two municipalities to violent extremism.

For nearly a decade after the end of Kosovo’s war, Hani i Elezit saw no investment or administrative attention. The town and its surrounding areas were part of the municipality of Kaçanik and only gained the right to self-rule through an internal rearrangement in Kosovo as part of a decentralisation plan that followed the country’s declaration of independence in 2008.

With no representation, Hani i Elezit did not reap any of the benefits of development of the intense attention of the international donors that followed the Kosovo war and by the time the municipality was set up, the attention and presence of international donors in the country waned.<sup>35</sup> This is particularly obvious in the scarce infrastructure in the municipality, which in contrast to Deçan has no cultural centre or any centre of gravity, such as civil society organisations, to engage the community in extracurricular activities,<sup>36</sup> but also in the variety of aid organisations present in the area.

Whereas Deçan has seen much involvement of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which engaged a variety of stakeholders from the local government and civil society as part of reconciliation efforts, and presence of large donors such as USAID and those of the European Union member states, in Hani i Elezit there has only recently been increased attention due to the violent extremist activity in the area.<sup>37</sup>

This difference in attention especially from the early days of Kosovo being an international protectorate was also reflected in the internal fabric of the society and its ability to mobilise in influencing the policy agenda. Though small in number compared to the civil society organisations in major Kosovo cities, Deçan has at least half a dozen active local civil society organisations, while Hani i Elezit has virtually no such active clubs.

The municipalities also differ in the attention accorded to them by the central institutions, in particular the country’s parliament and the government. Kosovo is a single electoral zone, meaning that candidates for Kosovo’s legislative branch derive their votes from all parts of the country equally. However, at this stage of Kosovo’s budding democracy, the constituencies and the mobilised vote remain local and political parties largely regional, as are the ties of their key protagonists to their places of origin. Over the

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Focus group with religious community in Hani i Elezit, February 21, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with senior local official in Hani i Elezit, December 21, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> This finding was confirmed in interviews with senior officials of both municipalities.



years Deçan and Hani i Elezit have been shaped by this internal political dynamic and political legacies that have seen Deçan rise up to become one of the most important political bastions and Hani i Elezit dwindle in political irrelevance.

Deçan, for instance, stands as an electoral stronghold of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo, the party of Kosovo's current Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj. Although in opposition for years until it came to power in the current government, the municipality enjoyed political support due to its affiliation with Haradinaj's party. Local officials concede that even when the party was not in power they were generally able to solicit public investment from central government.

Currently, on top of the Prime Minister, another seven MPs or senior government officials have strong familial ties to the area and derive their electoral support from Deçan, which is often translated into increased attention for that constituency. One such case in point is the former two-time mayor of Deçan, Rasim Selmanaj, who now is a member of Kosovo's parliament.

The ties between Kosovo's central institutions and the strongholds of the political parties in power have been documented in a general study on Kosovo's patronage political system that shows a clear trend of "the purchasing of political land with public funds" (Bajrami 2011).

This view was further bolstered during last year's general elections in which the current Prime Minister, campaigning on behalf of his party's candidate in Deçan, pledged to double the municipality's budget and triple capital investments in the area. He also announced he was earmarking 80 million euros for the construction of the Dukagjin highway that affects the municipality of Deçan (EkonomiaOnline 2017).

By contrast, since its foundation as a municipality, Hani i Elezit has supported a politically independent candidate as the mayor, with no significant ties to the main political parties in Kosovo. While mayor Rufki Suma's modest style of governance has elicited much local support for him, this political dynamic has rendered Hani i Elezit insignificant as a constituency, making the central government unresponsive to the needs of the municipality's population.<sup>38</sup>

"Our resources have gone to the Greeks and Macedonians (under privatization deals). We're just bystanders. People find ways. Some through religion, some elsewhere," an official interviewed in Hani i Elezit said speaking of the changing economic landscape in the municipality.<sup>39</sup>

Currently, Deçan's municipal budget stands at 8.3 million euros, while that of Hani i Elezit is 2.7 million euros, both slightly higher than in 2017.

Municipalities	Deçan	Hani i Elezit
<b>Political representation in central level</b>	8 (including current prime minister)	0
<b>Trust towards institutions (as measured by voter turnout in the last three elections)</b>	General elections 2017: 39,97 percent General elections 2014: 37,31 percent General elections 2010: 34,51 percent	General elections 2017: 37,38 percent General elections 2014: 43,29 percent General elections 2010: 49,88 percent

Table 2: Political representation and voter turnout in Deçan and Hani i Elezit (source: Newspaper Zeri 2017, Kosovo Central Election Commission)

These dynamics are reflected in the vote tally of the last general elections in Kosovo of 2017. In Deçan, 71.68 percent of the vote went to Haradinaj's ruling coalition, while in Hani i Elezit the vote was split between the

<sup>38</sup> Focus Group participant in Hani i Elezit, February 21, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with an official in Hani i Elezit, January 12, 2018.

main opposition party Vetëvendosje 45.09 percent and the current ruling coalition, which garnered 38.91% of the vote (Kosovo Central Election Committee 2018).

### 4.3.3 National narratives and local context

The two municipalities also differ in their centrality to the national narrative of liberation in Kosovo and the way that narrative shapes the local context particularly in terms of identity politics, a story that emerged as especially relevant in countering violent extremism during this research period.

Actors in both municipalities reported increased religiosity since the end of the war in Kosovo and an increasing demand by the youth to participate in religious affairs.

Yet, despite this commonality, citizens of these two municipalities had various responses to the impact of religion on their identity. So did the stakeholders whose different approaches to channelling this increased interest in the practice of religion ultimately may shape the role of the religion and its relationship with radicalisation and violent extremism in the future.

In Deçan there is uniformity: ethnic identification is the most important in both religious and non-religious communities. In both groups, religious and non-religious participants, identified primarily with their Albanian ethnicity.

In Hani i Elezit both the religious and non-religious members of the community were less homogenous. Those that identified by their ethnicity and those that chose to first identify with their religious belonging were nearly split evenly.

In Deçan religious and local authorities appear to have taken a direct approach in confronting those that challenged BIK's authority and what they perceived as a contestation of the traditional religious preaching common to Kosovo.

Local officials call upon a long tradition of resistance in Deçan as the functioning counter-narrative, which helped to dissuade agents of radicalisation in their municipality. *“Many people were killed, we have many martyrs and many heroes. For example, an imam here has a brother who is a hero and he would never allow such (extremist) currents to penetrate here. The feelings of national identity are strong as is the feeling of sacrifice for Kosovo's freedom, US support, NATO's intervention, the West and these are things we prize as valuable. Therefore, these (radical) currents run counter to this idea.”*<sup>40</sup>

In contrast, in Hani i Elezit both formal and informal stakeholders were somewhat intimidated by the religious newcomers in their midst and while they sought to confront this influence in the early days, eventually the pressure was too big for their fractured counter-narrative to make a difference.

According to a senior local BIK official, *“If I had issues with person X, the state authorities never reacted. I confronted them and remained in tense relations with them due to the different literature that was smuggled here. Then, associations came, and each one of them had their ideology. They weren't serving the religion but catered to a certain ideology. This brought about a cleavage in the mosque and outside of it. ... The problems are serious... They ignore you in the mosque, they are a group and you are alone. No one would take the responsibility to enter in conflict with them to protect me. Or, I enter the mosque and they leave (in protest).”*<sup>41</sup>

Deçan, like much of western Kosovo, takes particular pride in the active participation of a string of local figures that contributed to Kosovo's independence movement since the early 1980s. The municipality's regional significance rose further during Kosovo's 1998-1999 war when the area became a stronghold of the Kosovo Liberation Army, the guerrilla force that mounted a resistance to Serbia's counter-insurgency in Kosovo. Presently, the municipality is strewn with memorials that commemorate the area's contribution to the independence movement, including a vast cemetery dedicated to the KLA fighters that acts as a meeting point for the community in all historically significant dates. The municipality has a rich calendar of public

40 Interview with senior political representative in Deçan, January 4, 2018.

41 Interview with local BIK official in Hani i Elezit, January 12, 2018

holidays built around the national narrative and is on the map of Kosovo's top politicians as they pay tribute to the armed resistance that lays at the foundation of the independent state. Every year since the end of the war, Kosovo's institutional leaders embark on several tours that take them to Deçan to pay tribute to those fallen on Independence Day on February 17, the anniversary of the beginning of armed resistance in March 1998, various public gatherings to mark war heroes, martyrs and civilian casualties.

The community in Deçan is frequently part of these celebrations, which have contributed to the construction of a strong national identity and a participating local narrative where the public takes part in the rituals of remembrance.

In contrast, Hani i Elezit, which had largely escaped unscathed from the Kosovo war, is accorded no significant presence in the current national narrative and is rarely part of any significant national celebration save for the liberation of the town by NATO forces on June 11, 1999. Its calendar of public holidays mainly consists of informal celebrations of religious festivities, as the community looks outward, mainly nurturing ties with the Albanian community in the neighbouring Macedonia.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.4 Exploring the unexplored: violent extremism and political extremism in the ethnically divided city of Mitrovica

Since Deçan and Hani i Elezit are predominantly Albanian and share some of the same traits as the majority of Albanian-dominated municipalities in Kosovo, as part of this study the researchers set out to test the relationship between religious-based violent extremism and ethnically-driven political extremism in Kosovo in a more ethnically diverse setting. While assumptions are made in policy-making circles about the relationship between the two, to date scholars have not established a qualitative or quantitative link between the two phenomena. This question is researched in the ethnically divided city of Mitrovica, an area also affected by the foreign fighter phenomenon and a growing conservative religiosity.

Because of restricted access and ethical difficulties to conform to the requests of participants in assembling a focus group, researchers approached this research question through transcripts of local security council meetings, in which participants shared thoughts about the effectiveness of national strategies in the prevention and countering of violent extremism. This helped gauge what these local activists thought were the main drivers and community factors that led to violent extremism.

In addition to the close study of five transcripts from local security council meetings in Serb-dominated municipalities and the divided city of Mitrovica, four interviews were conducted with Muslim religious leaders and Mitrovica's main civil society activist, who established a foundation of interethnic cooperation in the divided city.

Mitrovica, once a flourishing industrial city and home to Kosovo's famed mines, is embarking on its third decade as a city ethnically divided between Kosovo's Albanian majority in the south and the Serbian dominated north. Apart from being a flashpoint of ethnic tensions for the entirety of Kosovo's state-building efforts, the town remains a bitter reminder of the unsuccessful international reconciliation efforts to transform the conflict in Kosovo after years of investment in peace-building programmes.

Apart from being an arena of continuous political contestation for control between Kosovo and Serbia, the political impasse and the entrenched ethnic animosities have become a stomping ground for organised crime and extreme ideologies that seek to portray a territorial dispute as a civilizational clash between the East and the West, namely between Christianity and Islam, drawing deeply on present geopolitical divisions and the increasing religious rhetoric to explain ideological and ethnic differences (The Economist 2017).

Furthering this viewpoint, which has been an official storyline, sponsored by the Serbian government,<sup>43</sup> in

<sup>42</sup> Interviews with local religious and municipal officials.

<sup>43</sup> For example, see Serbia's foreign minister statement comparing Kosovo's bid to join UNESCO to granting membership to IS: <https://inserbia.info/today/2015/10/dacic-admitting-kosovo-to-unesco-same-as-admitting-islamic-state/>



the past several years, Mitrovica and the surrounding areas became recruiting grounds for the Islamic State group and for far-right Serbian groups like the Kosovo Front that supplies fighters to fight alongside pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine. According to Kosovo Police data, some 15 citizens from Mitrovica have joined IS and, while there are no accurate data on the number of Serb foreign fighters, officials estimate that at least a dozen Serbs from Kosovo's north have joined the ranks of some 300 Serbs that are fighting with various pro-Russian fractions in eastern Ukraine.<sup>44</sup>

Various local actors are split on whether the swelling of ranks of violent extremists from Mitrovica and the surrounding area is a result of communities embracing and accentuating a religiously-motivated cause to set themselves further apart from the identity of the opposing ethnic group. Some blame the political deadlock that has led to general stagnation in Mitrovica as the enabling factor for extremist ideologies to find their way in this community.<sup>45</sup> Religious leaders do not see violent extremism as a direct consequence of ethnic tensions but claim that there is *“an attempt to incorporate religious elements in this conflict,”* and link some of the distrust between Albanians and Serbs to the destruction of religious monuments during the war, such as in the case of the destruction of an ancient mosque on the Iber River that now divides the city along ethnic lines.<sup>46</sup> One prominent religious leader, on the other hand, did not share the view that political tensions have fuelled religious extremism but thinks they have continued to feed political extremism and nationalistic rhetoric on both sides of the divide. He blamed *“the increased Islamophobia”* in Kosovo as giving rise to radicalisation among the Muslim community in the country.<sup>47</sup>

Serbs and Albanians on both sides echo such sentiments. They largely blame lack of perspective and Kosovo's institutions for the emergence of violent extremism. By and large, both Albanians and Serbs refrained from linking religiously-based violent extremism to the ethnically-based political extremism that has plagued the area in the last two decades.

At a recent meeting, Serb participants of the local security council in the northern town of Zvecan blamed unemployment and Kosovo government's inability to confront organised crime as well as Islamic and Christian fundamentalism that is setting communities further apart as a cause of the rise of violent extremism in the country.<sup>48</sup> *“In this environment of confusion, people without hope are looking for an exit, that's why they join foreign conflicts,”* quipped one Serb participant.

In a similar setting with Albanian and Serb community representatives from Mitrovica south and Mitrovica north, they blame *“weak state institutions and governance for hyperbolisation of the threat posed by violent extremism”* as well as *“the lack of citizen's trust in state institutions,”*<sup>49</sup> which has hit an all-time low in recent years. Yet, both representatives of ethnic communities also complain about their inability to reach out to those members of the ethnic communities that harbour extremist ideologies and condemned *“religious misinterpretation and the role of the media”* in exacerbating the threat of violent extremism. The BIK representative at this meeting, for example, tells the participants that he finds the Muslim followers *“distracted”* and concerned about the lack of justice and inclusion in Kosovo society, especially of veiled women who are discriminated in finding jobs or in pursuing an education.<sup>50</sup> Serb participants in Zvecan invoke the 2004 ethnic riots in Kosovo as acts of *“religious and political extremism”* that further deteriorated ethnic relationship between Albanians and Serbs in the area.

In an all-Albanian focus group in the Albanian part of Mitrovica, the participants identified ideological indoctrination, lack of economic opportunity, media *“misinformation”* about the war in Syria and Iraq or pure curiosity as main drivers of violent extremism in their city.

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<sup>44</sup> For more on this phenomenon, see The Economist (2014).

<sup>45</sup> Interview with a prominent community activist in Mitrovica, June 7, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with a BIK official in the Grand Mosque in Mitrovica, and interview with local Mitrovica imam, April 10, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with BIK official in Mitrovica, April 2018. He responded to questions in writing.

<sup>48</sup> Minutes of KCSS meeting in Zvecan with local security council participants.

<sup>49</sup> Minutes of KCSS meeting in Mitrovica with local Serb and Albanian community representatives.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

# 5 Entry Points: Mapping Efforts to Curb Violent Extremism

## 5.1 National and local P/CVE initiatives

Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism has been high on the agenda of the Kosovo Government. Since the emergence of this phenomenon, the Government of Kosovo has taken several steps to help mitigate the risks associated with the phenomenon of violent extremism. Firstly, the National Strategy on Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism (2015–2020) has been approved. This Strategy is one of the first concrete steps that the Government took in preventing violent extremism. The Strategy lays out the general context and it explains so-called ‘push and pull factors’ of violent extremism in Kosovo; further, it elaborates on future steps to be taken by all relevant institutions with the goal of preventing violent extremism. The Strategy has four main objectives: (I) Early Identification of causes, factors and targeted groups; (II) Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation; (III) Intervention and (IV) De-Radicalisation and Reintegration of Radicalised Persons.

Besides the Strategy, the Kosovo Government has approved the National Action Plan, which provides detailed description of the activities divided per the objectives of the Strategy, the institution(s) in charge of implementing the activity and clear indicators of success. While both the National Strategy and the National Action Plan aim to address the root causes of violent extremism in Kosovo and therefore propose various activities –mainly focusing on raising awareness against the phenomenon, with more than 40 percent of the activities falling under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education –, there are various concerns particularly on the process of drafting and implementing the Strategy.

The main critique of the National Strategy is linked to the lack of involvement of local authorities in drafting its activities. While the Strategy has adopted a wider scope to address violent extremism, anchored primarily on education as a key pillar to prevent violent extremism, interviews with various actors involved in the implementation of PVE projects in Kosovo reveal a lack of coordination between donors and the Action Plan of the National Strategy.

For instance, in the case of Hani i Elezit, one of the areas most affected by violent extremism, but also in Mitrovica, which has a high number of foreign fighters, there is very little knowledge by local authorities on the activities foreseen by the National Strategy or that any activity is taking place in their municipality. This finding points to lack of cooperation and consistence between donor organisations and local state structures. Most donors coordinate with central-level Country Support Mechanism that does not appear to trickle down to local authorities. The local leaders have not been included as stakeholders in these mechanisms. One major donor said its focus is predominately on youth, from 12 to 25 years old, but the goals of their programmes lacked focus and remained broadly defined. For example, the donor reported their objectives ranged from increasing “*support to young people by improving education, job training, employment opportunities*” to “*improving the targeting and prioritisation through active employment programmes and social services... provision of training, financing and assistance for individuals participating in appropriate mechanism in community level.*” The donor also added that there would be “*also different types of activities around sports, arts and culture,*” in “*getting youth organised around youth councils, community, different types of community initiatives where the youth are in dialogue with community leadership, either formal leadership or informal leadership.*”<sup>51</sup>

51 Interview with a GCERF official, from KCSS database.

The other stakeholders in the National Strategy are the various ministries in the Kosovo government, such as the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports and Ministry of Education. They outsource most of the implementation of their activities to civil society organisations through various calls. They also report to be bogged down by bureaucracy and have not provided evidence that quantifies the impact of their programmes in the implementation of the strategy.<sup>52</sup>

## 5.2 International donors and programming

Since 2014, when the number of foreign fighters from Kosovo joining conflicts in Syria and Iraq became alarming, the **US Embassy** appeared to be the most proactive supporting actor in Kosovo. The Embassy financially supported KCSS's efforts in drafting the report on Kosovo's foreign fighters, which was the first of its kind drafted in South East Europe.<sup>53</sup> It also helped Kosovo state institutions to draft the Law on Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts outside State Territory and the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism (2015–2020) by involving various experienced experts in this area (Qehaja et al. 2017). Further support continued in 2016, when the main focus of the US Embassy was to help Kosovo institutions to develop their capacities in implementation. This has been done through engaging prestigious institutes specialising in the area of CVE, such as Hedayah from the United Arab Emirates and the US Institute for Peace. It also provided funding for different NGOs and media outlets in Kosovo who are actively engaged in the area of CVE.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, part of this funding has been provided directly by the US State Department, while the Embassy served as a technical facilitator of those funds. The aim of those funds is to organise various de-radicalisation activities and campaigns at the central and local level in Kosovo to improve social cohesion and decrease the risk of violent extremism.<sup>55</sup> The US State Department has supported KCSS in implementing of the project “Countering violent extremism in Kosovo” which covered 11 municipalities of Kosovo and other projects related to media coverage of the phenomena.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been working on P/CVE by conducting research and publishing several reports on identifying push and pull factors of violent extremism, including a point pulse analysis and other documents (UNDP 2015, 2017a, 2017c, 2017c). Moreover, in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and the Italian Embassy in Prishtina, UNDP has piloted the referral mechanism in the municipality of Gjilan, which has identified eight cases (UNDP 2017a).

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is also quite active in C/PVE in Kosovo. So far it has established the “OSCE united in CVE Programmes” (Qehaja et al. 2017). Further, OSCE organises roundtables, debates and trainings for the purpose of implementing CVE activities. The OSCE has also established the LIVE Programme (“Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism”), which engages youth in Kosovo to prevent violent extremism.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has been working with experts, youth and leaders to prevent violent extremism. They have been providing small grants to people in need in the communities that they target. The main aim is to give youth the possibility to create their own projects.<sup>56</sup> The engagement with youth is about fostering critical thinking. Further, they provide trainings for parents in early identification of radicalisation. IOM has also been working in re-integration, with supporting a needs assessment on the family members of the FFs.

The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) has provided one of the largest funds in PVE in Kosovo. GCERF has been working primarily in PVE and has given grants to local CSOs

52 Interview with a Ministry of Culture, Youth, Sports official, KCSS database.

53 Kursani's “Report on Causes and Consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq,” published in April 2015.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 KCSS interview database.

in implementing activities with the objective of preventing violent extremism. The programme has been largely focused on providing employment opportunities and job trainings and improving education. The target group of the programme has been youth from 15 to 25 years old.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has provided grants for agriculture targeting youth in the municipality of Hani i Elezit. USAID is also working closely with the Ministry of Education in revising the curricula and including critical thinking as part of these curriculums in schools.

Finally, the Dutch Embassy – through its MATRA Programme<sup>57</sup> – is supporting civil society projects such as “Youth and Community in Action – Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Kosovo”.

### 5.3 Relevance of PVE programmes

This study has identified several factors that contribute to resilience and prevention of violent extremism. The factors include outreach and cooperation between different local stakeholders, such as the local municipal authorities and local religious leaders; political representation on a local and central level; the level and type of donor and government investments in the local level; national and identity narratives and their enforcement.

While the findings of the research have identified these resilience factors, it has also become clear that the majority of programming in PVE is focused largely on raising awareness against the phenomena and improving employment opportunities for youth at the local level. As previously discussed, the National Strategy has four objectives, each with a set of activities. However, to date the focus of different actors (international donors, civil society organisations and the Government) has remained on raising awareness and early identification of VE factors. Only recently has the Government taken concrete steps on the reintegration process, as the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with the support of ICITAP,<sup>58</sup> has created a division that will work with on de-radicalisation and reintegration of returned FTFs themselves (Telegrafi 2018).

There have been a number of activities with the purpose of raising awareness that have been implemented in the communities/municipalities that this study has focused on. For instance, in 2017 the Ministry of Education conducted several informative sessions with students, teachers and parents in 21 municipalities of Kosovo, including Deçan, Mitrovica and Hani i Elezit (Government of Kosovo 2017). The Ministry, in collaboration with the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, also drafted a PVE guidebook for teachers, whereas in collaboration with UNDP the Ministry has drafted a guideline for teachers for identifying and ways of approaching violent extremism in schools (Government of Kosovo 2017).

Similar activities have been conducted by IOM and KCSS throughout Kosovo.

Moreover, other activities were conducted aimed at raising awareness of the phenomenon, such as meetings with parents and municipal officials to discuss about PVE and increase literacy on early identification signs. These activities have been carried out by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Local Government Administration, IOM and KCSS.

In addition, the Action Plan dictates that the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare should give priority to vulnerable groups in the job market.<sup>59</sup> But as this study showed, even though unemployment might be a contributing factor in the decision to join terrorist organisations, no direct link has been established between the level of employment and the rise of violent extremism given its rate across Kosovo.

As seen from the table below, with some exceptions, the programmes that are currently being implemented with the aim of PVE do little to address the factors that contribute to resilience that this research has identified, as such programmes and projects focus largely on increasing awareness and employment prospects in Kosovo.

<sup>57</sup> See <https://www.government.nl/topics/european-grants/dutch-fund-for-regional-partnerships-nfrp/nfrp-matra-grants-for-strengthening-democracy-and-the-rule-of-law-in-europe>, retrieved 14 September 2018.

<sup>58</sup> See <https://www.justice.gov/criminal-icitap/about-icitap>, retrieved 14 September 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Factors contributing to resilience	Programmes on P/CVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Outreach and cooperation of local stakeholders (municipal officials and religious leaders)</li> <li>▶ Political representation (local and central level)</li> <li>▶ Donor investments</li> <li>▶ National narratives</li> <li>▶ Identity</li> <li>▶ Presence of violent extremists and recruiters (family and friendship ties)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Referral mechanism</li> <li>▶ Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism</li> <li>▶ Youth employment, job trainings</li> <li>▶ Raising awareness through education projects implemented by local CSOs (lectures and discussions with students, teachers, parents)</li> <li>▶ Promoting critical thinking</li> <li>▶ Interfaith dialogues</li> </ul>

Table 3. Factors contributing to resilience and identified programmes on P/CVE in Kosovo

## 5.4 Linkages between PVE activities and peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts

The final goal of this research was to examine potential links between PVE projects and the wide array of peacebuilding and reconciliation programmes, which have been conducted since the 1998-1999 war, both generally in Kosovo and in the specific communities under study.

While there have been numerous projects and programmes aimed at ‘reconciliation’ and ‘interfaith’ dialogue in the municipalities of Deçan and Mitrovica, through desk review and interviews with local leaders, particularly in the municipality of Deçan, no direct links could be established between peacebuilding and resilience. However, indirectly the mark that various internationally driven peacebuilding programmes seem to have imprinted in Kosovo is in mobilising municipal authorities to react quickly to various concerns and incidents that take place in the municipality. For instance, a graffiti with the IS slogan painted on the outer walls of the Serb Orthodox Monastery of Deçan drew immediate condemnation from central and local government officials and led to the quick arrest of the perpetrators.<sup>60</sup>

Reconciliation and interfaith dialogue have been at the forefront of many non-governmental and international organisations working in Kosovo. Such activities have begun as early as the end of the war and they have become part of the government’s agenda since 2006 when a large interfaith conference was held in western Kosovo city of Peja, which is home to an important presence of the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>61</sup>

At the local level, various activities and rounds of dialogue have been organised mainly by the OSCE, which continues to oversee and facilitate democratisation efforts in Kosovo and remains the key organisation on interfaith initiatives. For example, in 2013 OSCE organised 15 local interfaith forums.<sup>62</sup>

Some of the stakeholders and participants interviewed for the purposes of this study in Deçan revealed that they themselves have participated in such meetings, though they said they did not consider these meetings to have succeeded in fostering a constructive environment for reconciliation or better religious understanding.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> “Kosovo President and Prime Minister condemn vandalism at Deçan Monastery,” UNMIK Press Clippings, Oct. 13, 2014.

<sup>61</sup> See <http://www.mfa-ks.net/?page=2,220,2696>, retrieved 14 September 2018.

<sup>62</sup> See <https://www.osce.org/kosovo/105027>, retrieved 14 September 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Focus groups with religious and non-religious participants in Deçan.



As the discussion between participants in the focus groups revealed, these meetings remain highly unpopular as they are perceived as caving in to pressure from international donors and often are seen as hurting the credibility of the actors that take part in them. Broadly, because these meetings are not a grass-root driven initiative but are largely seen as an external intervention they did not attract the local attention and take off as a sustainable initiative. Some members seem to value more the daily interactions that the proximity to the Deçan Serbian Orthodox Monastery afforded to them, such as purchasing wine or brandy.

In Mitrovica, finally, international donors and local civil society organisations have organised several such activities, but with few results. Throughout our interviews, it was noted that these projects have not achieved the desired goal because they failed to reach vulnerable groups and only ‘recycled’ participants from one activity to the other.<sup>64</sup> As one prominent civil society leader claimed, *“these programmes failed to target the general community and explore the inter-community vulnerabilities and instead attracted people who were already susceptible to cooperate across the ethnic divide.”*<sup>65</sup>

## 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study contributes to bridge an important gap in the violent extremism literature in that it seeks to identify, study, analyse and compare differences between communities affected and unaffected by violent extremism in the recent years in Kosovo in an effort to understand such variance.

While no case is the same and no answer is finite, the answers to the research questions and the case studies provide the much-needed context to a community’s resilience and vulnerability to violent extremism. The findings provide insights to researchers and give policy-makers a chance to rethink the country-specific prevention strategies as well as policies on the reintegration of former foreign terrorist fighters as they return to their home countries. The study’s findings point to the role that an increased engagement and accountability of local actors play, especially in cases when preventive strategies give little space to nuances and impose a one-size-fits-all approach from the central level to prevention mechanisms at the local level.

Here is a brief summary of the main research findings:

- ≡ Violent extremism, as an externally-driven phenomenon in Kosovo, is directly associated with a handful of preachers and influencers who raised recruits for IS from their immediate local networks;
- ≡ Non-governmental organisations served as fronts for ideological indoctrination and recruitment. Their presence in a particular community is a determinant factor of radicalisation and violent extremism;
- ≡ The breakdown in the authority, the crisis of legitimacy and divisions in the senior ranks of Kosovo’s Islamic Association created room for various ideologies to infiltrate parts of Kosovo. The lack of a common front against radical influences divided the community and weakened the authority of traditional imams;
- ≡ Religious leaders that were able to preserve their cohesion managed to curb any external influence, shape the institutional agenda and preserve the community from exposure to violent extremism;
- ≡ Though democratically elected and part of a highly decentralised form of governance, the effectiveness of local authorities and attention to a particular community depends on their links to central institutions and the “worth” of a constituency in terms of political representation;

<sup>64</sup> Interview with civil society activist from Mitrovica, June 7, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

- ≡ While prevention is commonly defined as awareness raising, the study finds that on the ground it is often a code for heavy-handed measures that include rejection, expulsion and pressure to change behaviour;
- ≡ No direct links were found between political extremism and religious extremism. However, the indirect impact of the continuous political extremism has eroded the trust in institutions and affected their authority in combating violent extremism;
- ≡ No direct links were established between PVE and peacebuilding programmes. Counter to general perception, peace initiatives to build interfaith reconciliation were often met with scorn by the general public as they were seen as external interventions by the donor community and not genuine grass-root efforts;
- ≡ The indirect consequence of peacebuilding programmes was an awareness to mobilise institutional reaction against acts of vandalism or religious intolerance;
- ≡ The National Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and the donor agendas to counter violent extremism do not address specific concerns that affect communities, but adopt a one-size fits all approach to countering violent extremism;

To properly address the problem of VE, this study offers these recommendations:

1. Future programmes should be tailored to the community they target. They should be based on the needs, the power relations and dynamics (whether formal or informal), and the structural design of the particular community where the intervention takes place;
2. The aim of such programmes should be to foster a culture of communication, coordination and collaboration between the main stakeholders in the community and to create trust between the different community leaders.
3. The main aim of such programmes should be in social integration of youth, specifically the young who sit at the margins of society;
4. PVE and CVE programmes should address local challenges. They should respond to their needs as voiced by the local community and give a sense of ownership to the local community that often felt detached from the solutions provided from the top;
5. PVE programmes should be multidisciplinary and lead to the attainment of life skills at the individual level and at the same time strengthen the ability of the affected communities to mobilise in the face of similar threats in the future.

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