EDUCATION IN PREVENTING & COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM
CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

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WESTERN BALKANS SERIES

"...regional policymakers and practitioners should continue to consider and evaluate the role of education in addressing and preventing violent extremism..."

FAST FACTS

→ As violent extremism continues to evolve and adapt in the Western Balkan countries, efforts to address it must also adjust to new threats from both internal and external sources.

→ Education can serve as a mid- and long-term prevention strategy with impact across large segments of the population.

→ Governments should consider potential overlaps between P/CVE and non-P/CVE projects that may produce shared outcomes, but labeling educational initiatives that promote peace, diversity, and tolerance as P/CVE may reduce their acceptance and impact.

Context

Violent extremism in the Western Balkans takes many forms, from Western Balkans foreign fighters recruited to participate in conflicts abroad, including in the Middle East and Ukraine;[1] to ethno-nationalist organizations that spread inter-ethnic hatred, some emanating from and glorifying legacies of conflict spanning back to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and regional conflicts in the 1990s;[2] to chauvinism

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1 Adrian Shtuni, *Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2016), https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf; Beslin and Ignjatijevic, *Balkan Foreign Fighters: From Syria to Ukraine* (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2017), https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2020%20Balkan%20foreign%20fighters.pdf.

2 *CSOs Engaging in the Prevention and Countering of Ethno-nationalism and Volent Right-wing Extremism [Conclusion Paper: RAN in the Western Balkans Regional Small-scale Meeting 24-25 March 2022, Belgrade Serbia]* (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2022), https://home-affairs.

and anti-EU and anti-NATO ideas that emerge to become even more serious and with greater consequences for the region and socio-political cohesion and dynamics.[3] As violent extremism continues to evolve and adapt in the Western Balkan countries, efforts to address it must also adjust to new threats from both internal and external sources.[4]

Recent research on violent extremism in the Western Balkans, and North Macedonia specifically, suggests that education may be an important tool in addressing violent extremism in the region. Some have suggested education initiatives may assist in addressing online and offline disinformation and extremist narratives.[5] Furthermore, addressing ongoing issues within ethnically divided educational systems may play an important role in working to address some of the ethnic-based divisions that can contribute to "othering" dynamics.[6] Others have further suggested that education and other support services can play a role in aiding the transition of those imprisoned on charges related to violent extremism and returning families back into society.[7]

As countries throughout the Western Balkans continue to update and revise their national action plans and policies to address violent extremism, greater consideration of the role of education and how it might be integrated into these policies is needed.

This publication, based on findings from a large-scale literature review mapping the state of re-

ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/ran-western-balkans-csos-engaging-prevention-and-countering-ethno-nationalism-and-violent-right-wing_en.

3   Luke Kelly, Overview of Research on Far-right Extremism in the Western Balkans, K4D Helpdesk Report (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2019), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d309f7aed915d2fe9ea6aec/620_Western_Balkans_far_Right.pdf; Marina Lažetić, Migration, Extremism, & Dangerous Blame Games: Developments & Dynamics in Serbia (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2021), https://www.resolvenet.org/research/migration-extremism-dangerous-blame-games-developments-dynamics-serbia.

4   In regard to the national approach on violent extremism in North Macedonia specifically, please see: Vlado Kambovski, Lidija Georgieva and Naum Trajanovski, CONNEKT, Country Reports National Approaches to Extremism: North Macedonia (CONNEKT, 2022), https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/North-Macedonia_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf. Another interesting study is: Natalija Shikova and Afrodita Musliu, Baseline Shadow Report on Existing Strategies and Relevant Legal Framework for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their Families Covering the Period 2018 – 2021 (NEXUS Civil Concept, 2022), https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IdGM1-drpEwizYwpDvcJIoS_t_PTFrlu/view. Furthermore, recent studies on ethnic and political extremism in North Macedonia are crucial for understanding the context and radicalization ideologies in this country. Available studies in this topic include: Katerina Mojanchevska, Elena Jovanchikj and Afrodita Musliu, Ethnic and Political Extremism in North Macedonia: Mapping the Main Action Frameworks in the Extremist Scenes (NEXUS Civil Concept, 2020), https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ENI4Mbf9aHsp5CHWX2uHDbIz3cVPlqku/view.

5   Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism in North Macedonia: Politics, Ethnicities and Religion (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022).

6   For further information, see: P/CVE Work with Religious Communities and Faith-based Organisations [Conclusion Paper: RAN in the Western Balkans - Regional Small-scale Expert Workshop 21-22 October 2021, Skopje, North Macedonia] (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2021), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-02/ran_in_the_western_balkans_skopje_21-22102021_en.pdf; CSOs Engaging in the Prevention and Countering of Ethno-nationalism and Volent Right-wing Extremism (RAN).

7   Working with Violent Extremist or Terrorist Offenders Along the Prison-exit Continuum [Conclusion Paper: RAN in the Western Balkans – Regional Small-scale Expert Workshop Working with Violent Extremist or Terrorist Offenders Along the Prison-exit Continuum] (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2022), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_wb_prison-exit_continuum_30032022_en.pdf; Eric Rosand, Heidi Ellis, and Stevan Weine, "Repatriating ISIS Family Members: A North Macedonia Model?" Just Security, September 14, 2020, https://www.justsecurity.org/72420/repatriating-isis-family-members-a-north-macedonian-model/.

search on education in P/CVE in the Western Balkans and beyond,[8] offers a series of consider-ations for policymakers and practitioners looking to incorporate education in future efforts to address drivers, both real and potential, of violent extremism in Western Balkan states.

While findings from this paper are contextualized within the broader experiences of the Western Balkans, specific examples based on experiences in individual countries, North Macedonia most notably, are detailed to provide an in-depth example of considerations for policymakers interested in further incorporating education into P/CVE plans moving forward.

Violent Extremism the Western Balkans: Trends & Topics

The Western Balkans is essentially a geopolitical term describing the countries of Southeast Europe that are not yet members of the Union, encompassing Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The region has for long been perceived as politically volatile and unstable.[9] This instability, it could be said, contributes a fertile ground for participation in violent extremist movements. The region's long history of armed conflicts continue to bring up unresolved issues of the past among newly formed states with weak economies, long term corruption, lack of rule of law, and an increasingly decaying educational system and brain-drain.[10] In this context, and over the last decade, manifestations of violent extremism have varied, although focus has largely centered around issues associated with foreign fighters, their return to the region, and, more recently, far right extremist movements and narratives.

Localized reflections of the global foreign fighter phenomenon have been a central focus and pre-occupation of those addressing violent extremism in the region.[11] In this vein, researchers study-

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8   Findings and information presented in this paper was derived from desk research and literature review. The research and review focused on topics related to violent extremism in the Western Balkans, policy responses to violent extremism in the Western Balkans and beyond, and the topic of using education as a tool for P/CVE. The author consulted literature written in English language as well as in local languages: Albanian, Macedonian and Bosnian. The study focuses on North Macedonia; however, where relevant, includes experiences from other Western Balkans countries. The reviewed literature consists of reports, research briefs, guidelines, strategies, research articles and other relevant documents related to the topic. For each research question there is a set of specific resources that are consulted. A detailed list of the literature is included in the Bibliography section.

9   Vlado Azinović, Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum- Regional Report: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans, (London: British Council, 2018).

10   Drivers such as a history of armed conflicts, weak state institutions, presence of foreign charity organizations not regulated by the state, radicalized preaching in formal or informal religious institutions, etc. are commonly identified in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Please consult: Valery Perry, Initiatives to Prevent/Counter Violent Extremism in South East Europe- A Survey of Regional Issues, Initiatives and Opportunities (Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council, 2016); Kaltrina Selimi and Filip Stojkovski, Assessment of Macedonia's Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism, View from Civil Society (Skopje: Analytica Think Tank, 2016).

11   According to a study conducted by Adrian Shtuni in 2019 "Over 1,000 adult male foreign fighters, women, and minors from the Western Balkans spent time in Syria and Iraq and around 500 from the region are still there, including children born in theater." See: Adrian Shtuni, "Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications,"

ing foreign fighters have noted that the phenomenon was particularly notable in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), North Macedonia, and Kosovo adding that those states are perceived as most affected by administrative dysfunctionality, frozen conflict, and unresolved identity and governance issues.[12] Other researchers have described it as the "most visible manifestation of a wider religious militancy phenomenon in the region."[13]

As foreign fighters from the Western Balkans have begun to return from conflict zones, attention has shifted to addressing and reintegrating returning foreign fighters and their families in the region. As Shtuni indicates, in order to succeed, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts need to be coupled with programs to address the conditions and dynamics that enable radicalization, to reform the criminal justice sector, and to build broader social and political resilience to the influence of violent extremism.[14]

Attention to far right and the role of online spaces from both within and outside of the Western Balkans region has increased in recent years. Recent studies have examined far right attitudes towards emerging geopolitical, economic, and social issues, including reactions to the "migrant crisis" in the region and their connections to Euroskepticism in Serbia[15] and historical revisionism and genocide denial in Bosnia Herzegovina.[16] Meanwhile, a recent study in North Macedonia focused on narratives in the online space, pointed to continued areas of concern in relation to recent developments with the Prespa Agreement (2018),[17] while another focused on concerns in relation to ethnic and political extremism.[18]

While the extent of these challenges varies from country to country, their impact and potential future impact on the region remains. As such, adopting appropriate P/CVE policies to address the factors that may contribute to violent extremism in the region is of high importance. In many regards, and as suggested by others as noted above, education may serve as an important tool in addressing issues associated with these various challenges.

CTC Sentinel 12, no. 7 (2019), 18,, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/CTC-SENTINEL-072019.pdf. According to another study conducted by the same author in 2020: "As of the end of 2019, some 485 nationals of Western Balkan countries had returned home." See Adrian Shtuni, "Returning Western Balkans Foreign Fighters: A Long-Term Challenge," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, January 9, 2020, https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/returning-western-balkans-foreign-fighters-long-term-challenge-24762.

12   Azinović, Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum.

13   Shtuni, "Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis."

14   Shtuni, "Returning Western Balkans Foreign Fighters."

15   Lažetić, Migration, Extremism, & Dangerous Blame Games.

16   Sead Turčalo and Hikmet Karčić, The Far Right in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Historical Revisionism and Genocide Denial (Balkan Insight, 2021), https://balkaninsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Far-Right-in-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina_preview_without-IRI-logo.pdf; Lažetić, Migration, Extremism, & Dangerous Blame Games.

17   Dukić, Online Extremism in North Macedonia.

18   Mojanchevska, Jovanchikj and Musliu, Ethnic and Political Extremism in North Macedonia.

P/CVE in the Western Balkans:
A role for education?

While studies published by international organizations, civil society organizations and scholars[19] addressing the use of education in P/CVE efforts[20] have identified few direct and many indirect links between education and violent extremism,[21] it is believed that educational initiatives can create environments where extremist ideologies are less likely to thrive.[22] Indeed, many suggest that inclusive educational systems may help advance P/CVE outcomes through promoting tolerance, mutual understanding, and peace as fundamental values,[23] often identified as key resilience building factors towards extremist ideologies.[24]

Education can serve as a mid- and long-term prevention strategy with impact across large segments of the population.[25] As a component of many Western Balkans P/CVE national action plans already,[26] regional policymakers and practitioners should continue to consider and evaluate the

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19   For the purpose of understanding the role of education in PVE the following initial sources were consulted among others: United Nations Development Programme, Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity - A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism (New York: UNDP, 2016); Lynn Davies and Zubeda Limbada, Education and Radicalisation Prevention: Different Ways Governments Can Support Schools and Teachers in Preventing/countering Violent Extremism, Ex Post Paper (Brussels: Radicalisation Awareness Network - European Commission, 2019); Global Analitika, "The Role of Education in Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalism," Global Analitika, May 4, 2018, http://en.globalanalitika.com/the-role-of-education-in-preventing-violent-extremism-and-radicalism/; Stephan Kyburz, Andreas Beerli, and Adina Rom, "Can Education Prevent Violent Extremism?" Center for Global Development, July 30, 2019, https://www.cgdev.org/blog/can-education-prevent-violent-extremism; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education - A Guide for Policy-makers, (Paris: UNESCO, 2017).

20   Author note: Studies that directly relate to using education as a PVE tool are mostly conducted in USA and Western Europe countries. The literature on CVE and PVE that is available in the Western Balkans is mostly general and not specifically oriented towards analyzing the education systems and their role in PVE.

21   Kyburz, Beerli, and Rom, "Can Education Prevent Violent Extremism?"

22   Ibid.

23   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education.

24   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education, 69.

25   Ibid.

26   P/CVE strategies in the Western Balkans also incorporate this approach, noting that education that promotes human rights, diversity and interculturalism is needed in developing effective P/CVE programs. A common point in the P/CVE strategies developed in the Western Balkans is a direct or in-direct focus on education as a P/CVE tool. The C/PVE Strategy in Albania directly mentions the use of education as a P/CVE tool, whereas the other strategies include educational institutions as important P/CVE stakeholders (such as Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro). However, given the lack of availability of public documents on many of these strategies, the author was unable to make further determinations as to how education was incorporated in each of these strategies. For more on Albania, see: "Promotion of education to prevent violent extremism," a project of CC-CVE Albania which aims to build capacities of teachers-coordinators to better identify and react to signs of radicalization in schools (information available at: https://cve.gov.al/promovimi-i-edukimit-per-te-parandaluar-ekstremizmin-e-dhunshem-3/) ; another project of CC-CVE Albania, titled "Prevention of violent extremism and reintegration of radicalized children in school," was implemented for eight months and ensured the creation of a module and aimed to increase the capacities of teachers and administrative staff at schools to identify, manage and reintegrate radicalized children in schools. Teachers from Tirana, Pogradec, Elbasan, Peshkopi and Korce were trained in this program which was imple-

role of education in addressing and preventing violent extremism, particularly in this time period when many P/CVE strategies in the region have expired and efforts to construct new strategies are underway. International organizations and bodies have suggested ways in which governments can support schools and teachers in PVE endeavors,[27] but there are additional considerations that policymakers should take into account in developing education programs capable of promoting inclusiveness and diversity for populations within the Western Balkans as a mechanism to address violent extremism. A few of these considerations are outlined in the following section.

Considerations for Policy & Practice

Adopt clearer guidance on how education fits into larger P/CVE goals and broader social initiatives

While education is included to some degree in many of the P/CVE strategies in the Western Balkans, what this looks like in practice is somewhat unclear.[28] In future iterations of the documents, clearly delineating the strategy behind its inclusion and the specific roles and responsibilities and coordinated efforts to be taken to implement P/CVE educational initiatives may help address this issue. Policymakers may also consider specific projects to be implemented by state institutions and non-state institutions and through formal and informal educational systems. Efforts have been made to incorporate CSOs and informal teaching to raise awareness about P/CVE at schools, however, addressing this issue on a national level and by state institutions should be a priority in new P/CVE Action Plans. Albania's efforts may serve as an instructive example in crafting this

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mented with the support of UNICEF Albania and Save the Children (more information available at: https://cve.gov.al/pro-movimi-i-edukimit-per-te-parandaluar-ekstremizmin-e-dhunshem-2/ ; Intersectoral Counter Terrorism Strategy 2021-2025 and an Action Plan for this Strategy for the period 2021-2023 (available at: https://cve.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/vendim-2020-12-16-1137.pdf). For more on Bosnia, see: Information from the Regional Cooperation Council (available at https://www.rcc.int/swp/news/316/bi-analysis-delays-continue-to-dog-bosnian-counter-terrorism-policy); information from CONNEKT Reports on Bosnia, see: Damir Kapidžić, Muamer Hirkić, Anida Dudić, Sead Turčalo, Sanela Bašić, and Sarina Bakić, Drivers of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Light of the State Dynamics in MENA and the Balkans: Bosnia and Herzegovina. Country Paper on Macro-level Drivers (CONNEKT, 2021), https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Bosnia_Herzegovina_CONNEKT_Macro_Drivers.pdf. For more on Kosovo, see CONNEKT Country reports on Kosovo: Lulzim Peci, Agon Demjaha, National Approaches to Extremism: Kosovo. National Approaches to Extremism (CONNEKT, 2020), https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Kosovo_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf; official information of the Ministry for Interior Affairs in Kosovo, is also available at: https://mpb.rks-gov.net/f/57/1663/U-mbajt-takimi-i-grupit-punues-per-hartimin-e-%E2%80%9CStrategjise-shteterore-kunder-terrorizmit-dhe-ekstremizmit-te-dhunshem%E2%80%9D. Further information is also available from CONNEKT reports on Kosovo. See: Lulzim Peci and Agon Demjaha, Drivers of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the Light of State Dynamics in MENA and the Balkans: Kosovo. Country Paper on Macro-level Drivers (CONNEKT, 2021), https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Kosovo_CONNEKT_Macro_Drivers.pdf.

27   Davies and Limbada, Education and Radicalisation Prevention; United Nations Development Programme, Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education.

28   Author note: Without specifying in the action plan concrete projects or steps that would be implemented at a national level by state institutions, at least in terms of publicly available information.

guidance, given it has implemented projects to train schoolteachers and staff about P/CVE with contributions from CSOs and international organizations.[29] These projects could serve as an important means by which other countries might structure their own P/CVE educational policies and strategy.

However, policymakers should take stock of non-P/CVE initiatives incorporating shared goals and more closely coordinate their activities. An interesting example to consider here is the relationship between North Macedonia's P/CVE initiatives and the adoption of the National Strategy for One Society and Interculturalism (NSOSI 2020-2022), which also includes educational priorities.[30] The NSOSI is envisioned to initiate activities and strengthen the processes of communication and cooperation between communities, with the aim of developing a society where every person shall feel as a member of "one society," in recognition of all diversities, safeguarding and ensuring equality, social justice, just and equitable treatment, equal opportunities, involvement and participation of citizens in decision-making and attaining social cohesion.[31] Although the Strategy itself does not refer to C/PVE per se, in terms of its focus on social cohesion, developing soft measures for building trust among citizens, promoting democratic values, and education, the effort may prove complementary to the goals of the National CVE Strategy (NSCVE). Avenues to connect and avoid overlap or potential issues in over conflating or conflicts within the two strategies, and others like them in the region, should be considered, as should the implementation of coordination mechanisms between their implementors.

Consider incorporating curriculum on hate speech & enhancing critical thinking & media literacy

An important gap in approaching P/CVE is the further study of the relation between hate speech, hate crimes, and violent extremism. When hate crimes are not properly addressed and prosecuted in a country, they can impact the creation of marginalized communities,[32] which can provide a fertile ground for the development of radicalized ideologies.[33] More research on this nexus is

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29 "Promotion of education to prevent violent extremism" is a project of the CC-CVE Albania which aims to build capacities of teachers-coordinators to better identify and react to signs of radicalization in schools (information available at: https://cve.gov.al/promovimi-i-edukimit-per-te-parandaluar-ekstremizmin-e-dhunshem-3/). Another project of CC-CVE Albania was implemented for eight months, ensured the creation of a module titled "Prevention of violent extremism and reintegration of radicalized children in school," and aimed to increase the capacities of teachers and administrative staff at schools to identify, manage and reintegrate radicalized children in schools. 58 teachers from Tirana, Pogradec, Elbasan, Peshkopi and Korce were trained in this program which was implemented with the support of UNICEF Albania and Save the Children (information available at: https://cve.gov.al/promovimi-i-edukimit-per-te-parandaluar-ekstremizmin-e-dhunshem-2/).

30 Government of Republic of North Macedonia, "Strategy for Development of the 'One Society For All' Concept and Interculturalism (NSOSI)," Government of Republic of North Macedonia, 2019.

31 Ibid.

32 Besa Arifi, "Hate Crimes as a Driver to Violent Extremism – Are Victims of Hate Crimes at Risk of Becoming Involved in Violent Extremism?" Conference Proceedings, Conference on Hate Crimes in South-East Europe, Sarajevo, 8 November 2016 (Sarajevo: Faculty of Criminal Justice, Criminology and Security, 2017), 205-26.

33 Marginalization of communities and discrimination is often seen as a driver towards violent extremism. Please consult: United States Agency for International Development, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2009);

needed, however other studies seem to suggest that hate speech, othering and disinformation online is a continued concern.

For example, recent studies have specifically noted the potential use for education in addressing issues associated with othering and disinformation online.[34] A holistic approach towards P/CVE as well as the aim to build education systems that promote peace and tolerance cannot ignore the need to address the issue of hate-speech and crime. Specific research studies that link the approach to hate crimes, hate speech and the P/CVE mechanism are relatively rare or still lacking in local, regional, and global terms.[35] However, studies on online engagement have found that online extremism and hateful rhetoric represents an ongoing issue in the region.[36] Education initiatives focused on raising awareness about hate speech and hate crimes and avenues by which to address them may be beneficial to broader P/CVE efforts and contribute towards building more resilient communities.

In this same vein, policymakers should consider incorporating educational efforts aimed at developing critical thinking and media literacy skills. While the media environment in the Western Balkans may vary, recent studies have pointed to the importance of using media literacy as a means to address "othering" rhetoric that may facilitate violent extremism.[37] In North Macedonia, for example, while media is subject to legislative regulations,[38] as of 2021, studies have pointed out that disinformation is not specifically regulated, which may allow organizations to misuse specific online and media portals to spread disinformation and propaganda which may deliberately mislead the public certain issues.[39] Naturally, it may not be advisable for governments to specifically censor online platforms and communications, however this underscores how important devel-

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Florian Qehaja and Skender Perteshi, The Unexplored Nexus: Issues of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Macedonia (Prishtina: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, 2018).

34 Dukić, Online Extremism in North Macedonia.

35 Arifi, "Hate Crimes as a Driver to Violent Extremism."

36 A recent study on North Macedonia found that 2% of messages in online spaces "were found to be polarizing, hateful and extremist in nature" and that "hate speech between the two biggest ethnic groups is flourishing on social media despite the lack of violence in the country since the conflict in 2001." For more on the study's findings, see: Dukić, Online Extremism in North Macedonia, 2. For more on online extremism in the region, see: Milo Comerford and Simeon Dukic, Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2020), https://doi.org/ 10.37805/ pn2020.7.wb.

37 Shtuni, Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo; Beslin and Ignjatijevic, Balkan Foreign Fighters; Lažetić, Migration, Extremism, & Dangerous Blame Games; Kelly, Overview of Research on Far-right Extremism in the Western Balkans; United Nations Development Programme, Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity; Davies and Limbada, Education and Radicalisation Prevention; Global Analitika, "The Role of Education in Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalism"; Kyburz, Beerli, and Rom, "Can Education Prevent Violent Extremism?"; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education.

38 Government of Republic of North Macedonia, "Strategy for Development of the 'One Society For All' Concept and Interculturalism (NSOSI)," 38.

39 Vesna Nikodinoska, National Regulatory and Self-regulatory Framework Against Hate Speech and Disinformation Factsheet (Ljubljana: SEENPM, Peace Institute, Macedonian Institute for Media, 2021), https://seenpm.org/wp-content/ uploads/2021/12/Resilience-Factsheet-North-Macedonia.pdf, 5.

oping educational programs that teach media literacy to help identify and critically think about potentially radicalizing content online is so important.

Look for avenues to better coordinate a whole of society approach

Crucial to crafting effective P/CVE policies is the development of holistic approaches to addressing the many factors that may give rise to and influence violent extremist trends and trajectories. A holistic approach recognizes that violent extremism is not merely a security issue; rather, it emphasizes the need to analyze and incorporate different aspects and various institutions, including political and governmental, central and local, non-governmental and religious, as well as educational institutions.[40] Many regional P/CVE strategic documents and plans recognize the need for a holistic approach towards finding mechanisms to prevent violent extremism (PVE).[41]

A holistic approach towards C/PVE means that all segments of society that can contribute in this field, work together in developing better strategies and policies. Although strategical documents emphasize the holistic approach, it is unclear how this approach is coordinated between institutions. Better coordination is essential given that that C/PVE educational efforts may also involve communities, CSOs, religious actors, teachers, youth, and different state institutions.

Civil society, in particular, has advanced new approaches and developed important P/CVE tools for educators and teachers. For example, the CSO Nexus Civil Concept in North Macedonia created "Educate to Prevent - Strengthening Front-line School Workers and Parents to Build Youth Resilience." Supported by Hedayah and the EU, the program developed P/CVE-related for educational stakeholders, provided insight to factors that contribute to youth radicalization, and shared important resources in assisting teachers in identifying early signs of radicalization.[42]

In addition, the CSO Analytic Think Tank carried out the Mothers Schools Project, providing educational training to mothers as important stakeholders in identifying early signs of radicalization in family environments.[43]

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40   Government of Republic of North Macedonia - National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter Terrorism, National Counterterrorism Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia 2018-2020 (Skopje: Government of Republic of North Macedonia, 2018); National Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism 2018-2022 (Skopje: Government of Republic of North Macedonia, 2018).

41   Government of Republic of Albania, "National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism and Action Plan." Këshilli i Ministrave i Republikës së Shqipërisë - Strategjia Kombëtare për Luftën kundër Ekstremizmit të Dhunshëm dhe Plani i Veprimit (Tirana: Fletorja Zyrtare, 2015/203, November 11, 2015); Government of Republic of Kosovo, Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization leading to Terrorism 2015-2020 (Prishtina: Government of Republic of Kosovo, 2015); Government of Republic of North Macedonia- National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter Terrorism, National Counterterrorism Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia 2018-2020 (Skopje: Government of Republic of North Macedonia, 2018); National Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism 2018-2022 (Skopje: Government of Republic of North Macedonia, 2018).

42   Musliu and Simonovski (2019).

43   Analytica Think Tank, "Mothers Schools Project," Analytica Think Tank, accessed April 20, 2020, https://analyticamk.org/projects/mothers-schools-project.

However, rather than rely on civil society alone, which may have relatively limited access to teacher and student populations as compared to ministries of education, policymakers should consider incorporating mechanisms into future P/CVE guidelines that enable civil society to better coordinate with formal educational institutions in raising awareness and resilience to violent extremism. In addition, CSOs may not have the necessary funding or resources to carry out programs alone, speaking to the need to consider how CSOs can be integrated into national CVE strategies and funding.

Explore education for disengagement & reintegration

As the region continues to reintegrate former terrorist fighters and their families, how states choose to reintroduce these individuals into society becomes a crucial issue. Various activities and projects in WB countries deal with de-radicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration of FTF returnees. Some of these projects have tackled rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children[44] whereas others involve planned activities to facilitate rehabilitation in prisons.[45] Limited regional research addresses how education may assist in re-integration efforts.[46] However, recent thinking suggests that addressing issues such as stigma in schools may be an important aspect of this process.[47] Data show that FTF-s coming from the Western Balkans are usually younger than those coming from other parts of the world,[48] which may further point to the importance of incorporating educational initiatives into reintegration processes. Future iterations of national P/CVE plans in the Western Balkans should consider how education might be used not only as a means to prevent violent extremism, but also as a means to facilitate the successful reintegration of returning foreign fighters and their family members, and what that might entail in terms of addressing ongoing issues within current education systems and schools in the region.

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44   Skender Perteshi   and   Ramadan Ilazi, Unpacking Kosovo's Response to Returnees from the War Zones in Syria and Iraq (Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, 2020), https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/zberthimi-i-pergjigjes-se-kosoves-ndaj-te-kthyerve-nga-zonat-e-lufte-ne-siri-dhe-irak/.

45   In North Macedonia, the National Committee for CT and CVE has initiated the adoption of the National Plan for rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration as well as the Standard Operative Procedures for reintegration, resocialization and rehabilitation of FTF returnees and their families. For more, see: Disengagement, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (Nexus Civil Concept, 2022), https://drive-ontherightpath.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/drive-report-nort-macedonia-23-05-22.pdf; Rosand, Ellis, and Weine, Repatriating ISIS Family Members.

46   Here it should be mentioned again the project titled "Prevention of violent extremism and reintegration of radicalized children in school" which as mentioned above was implemented by the CC-CVE in Albania and aimed to increase the capacities of teachers and administrative staff at schools to identify, manage and reintegrate radicalized children in schools. Projects that focus specifically on education and reintegration of children, women or men who have returned from combat zones should be explored with the new strategies and action plans in the region.

47   See, for example: Rosand, Ellis, and Weine, "Repatriating ISIS Family Members."

48   See, for example: Adrian Shtuni, "Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," CTC Sentinel 8, no. 4 (2015), https://ctc.westpoint.edu/ethnic-albanian-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria/.

Further research, monitoring, & evaluation exploring the role of education in P/CVE initiatives

There are very few contributions to exploring the link between education and P/CVE in Western Balkans. This remains a vast area where different topics of research can develop which include: How do curricula that promote inclusiveness and diversity impact the resilience of communities in multi-ethnic regions? Can the teaching of community languages in schools contribute to creating more resilient youth communities? Can raising awareness about P/CVE in secondary and high schools contribute to creating resilient communities? Each country in this region has its specific problems related to education which interact interestingly with the development of P/CVE strategies. A coordinated regional study can contribute to identifying the role of education as a P/CVE tool as well as to enhancing the capacities of educational institutions in this regard. However, this requires that governments consider investing heavily in monitoring and evaluation of existing and new governmental and CSO educational initiatives to better understand how they are (or are not) addressing the needs of P/CVE strategies and policy.

Consider efforts to promote peace, diversity & tolerance in education systems, but avoid overly-securitizing education systems

Western Balkan countries share a history of ethnic divisions and tensions that have often resulted in armed conflicts and divided societies. Some of these divides persist in institutionalized educational structures today based around ethnic and language divisions.[49] Given that such tensions may play a role in inspiring violent extremism, there may exist an opportunity for regional P/CVE policies and broader social policies to incorporate educational initiatives that address issues such as ethnic segregation, tolerance, and diversity within existing educational structures, particularly those that entrench ethnic divides.[50] While not aimed at P/CVE specifically, efforts like that of the German CSO Kurve Wustrow in partnership with local CSOs and universities[51] incorporating peace education in official curricula and aimed at promoting peace, diversity, and tolerance within education systems,[52] may be instructive in considering P/CVE programs and activities in educational settings.

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49   For more insight on ethnic divisions in school systems, see: P/CVE Work with Religious Communities and Faith-based Organisations (RAN); CSOs Engaging in the Prevention and Countering of Ethno-nationalism and Volent Right-wing Extremism (RAN).

50   Ibid.

51   This partnership with the local CSO "CBC Loja", is aimed at developing intercultural values among students, and involves cooperation with the five largest universities in the country The South East European University, the State University of Tetova, the "St. Cyril and Methodius University" in Skopje, "St. Climent Ohridski University" in Bitola and "Goce Delcev University" in Stip. For additional information, see: https://cbcloja.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021-Education-towards-Positive-Peace.pdf.

52   Ibid.

However, policymakers and practitioners should carefully consider the role education may play in helping to alleviate these issues and when it is appropriate to tie educational initiatives focused on building social cohesion and addressing ethnic divisions to P/CVE policy given the risk it poses to overly securitizing educational spaces. Education should not be used to detect potential violent extremists, instead, it should be considered as a means to equip learners with the skills to challenge ideologies, myths, conspiracy theories and exclusionary worldviews often at the base of violent extremism.[53] Indeed, educational initiatives addressing this phenomenon may not be the realm of P/CVE per se, but could have impacts on violent extremism writ large given the ethnic extremism in these countries which, as described by different sources, is on the rise.[54] Governments should consider potential overlaps between P/CVE and non-P/CVE projects that may produce shared outcomes or provide instructive lessons of P/CVE educational initiatives, but also understand that labeling initiatives that seek to promote peace, diversity, and tolerance through education as P/CVE writ large may reduce their acceptance and impact.

Conclusion

P/CVE is an extremely sensitive and highly important topic that cannot be effectively developed only by *ad hoc* initiatives. While different country-level P/CVE policies have incorporated education as a tool to address this issue to varying extents, policymakers should consider additional avenues for utilizing education as a means to address violent extremism moving forward. Increasing coordination between educational initiatives with similar goals and incorporating the findings and tools developed through CSO-implemented educational P/CVE initiatives focused on promoting multiculturalism and tolerance, understanding hate speech and discrimination, and improving media literacy represent important first steps in drafting collaborative, whole-of-society P/CVE strategies moving forward.

State institutions working in the field of P/CVE, may also consider further coordinating educational initiatives that may contribute to P/CVE outcomes. This coordination can combine the creation of educational tools aiming to develop cohesion and diversity, with education that raises awareness for hate crimes, as well as specific education concerning P/CVE topics. Such coordination may help enable students and citizens to build resilience towards violent extremist ideologies that may ultimately be adopted in official curriculums, making it easier to further develop them in the future. Doing so, however, requires not only continuous support in training educators and institutions involved in such initiatives, but also investing in monitoring and evaluation to continue to improve P/CVE educational practice.

Of course, not all of these considerations may be best placed under a P/CVE umbrella. Policymakers should coordinate with other agencies to determine the benefits and drawbacks of P/CVE initiatives focused on education and look for avenues to coordinate efforts that may be relevant, but not P/CVE specific, that can contribute to shared goals of preventing and addressing violent extremism.

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53   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Preventing violent extremism through education, 69.

54   Lažetić, Migration, Extremism, & Dangerous Blame Games; Turčalo and Karčić, The Far Right in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Dukić, Online Extremism in North Macedonia.

Importantly, educational institutions should not be conceived of as places of early P/CVE intervention measures but as places where education can help build understanding of peace, tolerance, and diversity among the population.

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