WESTERN BALKANS

EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM

ALBANIA REPORT

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMC	Albanian Muslim Community
AMI	Albanian media Institute
ANTTARC	Albanian National Training and Technical Assistance Resource Center
ASP	Albanian State Police
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
C/PVE	Countering / Preventing violent extremism
CIJA	Commission for International Justice and Accountability
CMD	Council of Ministers Decision
CSO	Civil society organization
ERF	Extremism Research Forum
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus group discussion
IDM	Institute for Democracy and Mediation
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OSAC	Overseas Security Advisory Council
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSFA	Open Society Foundation for Albania
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
U.S.	United States (of America)
VE	Violent extremism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violent extremism remains a relevant threat in Albania, albeit to a lower degree than two years ago which is mostly owed to higher degree of alertness among state actors, religious and other C/PVE stakeholders proactively engaged in synchronized efforts to deliver on the National CVE Strategy's objectives. While central government institutions beyond the security spectrum of agencies have developed an adequate understanding of the complexity of preventing violent extremism, the challenge remains to engage local institutions and other stakeholders at community level. Addressing the full range of pull and push factors will therefore require constant attention and adequate human and other resources, including more empowered religious and civic players. Additionally, Albania has yet to start design and implementation of concrete measures for the reintegration of returnees, as well as the disengagement from violent extremist ideology and reintegration of other "manipulated" religious believers, including the disengagement and reintegration of former/prisoners and their followers. Efforts to prevent radicalisation in prisons are at early stage and concrete work in this regard needs to step up more vigorously.

Given the prevalence of secular tradition and the deeply rooted religious tolerance in the society, Albania shows a higher potential of resilience to violent extremism. Extremist religious ideologies are isolated but they may not remain so if a coordinated response at community level fails to counter extremist narratives. The possibility of peer to peer offline radicalization seems to be overlooked and this report's respondents urge greater attention and concrete actions. The capacities and work of local clerics are key in this context in order to dismantle the influence and outreach of religious extremists – even more so, given the fact that mapping the profiles of individuals who engage as promoters of extremist ideologies and their victims may cause misapprehensions.

Due to the complex nature of the pull push factors and their interplay in different environments, the profiling of at risks communities and the geography of hotspots sometimes becomes cumbersome. The combination of extremist religious ideology with other factors such as poor presence of the state, exclusion or perception of discrimination may create an enabling environment even beyond the "usual hotspots" reported by the media. This study points out at the returnees, their immediate social circle and other religious believers who have been in contact with extremist ideologies, inmates in prisons, young people and the so-called "early phase religious believers" as particularly at risk communities.

Although links between organised crime and violent extremist groups is probable, no such instances have been reported in this research. Albanian law enforcement and intelligence agencies remain highly alert on cases of transnational violent extremist groups involving Albanian citizens.

In view of the progress made in the past few years and considering the relatively low threat of VE phenomenon in Albania, C/PVE measures at local level should be streamlined in the context of community policing programmes and other community level models thus offering more space for local civic, non-state players and reducing reason for possible public misconceptions.

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The Extremism Research Forum is a UK government funded research project[1], examining drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

The research commenced in 2017, exploring a range of themes and topics with key stakeholders within communities, civil society and government, in order to build a coherent picture of the specific situation in each country. This research seeks to inform and assist in the development of CVE policies and programming, offering key findings that could be relevant to practitioners and policymakers working in the field of countering violent extremism.

Each country study: 1) maps out the forms of extremism; 2) examines drivers and contributing factors of radicalisation (global, regional, national and local drivers, political and socio-economic); 3) develops a profile of at risk communities.

Taking into account the multifaceted nature of extremism, the research also; 4) identifies any potential links with organised crime, money laundering, links to terrorism; and; 5) analyses trans-national co-operation of violent extremist groups.

This study forms one of the six contextual research pieces, presenting findings from in-depth primary research conducted with communities and wider stakeholders with knowledge of the violent extremist threats specific to the country. The findings are based on primary, and where credible, secondary data sources in order to create an informed and nuanced picture of the violent extremist activity or potential threat within the country. Importantly, it is intended that this research usefully informs policy development, providing practical recommendations, while also feeding into an overarching regional report, where broader linkages and key transnational issues that have been identified from the research will be examined.

It is expected that this project will result in an increased understanding of the size of extremist threats emanating from the Western Balkan region, and ultimately increased ability of the UK and Western Balkan partners to address radicalisation based on increased understanding of the issues and the problem.

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[1] Implemented by the British Council, in partnership with the International Conflict and Research Institute (INCORE), Ulster University.

ALBANIA BACKGROUND

Albania is broadly known as a country of religious tolerance and secular society where the majority of the population does not regularly practice religious rituals, despite showing awareness about their religious background and origin.

Since 2014 Albania has been taking active measures to counter and prevent the recruitment of Albanian citizens as foreign fighters in conflicts abroad, and their engagement in religious or violent extremism at home. Following the penal Code amendments, which criminalised acts of joining and recruiting for armed conflicts abroad, the number of Albanian citizens engaged as foreign fighters in Syrian conflicts dropped to zero. The 2015 adoption of the National CVE Strategy and action plan, the increased awareness and engagement of the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC) as well as numerous civil society initiatives to prevent violent extremism, have all contributed to keeping the violent extremist risks under control over the past two and a half years.

Although there are no new foreign fighters from Albania since 2015, the violent extremist threat still remains, and deserves to be given continued attention.[2] A recent statement by the former President Bujar Nishani implies a serious risk of terrorist threat to Albania:

> "We have witnessed many [counterterrorist] actions that have saved massive number of human lives in Albania thanks to the professional and apolitical functioning of the Intelligence Service, and [the actions] will be part of history and perhaps will be made public after 50 years."

> **Bujar Nishani, President of Albania during 2012-2017**

> *TV Interview, date 28th July 2017*

This was further proven in November 2016 when a group of four Albanian suspected radicals were arrested in Shkodra. The arrests were part of a trilateral operation which led to the arrest of their accomplices in Kosovo and Macedonia, altogether plotting to conduct a terrorist act in the wake of the Albania – Israel football match. Earlier in 2016 the Serious Crimes Court sentenced the nine self-proclaimed imams to a total of 126 years imprisonment, with individual sentences varying from seven up to 18 years imprisonment. While this is one of the harshest sentences pronounced to violent extremists in the Western Balkan countries, officials of the AMC have dismissed fears that this might encourage further radicalisation among Muslim religious believers.[3] Yet, the influence of condemned illegal imams persists. As this study's respondents from the security institutions have not confirmed indices of high in-country terrorist risks, evidence in support of the former President's statement will likely remain "classified" for the public.[4]

While central government institutions beyond the security spectrum of agencies have developed an adequate understanding of the complexity of preventing violent extremism, the challenge remains to engage local institutions and other stakeholders at community level. Addressing the full range of pull and push factors will therefore require constant attention and adequate human

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[2] A recent study of Soufan Center suggests the number of Albanian foreign fighters remains within approximately 90 persons. See: Barret, R. (2017) *BEYOND THE CALIPHATE: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, p. 12. Available from: http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf
[3] A group of family members and supporters of illegal imams have followed closely the court's proceedings during the last year and they have also articulated their dismay and opposition in a number of media appearances.
[4] Despite the attempts, the research team could not reach at the Albanian State Intelligence for official interviews. One key informant from the intelligence community however agreed to provide off record information.

and other resources, including more empowered religious and civic players. Additionally, Albania has yet to start design and implementation of concrete measures for the reintegration of 45 returnees as well as the disengagement from violent extremist ideology and reintegration of other "manipulated" religious believers, including the disengagement and reintegration of former/prisoners and their followers.

While the advantages of a still "early stage violent extremist phenomenon" and of other factors typical for the Albanian society (such as. religious tolerance) will enable smoother C/PVE interactions, other factors elaborated in this report will reveal further threats and add up to the complexity of the phenomenon.

METHODOLOGY

The study in Albania is focused on the set research questions and objectives, contextualising the research framework with closer examination of factors relevant for Albania. The report is structured around the following topics:

- Forms, threats and dissemination channels of violent extremism;

- Drivers and factors;

- At risk communities;

- Links to organised crime; and

- Transnational cooperation.

Under the drivers and factors section, the research explored issues related to the impact of societal prejudices and Islamophobia on violent extremist narratives, an under-researched theme in Albania and one that has been articulated as an issue of concern by religious groups.[5]

The research methods employed to gather information and relevant data for each of the themes included primary research, for which data was gathered through: three focus group discussions with approximately 30 religious believers (practicing and non) and non-religious persons of diverse demographic background in Tirana and Elbasan[6]; and 33 semi structured interviews with key informants from state, civil society, academia, media and other informed stakeholders, including representatives of foreign and international organisations supporting Albania's C/PVE efforts. A profile of participants of the focus group discussions and interviewed key informants (semi-structured interviews) are provided in Annexes 2 and 1. Secondary research methods included a literature and evidence review, as well as analysis of secondary data sources (qualitative and quantitative).

Considering the highly sensitive nature of the topic and restrictions in accessing information, the possible links between violent extremist activities or related processes and organised crime in Albania were investigated through a review of specific reports and a number of semi-structured interviews with informed stakeholders from the security and law enforcement agencies, and a limited number of experts, reporters and practitioners.

Given the relatively high number of respondents emphasising the so-called 'external' or 'societal pressure' on religious communities, the Research Team in Albania decided to probe whether and to what extent Islamophobia and other prejudices towards people practicing religion may serve as a push factor in combination with other drivers.

While the field work was concentrated in central Albania (Tirana, Elbasan), secondary data analysis and primary research (key informants interviews) looked at the radical and violent extremist situation at national level, including also a particular focus on areas suspected as VE hotspots in different municipalities of Albania (suburbs of Tirana, Elbasan, Shkodra or in other municipalities such as Dibra, Korca, Cerrik, Pogradec).

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[5] Such research gaps were identified through a gap analysis conducted at the outset of the project.
[6] As some of the most populated areas in the country, Tirana and Elbasan municipalities (including urban and rural areas) have a significant number of actively practicing religious believers.

LIMITATIONS

No major risks for the research team were present during the field work. However, the researchers could not access former foreign fighters and returnees or members of their close families for an interview, despite their anonymity being guaranteed. Some of the key informants with whom semi-structured interviews were conducted did provide insights and information on the profile, experience in conflict zones and "life after returning" of some of the returnees. However, a kind of "fatigue" was perceptible among some potential respondents, most notably returnees or some individuals suspected of religious extremist propaganda and members of their social circle, who may have fed the research with essential primary information. Generally, key informants who refused to be interviewed (returnees and their family members), were concerned by the possibility of potential actions by security actors and institutions. In few cases, their concerns were related to radical members of their religious group and community.

Only few semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded. Most of the key informants and participants at the focus group discussions were not comfortable with a recorded interview despite the guaranteed anonymity. Therefore a note-taker attended most of the interviews and all three focus groups in Elbasan and Tirana.[7]

The limited access to some information and target participants, as well as the research methodology which is heavily relying on qualitative research pose some limitations. In order to provide an accurate analysis with most recent information and evidence on the focus research questions, the report makes use of quantitative datasets from recent studies and reports which were not made public until December 2017.

Although law enforcement institutions refrained from offering official information on the returnees and religious radical persons suspected of being involved in violent extremist activities, the research team gained access to some such information informally (off record) through other channels.

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[7] Anonymity of focus group participants and some of the key informants was guaranteed by the research team and therefore their personal information and profile are kept confidential in this research.

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1. FINDINGS

1.1. VIOLENT EXTREMISM: FORMS, THREATS AND DISSEMINATION CHANNELS

Five years ago (2013) the violent extremism phenomenon was little known by the Albanian public. The reported cases of 144 Albanian citizens who had joined terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq[8] were a surprise not only for the ordinary citizen but also for most state institutions, civil society and other non-state players in general. Until early 2016, the media reported frequently, albeit often unethically, on the phenomenon and on various terrorist attacks in Europe. A monitoring report of the Albanian Media Institute in 2016 found that while the religious extremist discourse in the print media goes as far as the 'fringe' level, in online media extremist discourse goes as far as the 'Extreme 3' level".[9] This means that, according to the "extreme 3" definition of Holbrook D. "Extremist media index" which was employed by AMI's report, the online discourse in Albania has gone as far as to 'justify/promote/welcome serious violence'.[10]

However, in a country where religious tolerance is considered one of the most important societal values and traditions, forms and threats of religious extremism were little known and even ignored by the public.

1.1.1. Forms and threats of violent extremism

Since 2015, a number of state, religious communities and civil society initiatives have been implemented in order to raise awareness of the violent extremist (VE) phenomenon, to address pull/push factors and take actions to diminish the risks and threats posed by religious extremists. Following these intensive awareness raising and public informing activities, the violent extremism phenomenon is broadly associated by Albanian citizens with the 'ISIS-inspired' acts of extremism and foreign fighters. Although a threat to national security is perceptible, the majority of this report's respondents, focus group participants and key informants, believe that there are low chances for possible terrorist attacks carried out by Albanian nationals in Albania.

> "Albania is different from other European countries due to the reason that in Albania different religious people live together and no group is being isolated by others as it is the case of France whose Muslim community lives in an isolated area"
>
> *Participant at Tirana Focus Group discussion, July 2017*

However, a key informant from the specialised antiterrorist unit at the Albanian State Police does not dismiss the possible threats from 'lone wolfs'.[11]

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[8] In period from 2012 to 2015 approximately 144 Albanian citizens have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the armed conflicts, 45 fighters have returned, 26 died and 73 remain on the battlefield (the latter figure includes 18 fighters and 55 family members). European Commission. (2018). Albania 2018 Progress Report.
[9] Albanian Media Institute – AMI. (2016) *An analysis of religious extremism discourse in the media*, p. 41-42. Available from: http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Diskursi%20english.pdf
[10] See section on 'Methodologies and instruments for measuring religious extremism in the media' of the AMI 2016 report (p. 36); and Holbrook, D. (2015) Designing and Applying an 'Extremist Media Index'. *Perspectives on Terrorism*. 9 (5). Available from: http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/461/914
[11] "Yes there are lone wolfs. The most dangerous extremists are especially the converted ones. Take a look at the case of Petrika Ceci, an orthodox converted to Muslim who attempted to kill his own father [while he has been previously suspected of painting ISIS symbols in different buildings in Korca]." Interview with the key informant conducted in November 2017. For more information about Petrika Ceci please read http://top-channel.tv/2016/12/06/tentoi-te-vriste-babane-e-tij-arrestohet-28-vjecari-ne-korce/

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As the number of new foreign fighters from Albania joining the Syrian conflict has dropped to zero since 2015 according to the Ministry of Interior and the Albanian National CVE Coordinator, the public and other non-state stakeholders in Albania are focusing on the internal (national) dimension of violent extremism, its forms and risks.

Given the prevalence of secular tradition and values over religious, our respondents suggest that forms of religious based violent extremism will remain isolated. Such forms may potentially be manifested through attempts to incite religious hatred and intolerance, thus attacking one of the most important values of Albanian society – religious coexistence. A 2018 study of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) suggests that nearly two thirds of Albanians consider that potential threats "to Albania's religious tolerance include terrorism, religious extremism, propaganda on [religious] conflicts happening abroad, the politicisation of religion and religious discrimination".[12] Interestingly, the IDM 2018 study suggests that the majority of Albanians see threats to religious tolerance originating mostly from outside Albania (propaganda on religious conflicts or terrorist attacks abroad). Nevertheless, some focus group participants and key informants of this study suggest that extremist religious ideologies in Albania are present and they may not remain isolated if a coordinated response from religious communities, state and civil society fails to counter extremist narratives.

> "The allegations that the Scanderbeg statute at the main Tirana square was covered during the Kurban Bajram prayer on 1st September 2017 were inspired by radical sources in Kosovo. It is not the first time, but as usual, it wasn't successful. "
>
> ***Key informant, AMC***

These tendencies have been confirmed by other official sources of this report, but in general, key informants argue that the internal power struggle within AMC which has further developed during 2017 as a result of an increased pressure from Turkey over so-called Gulenist structures in Albania, involves mostly clerics and has not reached significant numbers of religious believers.

> "There are attempts to project 'Erdogan vs. Gulen' clashes in Albania but they have not been successful. Namely, while in Kosovo and Macedonia there have been large groups of Muslim believers showing support to Erdogan, in Albania the Turkish ambassador could only gather a handful of NGOs financed by Turkey at small event. Yet, this does not mean that our believers support Gulen...the majority of them simply don't know or don't care"
>
> ***Key informant, Expert***

While in the past two years, Albanian authorities and also other non-state players – AMC, civil society and other religious groups – have focused particularly on awareness raising and developing counter-narratives, key informants suggest that more needs to be done in order to prevent violent extremist narratives, particularly in reaching out to religious believers. While online campaigns of counter-narratives serve the purpose to raise awareness, dismantling of violent extremist ideology dissemination will require a) multiple actors cooperating and b) acting at community level (offline).

1.1.2. Violent extremist dissemination channels

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[12] Data obtained from IDM. (2018) *Religious tolerance in Albania*.

Albanian C/PVE stakeholders have over time developed a better understanding of the channels of dissemination of extremist messages and the process of expanding the base of supporters of religious extremist ideologies. Before the Syrian conflict and the "globalisation of the violent extremism threat" there was little to no understanding at all about the flux of interactions and exchange between religious extremists in Albania. A *laissez-faire* and non-interventionist approach was in place between religious communities and the state authorities, allegedly in line with secularism, although both players had a number of issues which required their attention and cooperation – property restitution, illegal religious objects and disputes over cultural religious objects, AMC financial constraints, influence of foreign religious organisations, concerns over capacities of religious clerics and the clashes within religious communities.

The IDM 2015 study on "Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania" suggests that many of these concerns were ignored during the 1990s. As Albania was still struggling to overcome its 'weak state' status, foreign religious organisations remained out of any monitoring or 'vetting' process by state authorities and even less, by Albanian religious institutions 'in-the-making'. In the subsequent years, AIC faced internal challenges including shortage of resources and 'clashes' between the country's Hanafi tradition and Salafi ideologies that were brought by foreign religious foundations and Albanian youngsters (returnees) who were educated in countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt".[13] Many of this study's key informants confirm that such 'investment' by foreign religious organisations and the lack of action by Albanian CVE stakeholders have played a role.

> "The problem of foreign fighters and recruiters erupted in 2014 but it was a consequence of a long process of investment by Middle Eastern countries in Albania which everyone ignored. We [AMC] didn't want to involve the state because we would have lost the trust of our community, while the state was uninterested".

> *Key informant, AMC*

The online channels of communication and influence have been emphasised as an important tool in the hands of violent extremists and recruiters over the past several years.[14] This perception has been further reinforced by the expectation that following the 2014 Penal Code amendments and the increased surveillance over suspected extremists by law enforcement agencies in Albania, peer to peer contacts and radicalisation of religious believers would diminish.

> "First, peer to peer communication, which is mainly in individual terms, they work with a small number of people (one, two persons who have no knowledge to oppose their ideas) this is due to the fact that they know their ideas are not widely accepted. The second way is through social media."

> *Key informant, AMC Official*

However, over 70% of this study's key informants and the majority of focus group participants emphasise that peer to peer radicalisation which may potentially develop into violent extremist acts still remains relevant[15] and needs to be addressed at local level. Few focus group participants and key informants suggested that dissemination of radical messages in a way or

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[13] See IDM. (2015) *Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania*, p. 32. Available from: http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf

[14] Dr. Fabian Zhilla suggests that "a considerable number of young Albanians, especially those with little religious knowledge, are approaching ISIS propaganda through social media such as Facebook". See BIRN investigation, "Albania faces the risk of shadow jihadi warriors". Available from: https://www.reporter.al/shqiperia-perballet-me-rrezikun-e-luftetareve-xhihadiste-ne-hije/

[15] "In my opinion, the dissemination of extremist messages happens mostly through internet (about 30%) and through direct communication (about 70%)". **Key informant, AMC Mufti**

another has been carried out not only by illegal imams, but also by "official" ones due to their poor knowledge about Islam or strict interpretation.

> "Some of them [recruiters] have used mosques which are out of the AMC's jurisdiction, some others have used "musallat"[16], houses or other ways. They are often discrete to others. The first contact to this ideology is not through internet but peer-to-peer, social media is not the most important way of dissemination in Albania, thus the most important work to counter this phenomenon should be focused on ground."

> *Key informant, AMC official*

Many civil society organisations, often in cooperation with AMC local clerics and Myftinias have been engaged over the past year in concrete counter and prevention of violent extremism activities at local level. Their primary focus is directed at preventing online radicalisation and hate speech, youth vulnerability, improving community policing and "school as community center" models as an instrument to fight the violent extremism and build community resilience. However, when it comes to countering the narratives of religious extremists and dismantling their outreach to vulnerable religious believers, especially those at an early phase of religious practice, the role and involvement of religious clerics remains of paramount importance. This requires "dedicated imams who do not consider their role as a mere profession"[17] and also a clear picture of "who are or could potentially become religious extremists and recruiters".

> "It is time that the implementation of the National CVE strategy involves community stakeholders – religious groups, local governments, civil society and others. AMC has been an active player in the past two years and we must support their local clerics and representatives to dismantle peer to peer influence radicalisation of religious believers."

> *Key informant, Government official*

Such role of local players is being increasingly emphasised as crucial by a number of C/PVE initiatives in Albania implemented by civil society organisations such as IDM, ANTTARC (Albanian National Training and Technical Assistance Resource Center), CIJA (Commission for International Justice and Accountability), Terre des Homme, Center for Inter-religious Cooperation (Elbasan) or the Albanian Helsinki Committee.[18]

1.1.3. Violent extremist recruiters

Mapping the profiles of individuals who may engage as promoters of violent extremist ideologies is a complex process. Focus group discussions (FGD) with religious believers warn of possible misapprehensions in this context which may be only avoided through involvement of AMC clerics with solid religious knowledge and with influence among the community of believers.

While research on profiles of recruiters in Albania is very scarce, the public perception about violent extremists and recruiters is mostly shaped by the media reporting on the profile of the nine illegal imams who were sentenced in 2016. Focus group participants regard a violent extremist recruiter as someone who has no religious education and engages in such activities for profit making or power:

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[16] A small place used for religious preaching (not mosque), kind of mescid.
[17] Myfti interview (September 2017).
[18] While some key informants suggest that donors should support theological capacity building for religious clerics, many CVE experts argue that civil society initiatives should remain focussed on prevention actions at community level in close cooperation with religious communities and other local players (municipalities, education institutions, local police etc.)

> "[Recruiter is someone] unemployed, not adequately educated, with poor religious information, and a person who wants to have more power and glory."

Elbasan FGD (July 2017)

> "...poor education, economic difficulties, psychological problems and low religious knowledge"

Tirana Focus Groups (July 2017)

Such perceptions do not necessarily fit the profile of the known recruiters in Albania. Namely some of the convicted persons in Albania had formal religious education in Middle Eastern countries (for example, the case of Genci Balla) while not all of them had economic difficulties.[19] This is indicative of the fact that public perceptions often tend to confuse the profile of recruiters with that of the possible victims – vulnerable categories. Unlike the FGD participants' perception, the case of the nine convicted Albanians has shown that recruiters have succeeded to overshadow the role of official imams in some parts of the country. Some of the convicted recruiters have completed religious studies abroad which mean that *"while they manipulated different people with the interpretation of religion, the local official imams were incapable of countering their messages with solid religious arguments"*.[20] Accordingly, the religious knowledge and preaching capacities should not be underestimated, while attempting to profile religious extremist recruiters. The economic difficulties as a feature of a recruiters' profile does not seem to play a role in this regard either, especially given the fact that many of them had access to funds which were used to attract socially and economically vulnerable categories of citizens and even to build illegal religious objects.

While the different socio-economic or cultural factors combined, play a role in defining the profile of groups/individuals vulnerable to violent extremist ideologies (*see next section*), recruiters cannot be identified or defined by such features. In this sense, their ability to manipulate religious interpretations and build the base of supporters should not be underestimated. Key informants of this study from the AMC do not contest religious preaching capacities of recruiters but argue that religious extremism is "imported" from and supported from outside.

> "Albanian recruiters were often young and uneducated or educated in Saudi Arabia. They were well-organised, guided and oriented by others [abroad]."

Key informant, AMC official

> "The recruiting process is very secretive. Albania's recruiters have been educated and are backed from foreign forces."

Key informant, AMC official

The influence of extremist interpretation of Islam being imported through some Albanians who have studied in Middle Eastern countries and have not adapted to the local (Albanian) less rigid tradition of Islam upon their return has been confirmed by the vast majority of key informants. However, it is also important to underline that once rooted in the local context, it is difficult to

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[19] At the time of their arrest, the convicted recruiters (age groups from 25 to 53 years old) were involved in religious activities carried out in illegal mosques. They all confronted the authority of the official AMC in Albania and recruited, according to the prosecution nearly 70 Albanians joining ISIS in Syria. In recent (January 2018) interviews some of the sentenced Albanians maintain the same extremist positions justifying ISIS terrorist attacks. See interview with Gerti Pashja, available from: http://shqiptarja.com/m/aktualitet/terrorizmi-pashja-si-na-nxiti-berishademokracia--sht--e-keqe-464321.html) and with Fadil Myslimani, available from: http://www.citynews.al/2018/01/intervista-fadil-myslimani-kuzhinieri-i-burgosur-per-terrorizem-u-frymezuam-nga-berisha-ja-mallkimi-im-qe-ndoqi-tahirin-dhe-ramen/1

[20] Interview with AMC theologian (August 2017).

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identify the "foreign" influence being channeled through local recruiters' preaching about religion. Similarly, some key informants suggest that, once radicalised, it is difficult to make a distinction between "the path towards further radicalisation" of the victim and "his own influence on other possible victims" of his immediate environment. This is possible not simply in closed or secretive social interactions of religious believers outside the official religious premises, but also within such environment where the official religious representatives lack adequate theological background.

1.2. DRIVERS AND FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

IDM 2015 study on "Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania" showed that the path to religious extremism is influenced by a complexity of drivers, making it difficult to explain the process of religious radicalisation by a single variable alone. IDM study's evidence suggests that it is the combination of different pull/push factors – situational, individual, cultural, political, and socio-economic – that enables religious extremists to recruit followers and the latter to be manipulated through misinterpretation of religious dogma.

A recent assessment of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI, 2015) suggests that 'factors' is a more accurate term than 'drivers' for the discourse on violent extremism. Unlike the term driver, "factors (a term derived from mathematics) usefully suggests that more than one is required to produce a given result".[21] Some of the main findings of this assessment suggest that radicalisation is a social process and identity is a key factor in why individuals become involved in violent movements whereas religion and ethnicity, as powerful expressions of individual and group identity, can be exploited by extremist ideologues. Additionally, evidence on the relationship between education, employment, poverty and radicalisation is mixed.

This study's focus group respondents and key informants offer a broad range of pull and push factors leading to and enabling violent extremism in Albania. While the majority of identified factors are common and shared in the perceptions of both categories of respondents, key informants also touch upon additional factors and variables which are relevant for the process of religious radicalisation leading to violent extremist activities. See Table 1.

Table 1. VE factors according to focus group participants and key informants[22]

Focus group suggested factors of VE	VE factors suggested by key informants
Criminal past	Corruption and **criminality**
Emotional factors (frustration)	**Discrimination** / **marginalisation**
Discrimination / **marginalization**	Disillusionment
Economic reasons	**Economic** reasons
Extremist religious **ideology**	**Emotional** and ideological factors
Fanaticism in rural areas	**Extremist** religious **ideologies**
Foreign religious organisations/**influence**	**Foreign** religious organisations/**influence**
Incapable religious clerics	Ghettos in the periphery of major cities
Islamophobia and exclusion	Harsh treatment by state institutions

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[21] See Allan, H. et al. (2015) *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review*. Royal United Services Institute, p 11. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf. The term "factor" is therefore used by this report.
[22] See Annex 7.1. and 7.2. for profile of FGDs participants and key informants.

Lack of opportunities **Low education** **Religious illiteracy and manipulation** **Self-isolation** Terrorist financing Unemployment	History of violence **Incapable religious clerics** **Islamophobia** Isolation and **self-isolation** Lack of identity & need for attention **Lack of opportunities** **Low education** Media negative reporting Non-representation in state institutions Poverty and lack of social services **Religious illiteracy and manipulation** Social and Political injustice Social media

*Note: Some of the above suggested factors have been reworded (without changing the essence of respondents' opinions) for comparative analysis. Factors in **bold** are those identified by both categories of respondents.

In general, the factors identified by both categories of respondents simultaneously relate to socio-economic variables and ideological factors. They include issues related to poor economic conditions, low level of education, lack of opportunities, the presence of extremist religious ideologies and influence from (unmonitored) religious charities and associations which provide for unmet social needs of vulnerable groups. Both categories of respondents – FGDs participants and key informants – touch upon concerns related to the capacities of religious clerics to attract believers and counter religious manipulation by recruiters. Poor information about religion especially among converts or people in the first stages of their religious practice are also suggested as a circumstance which, combined with other factors (such as disillusionment, incapable clerics, emotional factors) offer a favorable target for violent extremism recruiters.

In addition to the above factors, interviews with key informants from different sectors – state, academia, civil society, religious groups – shed light on another aspect which is related to political drivers; the presence of the state is required not simply as a law enforcement authority, but also as a provider of services to its citizens. Lack of such presence in the sense of both geographical areas and access for vulnerable groups, may serve as a narrative (inciting further alienation of vulnerable groups from the state), but also as a gap which may be employed by various radical players offering the missing public services and spreading ideas about the "state as the other side" or even as the "enemy".

Perceptions about or experience with social or political injustice including widespread corruption, harsh treatment by state institutions or the feeling of non-representation, according to this study's key informants, offer a favorable environment for VE recruiters who "sell an alternative model and values for which they invite religious believers to fight".[23]

Young people (15-25 years of age) regardless of whether they practice religion or not, are particularly vulnerable in light of the above context. Young people are often seeking for attractive narratives which allow them to "gain respect" and develop a "provoking identity" in the eyes of their peers. Uncontrolled content on social media, but also in the traditional media e.g. categories of movies allowed for restricted audiences) may fuel further their desire.[24]

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[23] Interview with AMC key informant.
[24] "This is particularly the case with youngsters in specific family (e.g. domestic violence) or personal conditions (history of violence)". Interview with key informant from academia (social sciences). October 2017.

Few key informants drew attention to the so-called "ghettos" in the suburbs of major cities (Tirana, Durres) which house populations considered to be "an easy target" for recruiters and foreign influences because of the complex challenges they are facing – poverty, lack of social services and opportunities:[25]

> "There are ghettos in the most populated cities as well. There are people coming from northern, northeastern or southern areas and they live isolated from others; they have relations only to each other, and they have established their mosques as well, just like the case of "Unaza e Re" mosque. This has started right after the years 95'… In addition, there have also been foreign influences and players offering financial support and attracting people in these communities to embrace extremist religious ideologies."

Interview with AMC key informant

The vast majority of respondents of this study agree that a certain combination of cultural, political, socio-economic and other factors create conditions for susceptibility to radicalisation, potentially leading to violent extremism. However, many key informants argue that ideology-related factors are key in this context and they include level of preparedness of local clerics, the access to religious information among religious believers, and questioned authority of (official) clerics.

> "As long as there will be religious illiteracy or misperceptions about Islam among Muslims and presence of various interpretations of Islam (wahabism, salafism, takfirism etc.) sponsored by foreign influences, there is always a potential danger of extremism. There is an "invisible hand" who feeds them through investments, salaries, etc."

Interview with AMC Imam

> Additionally, many key informants and FGDs participants point to the "external" environment of religious believers – namely, marginalisation, societal prejudices or misconceptions about Islam and Muslim believers which may push vulnerable individuals towards self-isolation and embracement of VE ideologies.[26]

1.2.1. External "pressure": societal prejudices and Islamophobia as violent extremism push factors

A number of Albania-specific (and under-researched) violent extremism issues have been identified in the inception phase as highly relevant to investigate by this research in order to inform the country's efforts in the prevention of violent extremism. Such research issues range from concerns around radicalisation in prisons and intra-AMC dynamics to issues concerning the role of women in countering violent extremism or external religious (and political) influences. This research investigated some of these themes analysing how a predominantly secular society can be affected by possible instances of misconceptions and/or prejudices towards a minority of Albanians actively practicing religion, and whether this can create gaps or vulnerabilities which could be used by violent extremist recruiters.

Studies and reports in Albania show that the number of Albanians who are practicing religious believers is modest. Additionally, these studies purport that Albanians have a "loose" definition of

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[25] There are no research data about such an assumption (ghetto) in Albania. A German funded regional project implemented by Berghof Stiftung and IDM in Albania is currently testing such an assumption in some of Tirana suburbs. Interview with IDM field researchers.
[26] Similar concerns are raised also by other experts and practitioners such as Shehu Redi "Misconceptions that induce ignorance" (TEDxTirana, October 2017). Available from: https://youtu.be/zDxcdtuTqck.

who is considered a religious believer. The latest CENSUS 2011 data in Albania suggests a religious composition of the population as follows: Muslim 57.12%; Catholics 10.11%; Orthodox 6.8%; Bektashi 2.11%; Evangelists 0.11%; Other Christians 0.1%; Atheists 2.52%; Other religious believers 0.2%; Uncategorized 5.53%; and 13.89% of citizens who did not respond to this question of the CENSUS.[27] There is a large gap between the percentage of Albanians who regard themselves to be a religious believer, and the actual percentage of those who are practicing religion. The IDM study on "Religious tolerance in Albania" suggests that while nearly 37% of Albanians consider themselves a religious believer, less than 10% of them describe themselves as someone who "believes in God and regularly practices all religious rituals".[28]

FGDs with participants practicing religion have suggested that the general perception among Albanian citizens is not favourable of religious practicants, be it Muslim or Christians (e.g. the Jehovah Witnesses). Some of the focus group participants with long standing experience of religious practice argue that such "unfavourable attitude" towards religious people go even further and can be labelled as "Islamophobia".

> "Islamophobia is relatively high in Albania and is more present in state institutions such as municipalities and schools. At the school where I teach one of my pupils is sometimes being discriminated on the basis of religion background."

> *Focus group participant, Elbasan*

The perception of the existence of Islamophobia is confirmed by key informants from different religious communities, interviewed by this report. However, key informants are at odds in regards to its spread or extent and its potential to serve as a violent extremism push factor in the Albanian context. FGDs' participants and key informants with closer links to the religious communities in general tend to qualify Islamophobia as broadly present in the society and used by VE recruiting networks as a narrative to engage members. On the other hand, key informants from academia and civil society suggest that "*Islamophobia in Albania is not as alarming as to drive Muslim religious believers towards violent extremism*", but it is a disturbing issue which needs to be addressed in order to strengthen the country's religious tolerance and values.[29]

> "I do not see it [Islamophobia] as a primary driver, but rather as an additional factor that makes those who are radicalised to become even more radical and to push them toward isolation".

> *Interview with key informant*

Even key informants who do not consider Islamophobia to be a particularly serious concern in Albania, strongly suggest that "*failing to act against such instances by state, religious, media, civil society and other players, may lead to discrimination, isolation or self-isolation of Muslim religious believers practicing religion*".[30] In fact, recent studies do confirm the existence of prejudices and discrimination on religious grounds, albeit at rather minor percentages. Such instances have been reported against Muslim believers who regularly practice religious rituals ("Religious tolerance in Albania", IDM, 2018:pp.7) and they "*mostly involve discrimination and exclusion of people practising religion (especially Muslims), including acts such as discrimination or exclusion in the public and private sectors; societal prejudices and exclusion; and discrimination in close relationships (e.g. marriage refused by family due to religious background)*". Nevertheless,

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[27] See: http://www.instat.gov.al/media/3215/1114.xls
[28] Another 16.9% declare they practice most rituals of their religion. See: IDM. (2018) *Religious tolerance in Albania.*
[29] Interview with key informant from the academia.
[30] Interview with key informant from the academia.

instances of societal discrimination or exclusion remain isolated – only 2.2 percent of Albanians declare they have witnessed often or regularly religion-based discrimination or exclusion of other people in the community where they live, and another 8.5 percent that they have witnessed such incidents rarely.[31]

Despite the low frequency of reported religious-based discrimination/exclusion or Islamophobia, it is essential to identify and analyse the factors that enable or fuel them in the society. As Albania remains the least religious society in the Western Balkan region[32] this study's key informants suggest that unethical or insensitive media reporting on ISIS- has sometimes fuelled public misconceptions about Islam or prejudices and discrimination towards the Muslim community. Religious believers participating in this study's FGD argue that such media reporting has shaped a public perception which *"labels as religious extremists and terrorist any ordinary Muslim believer who practices religion just because of their beards (for men) or headscarf (for women)".*[33]

Indeed, in a predominantly secular society where the majority of the population has little or no knowledge at all about the practice of religions, insensitive media reporting may influence prejudices and other misconceptions. However, key informants argue that there are also other factors that have enabled such perceptions in the recent past. The "over-securitisation" of CVE measures by state authorities in the initial phase of foreign fighter phenomenon in Albania (2014 – 2015) has fuelled a panic-reaction not only among the public but also among religious believers.[34]

Lastly, religious practitioners and experts interviewed by this report are concerned that differences between the AMC and some religious groups in the formerly "illegal mosques" may continue fuelling public prejudices and misperceptions about Islam and Muslim believers. Namely, although the AMC claims that most of the formerly illegal mosques are now under its official authority, in some cases such authority continues to be questioned by representatives or members of these mosques.[35] Therefore, it is essential that the AMC overcomes such differences which may potentially create "opportunities" for recruiters' narratives. In addition to an inclusive approach, AMC should play a more prominent role through enhancing theological capacities of official imams.

Despite the low frequency of occurrence as evidenced by the recent survey (IDM 2018), instances of religious discrimination and Islamophobia in Albania must not be ignored and must take adequate attention and coordinated efforts by state, religious, civil society, media, private sector and other societal players in Albania.

1.3. AT RISK COMMUNITIES

"Profiling" at risk communities and categories of individuals vulnerable to violent extremism ideology remains a difficult task in Albania. This opinion is held by most of this report's key informants who consider the combination of a variety of individual and situational factors in a specific environment as the "possible path" to extremist for some vulnerable groups. Informed

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[31] The proportion declaring that they have never witnessed such incidents was 89.3 percent. See: IDM. (2018) *Religious tolerance in Albania*, p. 52.
[32] Balkan Insight. (2018) *Religion Remains Powerful in Balkans, Survey Shows.* Available from: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/religion-remains-powerful-in-balkans-survey-shows-01-15-2018
[33] Elbasan FG participant.
[34] 31% of citizens in eight areas surveyed by IDM in 2015 agreed with the statement that "Nowadays it is difficult to be a practicing believer of Islam in Albania". Such opinion was more present among respondents who regularly practice religious rituals (51%). See: IDM. (2015) *Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania*, p. 91. Available from: http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf
[35] See: *Imam Armand Aliu compares the AMC Chairman with N. Causescu.* (15 November 2017). Available from: http://gazetaimpakt.com/imam-armand-aliu-krahason-kryetarin-e-kmsh-se-nikolla-causheskun/; and *Imam Aliu calls Scanderbeg a traitor.* (3 September 2017). Available from: http://www.mapo.al/2017/09/shokon-imami-skenderbeu-nje-tradhetar/1

stakeholders interviewed by this report point to some key factors *to help identify possible vulnerable groups.*

One of the primary, and more easily identified, "possible target communities" according to a number of key informants are the returnees. However, the main reason for this category of Albanian citizens is not merely ideology related, but rather related with the approach employed by state institutions and other CVE stakeholders towards them.

> "The returnees have witnessed the conflict in Syria and some of them have returned due to disappointment from what they saw. There may be others who returned for other reasons but nevertheless they all need rehabilitation and reintegration programs."[36]

Interview with AMC Myfti

Although the reintegration and disengagement is considered as important by many stakeholders and state institutions, Albania has not advanced with concrete measures in this context.[37] At present, the returnees (and other religious believers who have adhered to more radical or extremist ideology) in Albania remain 'abandoned' as no specialised disengagement program is in place. Further delays in establishing disengagement and reintegration programmes will likely contribute to their further estrangement and exclusion thus becoming a target for violent extremist recruiters.[38]

A similar conclusion is drawn also by Qirjazi R. (2017), but on a different issue which is particular for Albania – involvement of former military staff in violent and criminal activities. Analysing the cases of Albanian former soldiers engaging in criminal and violent extremist activities (as foreign fighters), Qirjazi argues that "re-integration programmes are essential to be applied in order for former military personnel to adapt more easily with life after the military" and could also prevent future cases of military personnel engaging in criminal activities, including as foreign fighters.[39]

Low level of religious information among the so-called "early phase religious believers" is underlined by the majority of our respondents as a key characteristic of individuals vulnerable to violent extremist ideologies. The first steps into religion are considered as very delicate especially for younger individuals and therefore, many key informants suggest that "*it is extremely important that such process takes place in recognised institutions and under the mentorship of theologically prepared religious clerics*".

Some of the key informants argued that another category of "vulnerable community" includes the ordinary religious believers of the formerly illegal mosques which AMC currently claims to have under control.[40] This is owed to the fact that, according to them, the 'radical interpretation' of religion in these objects has not ceased completely and it may take place in smaller groups of religious believers outside the premises of the mosques.

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[36] As a recent interview with some of the condemned imams shows, the disengagement process remains a challenging one and there is a need to make a distinction between manipulated believers and recruiters who show no sign of repent. Some of the statements of condemned recruiters in the interview include: "I fully support ISIS"; "I fully support the [terrorist] attacks in Paris and Brussels"; "Osama bin laden is our brother" etc. See full interview at http://tepaekspozuarit.oranews.tv/te-paekspozuarit-ne-te-denuarit-e-besimit-3-intervista-ekskluzive-nga-burgu-me-bujar-hysen-fadil-muslimanin-dhe-orjon-recin/
[37] Reintegration and disengagement programmes were included as possible measures under an EU Delegation call for proposals in 2016 which is currently being implemented through two projects by Terre des Homme and Albanian Helsinki Committee. By the time of preparing this report neither of the projects has engaged in reintegration or disengagement activities.
[38] While the majority of our respondents agree that highly vulnerable citizens include also the social circle of already identified VE recruiters, they remain at odds as regards what approach should be employed.
[39] The issue of former military professionals involved in violent activities as foreign fighters is little debated and known in Albania. In fact, 5-7% of the Albanian foreign fighters in Syria were former members of the Albanian Armed Forces. No other Western Balkan country has had any case of former military staff involved as FF. Qirjazi, R. (2017) *Reintegration difficulties and post mission adjustment of Albanian military personnel*. IDM. Available from: http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Policy-paper_Post-Mission-Adjustment-of-Albanian-Military-Personnel.pdf
[40] However, even this process is not considered finished given the fact that some of these mosques' clerics remain at odds with the AMC official representatives.

From a demographic perspective, the majority of respondents suggest that young people remain a target group for violent extremist recruiters. This is particularly a risk in areas without adequate presence of the state and with poor infrastructure of social services as elaborated in this report (see above Section 1.2). However, respondents have varying opinions as regards the range of age groups – with focus group participants pointing to adolescent (14-15 years) up to early 20s, and other key informants suggesting that the age group ranges between 20 years old and individuals in their late 30s.

To a certain extent this is also confirmed by statistical information on the average age of foreign fighters,[41] but also by the IDM 2015 study for some of the categories of VE drivers.[42]

Last but not least important, few key informants especially from the civil society and state police underline that inmates in prisons who have contact with persons who have been trialed or are currently under prosecution on terrorism and violent extremism related charges represent another category of "vulnerable group".[43]

> "The state's capacities to tackle and prevent radicalisation in prisons are poor. In fact, this is one of the least explored issues in Albania and particular attention should be given to: (a) inmates (vulnerable to extremist), target of the extremist prisoners such as: young people sentenced for minor criminal offences, individuals with economic/family difficulties, individuals opposing the justice system; and (b) tackling funding flows and potential connections with persons outside the prisons."

Interview with State Police senior official

Albania has made major improvements to its legal framework for identifying, tracing, and freezing terrorist assets; enhanced international co-operation; extended customer due diligence; and required the filing of suspicious transaction reports and currency transaction reports.[44] Key informants of this report argue that, given the rigid legislation, no major risks are visible as regards the financing of terrorist and violent extremist activity in Albania. However, they emphasise that state authorities have failed to understand the risks of "radicalisation in prisons" and "reintegration of the returnees". Namely, state authorities have to tackle these concerns in a more structured way, beyond the "nine convicted illegal imams serving their sentences" and the "reported 40 returnees". Specifically, more information is required on inmates with radical views, their immediate contacts in prison and exchange with the outside world.

Beyond the usual gap of knowledge and awareness between informed stakeholders and the public, more needs to be done in terms of informing local communities and citizens about the violent extremism phenomenon in order to increase community's and vulnerable groups' resilience. Although a number of studies on religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania have shed light on the phenomenon, their (findings') public dissemination has been limited to events (conferences, roundtables) and social media campaigns with too little presence in the traditional media (TVs, newspapers) which would help reaching out to the public at large.

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[41] According to Adrian Shtuni (2015), the age group most susceptible to recruitment in the case of Albania is 31-35 years old. See: https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/ethnic-albanian-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria
[42] IDM study (2015) suggests that political drivers are particularly relevant for youngsters in their 20s who are not necessarily religious believers, while cultural drivers are more relevant for religious practitioners in their 30s.
[43] Except the nine convicted persons (so called illegal imams) there are no other persons serving terrorism or VE related charges in Albanian prisons. However, there are no information as regards the number of other prisoners convicted on other charges who may display also VE and religious radicalism features.
[44] US Department of State. (2016) *Albania Country Report on Terrorism 2016*. Available from: https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/272231.htm

1.4. ORGANISED CRIME AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

UN Security Council Resolution 2195 (2014) refers to concerns that "*terrorists benefit from transnational organised crime in some regions, including from the trafficking of arms, persons, drugs, and artefacts and from the illicit trade…*" The Resolution further emphasises that "*the combined presence of terrorism, violent extremism, and transnational organised crime may exacerbate conflicts in affected regions, including in Africa, and [noting] that terrorist groups benefiting from transnational organised crime can, in some cases and in some regions, complicate conflict prevention and resolution efforts.*" [45]

The possible links between the two phenomenon and affiliated groups imply the existence of more serious circumstances and conditions which go beyond the level of "presence of state authority and public services" in a given territory.[46] Namely, armed conflicts and lack of control over the territory by already weak institutions provide a breeding ground for "interactions" between illicit networks and violent extremists in war zones or post-conflict societies.

Such assumptions exclude by default Albania as a possible environment where such linkages would emerge, although concerns over the capacities of law enforcement agencies in general may to a certain extent suggest the contrary.[47]

However, possible links between criminal networks and violent extremists in conflicting zones outside Albania or even in EU countries should not be excluded. A 2015 report of the Open Society Foundation for Albania (OSFA) deconstructs the scheme and routes of illegal trafficking of weapons through and from Albania. Although the report does not suggest explicit links between criminal groups and violent extremist groups and recruiters in Albania, in principle it does not exclude such possibility:

"Unlike years ago, when routes and final destinations of trafficked arms and munitions could be clearly seen because of armed conflicts in the region, at present, trafficking channels are generally scattered. Nevertheless, we notice a relatively more emphasised feature in the flows of trafficking of arms in Albania's northern border with Montenegro and Kosovo. Albania serves as a source country mainly for Kalashnikovs and munitions trafficked through the border crossing points or the green border with these countries that serve both as transit countries and as destinations. After being loaded on private vehicles or through bus lines, arms arrive in Austria, Germany, Sweden, and other countries of the European Union."[48]

Although the OSFA:2015 report does not suggest links between criminal groups and terrorist or violent extremist suspects, a recent case of an Albanian citizen arrested on charges of attempting trafficking of weapons in the UK has spurred speculation in the media that the weapons were to be used for terrorist attacks.[49] However, an Albanian State Police statement on this case does not make reference to such charges.[50]

This report's key informants from state police authorities do not confirm any instances of identified links between organised crime and violent extremism recruiters or groups.

[45] See S/RES/2195 (2014). Available from: http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1470875_EN.pdf.
[46] Interview with a Senior MoI representative.
[47] A shipment of around 800,000 12.7 mm rounds of ammunition, originating from Albanian surplus stocks to the United Arab Emirates which through intermediaries reached Libyan rebels in Benghazi in 2011 was investigated by Albanian authorities and UN panel of experts. See BIRN analysis "Albania Faces Questions Over Arms for Libya", April 2013. Available from: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-weapons-diverted-to-libyan-rebels-reports-says.
[48] See Zhilla, F. and Lamallari, B. (2015) *Organized crime – Threat assessment in Albania*. OSFA, p. 68. See also *Trafficking of arms graphic*, p. 65. Report available from: https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/organized_crime_soros.pdf
[49] See Daily Mail report: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4828366/Plot-smuggle-three-rifles-UK-foiled.html
[50] See ASP Statement available from: https://www.asp.gov.al/index.php/component/content/article/17-shqip/lajmet-e-fundit/11925-tirane-zbardhet-ne-kohe-rekord-tentativa-per-trafik-nderkombetar-te-armeve-luftarake [Accessed November 2017]

> "Police has not identified any link where terrorist groups have been supported with weapons or people by organised criminal groups. This is due to the fact that radicals work in narrow, isolated groups in a complete conspiracy."

Interview with key informant from State Police

However, neither of the interviewed officials excludes the possibility of (still unidentified) possible links.

> "State institutions must be very cautious on this issue as there might be unidentified links. Both groups are driven by the financial interest. Ideology does not necessarily represent the main axis of the functioning of the terrorist groups and termination of funds' flow embodies the genesis of problem solving."

Interview with State Police senior official

The assumption that both parties – organised crime and violent extremists/terrorists – are aware of the "threat" from another layer of police control (counter-terrorism and police department against organised crime) or a combination of the two, is supported by senior Ministry of Interior officials:

> "If such links are to be identified in Albania it would be an 'exception' rather than a 'rule' but nevertheless, our law enforcement agencies engaged in the fight against both groups are in very close coordination and exchange information also with other state institutions and partnering agencies"

Interview with senior Ministry of Interior official

Other key informants from the media sector or practitioners who closely follow organised crime and violent extremism cases in Albania share similar opinions but also emphasise this may change:

> "So far, I do not think they are related to each other. This might change only if ISIS becomes stronger again and would need more materials, weapons, etc. In Albania, weapons can be easily found. So if there's a bigger interest of those who control these networks, the threat is potential."

Interview with media key informant

Periodic independent reports monitoring Albania's fight against organised crime, money laundering and terrorism have not identified concerns over possible links between organised crime and violent extremism in Albania. However, considering the serious concerns over strengthened impact of organised crime and still poor performance of state authorities in this context the issue of possible links between organised crime and VE and terrorist networks requires constant monitoring and more specialised research.[51]

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[51] See: US Department of State. (2017) *Money Laundering and Financial Crimes*. INCSR. Volume II, p. 28-30. Available from: https://www.state.gov/documents/organisation/268024.pdf; OSAC. (2017) *Albania 2017 Crime & Safety Report*. Available from: https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=21471; US State department. (2017) *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016*, pp. 94-95. Available from: https://www.state.gov/documents/organisation/272488.pdf

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1.5. TRANSNATIONAL RELATIONSHIP TO EXTREMISM

The rise of ISIS and the extremely high number of foreign fighters, as well as the wave of ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks globally over the past two years strongly suggest that violent extremist networks and radicalisation processes operate beyond borders. Albania's 2014 Penal Code amendments criminalising the participation in and recruitment of citizens to engage in armed conflicts abroad contributed to zeroing the number of Albanians joining the conflict in Syria and Iraq after 2015.

Nevertheless, as some cases of arrests have recently shown (Shkodra 2016[52]), ties and communication of extremist groups and individuals beyond borders remain an issue of concern. This report's key informants from the security spectrum of institutions in Albania suggest that transnational violent extremist groups involving Albanian citizens is not very present in Albania but it remains a subject of cooperation and exchange between Albanian and partnering law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

> "Albanian state institutions have a very positive cooperation with other state institutions in this regard, especially with Kosovo."

> ***Key informant, Albanian state Police***

Transnational cooperation of violent extremists according to some of the key informants is present sporadically within the Albanian-speaking communities in the Balkans, most notably between Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. "*However, while there are similarities between Kosovo and Macedonia's Muslim communities, Albanian Muslim believers tend to show a higher degree of resilience to religious extremists.*"[53] In fact, religious authorities in the country are among the most trusted Albanian institutions according to recent studies. The UNDP Albania sponsored "Public Trust in Governance" (2014 – 2017) shows that public support for religious institutions has jumped from 44% in 2014 to 58% in 2016.[54]

On the other hand, some key informants from the media and academia tend to have a more critical view on the transnational dimension of violent extremism in Albania. This is so, they argue, not least due to the transnational characteristics of the Internet – a key communication and influence channel.

> "Transnational cooperation surely occurs, even at this moment online or in-person. The online influences in a way or another are present and take place also among religious believers [everyone has access to online content beyond borders]."

> ***Key informant, Academia***

Nevertheless, this is indicative of the transnational influences of violent extremism online propaganda (dissemination channels) rather than transnational cooperation of structured violent extremists groups. While the internet is still considered by many P/CVE actors in Albania as an important propaganda channel,[55] offline peer to peer radicalisation seems to be underestimated

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[52] On 4-5 November 2016 a regional counterterrorism operation led to the arrests of four individuals in Shkodra who were subsequently charged with supporting ISIS financially and logistically, recruiting people on behalf of ISIS, and promoting hate speech. The operation disrupted a potential attack on the Albania-Israel World Cup qualifying soccer match.
[53] Interview with senior expert, formerly close to AMC structures.
[54] The same high percentage of public support is confirmed also by 2017 survey report. See 2016 report at http://www.al.undp.org/content/albania/en/home/library/democratic_governance/opinion-poll--trust-in-governance-2016--.html.
[55] Similarly, a BIRN analysis suggests that while ISIS in Albania seems to be a fading force, ISIS online propaganda in Albanian continues. See: Balkan Insight. (February 2017) *Balkan Jihadi Warriors Remain Safe on the Net*. Available from: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/balkan-jihadi-warriors-remain-safe-on-the-netj-01-27-2017

according to the majority of this study's respondents (see Section 5.1.1.). All key informants from the law enforcement agencies and intelligence in Albania argue that security institutions are continuously monitoring Albanian violent extremist suspects in close cooperation with counterparts from the region, NATO members and other partnering countries. However, efficiency of such measures and structure of possible transnational cooperation of violent extremism require more specialised research. Given the fact that foreign fighters from Albania and the recruitment network had previously exchanged with violent extremist networks in neighbouring and other countries while transiting to Syria and Iraq, our key informants suggest that it is difficult to completely dismantle their linkages.[56]

Finally, as this report has often made reference to key informants' statements of "foreign influences" it is essential to take notice and raise awareness among C/PVE players about the need to adequately address such concerns. Specifically, following the failed coup d'état in Turkey it seems that the internal power struggle within the AMC is now involving another "foreign player" (Turkey) which is pressing Albanian state authorities to clamp down on so-called Gulenist structures.[57] Albanian authorities have been cautious in responding to Turkey's calls,[58] but Turkish pressure is increasing to close down a network of allegedly Gulen-controlled colleges in the country, including five madrassas.[59] Additionally, Turkey claims that AMC is controlled by Gulenists structures thus adding to the heated internal debate and clashes among different groups in the AMC. Although such tensions have not yet reached the community of Muslim believers at large,[60] further escalation involving Turkey may create space for violent extremist groups to cause a rift among the community of believers and recruit supporters.[61] The election of the new AMC chairman is due in 2019 and in this context, Turkish pressure on Albania against Gulenists structures may escalate internal AMC tensions and provide opportunities for groups to build their base of supporters.

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[56] Interview with media key informant.
[57] See: Balkan Insight. (2016) *Albania Weighs Turkey's Claim to be Gulenist Hub*. Available from: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/in-gulen-erdogan-fight-albania-should-put-its-interests-first-expert-11-02-2016
[58] See: Balkan Insight. (2017) *Turkey Presses Albania To Extradite Key 'Gulenist' Suspect*. Available from: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-to-face-turkish-request-to-extradite-gulen-supporter-10-13-2017
[59] See: Panorama. (2017) *Turkish ambassador: Albania's partner is Turkey, not FETO*. Available from: http://www.panorama.com.al/ambasadori-turk-aleat-i-shqiperise-eshte-turqia-jo-feto-mos-i-hidhni-femijet-ne-zjarr
[60] "Unlike in Kosovo or Macedonia, Muslim believers in Albania have not reflected the different internal power struggle within AMC groups and have stayed away from the Turkish attempts to project 'Erdogan vs. Gulen' conflict among Albanians". Interview with senior expert, formerly close to AMC structures.
[61] See: IDM. (2015) *Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania*, p. 34. Available from: http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf

2. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Violent extremism remains a relevant threat in Albania, albeit to a lower degree than two years ago. This is largely owed to a higher degree of awareness and engagement in prevention of C/PVE stakeholders – state, religious actors, civil society and other players through a diverse range of measures and actions, including but not limited to:

▪ Adoption of the National CVE strategy, setting up of the National CVE coordinator and the establishment of a Center for coordination in CVE (Council of Ministers decision no 737 date 13 December 2017[62]);

▪ AMC series of activities to raise awareness among religious believers, improve capacities of religious clerics, enhance cooperation with CSOs and public stakeholders in CVE and PVE action;

▪ Civil society awareness raising and targeted prevention activities (including social media campaigns, joint events with state and religious communities.);

▪ Assessments of the phenomenon of violent extremism and radicalism conducted by independent think tanks in Albania generating datasets and recommendations for decision makers and other PVE stakeholders nationally and locally;

▪ Greater attention by donor organisations (U.S, EU, OSCE, UN agencies etc.) to support CVE and PVE actions in Albania and cooperation and exchange with C/PVE community in the region and globally etc.

Yet, more concerted actions are needed particularly at the local community level as addressing the full range of pull and push factors will require constant attention and adequate human and other resources. While the recent establishment of the Center for coordination in CVE is a welcome step in this direction, more efforts are needed to:

▪ step up capacity building for frontline officers

▪ better use of analytical resources and knowhow of civil society,

▪ functionalisation of the CVE point of contact in central government agencies and better coordination with local level PVE stakeholders – municipalities, religious communities, civil society, law enforcement, media, education institutions.

As the findings of this report suggest, more attention and concrete measures are required on the issues of radicalisation in prisons. Albania has yet to start design and implementation of concrete measures for the reintegration of returnees and disengagement from violent extremist ideology of other "manipulated" religious believers.

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[62] CMD. (2017) Available from: http://www.qbz.gov.al/Botime/Akteindividuale/Janar%202017/Fletore%20225/VKM%20nr.%20737,%20date%2013.12.2017.pdf

Given the prevalence of secular tradition and values over the religious ones, Albania shows a higher potential of resilience to violent extremism, although the threat to national security remains perceptible. Extremist religious ideologies are isolated but they may not remain so if a coordinated response from religious communities, state and civil society fails to counter extremist narratives. The online channels of communication, propaganda and influence have been an important tool in the hands of violent extremists and recruiters over the past several years. However, this report's respondents urge greater attention and concrete actions focusing on peer to peer radicalisation at local level. Mapping the profiles of individuals who engage as promoters of extremist ideologies and their victims may cause misapprehensions which may be only avoided through involvement of AMC clerics with solid religious knowledge and with influence among the community of believers. Although the AMC has stepped up efforts to counter the narratives of religious extremists and dismantling their outreach to vulnerable religious believers, more needs to be done to boost the role and capacities of religious clerics at community level.

While the media reporting on foreign fighters has created a general perception about hotspots mostly concentrated in the areas of Pogradec, Librazhd, Cerrik, Bulqize, or peripheral areas in the municipalities of Tirana, Durres, Shkodra and Korca suburbs, the geography of possible risks is much broader. The combination of extremist religious ideology with other factors such as poor presence of the state, exclusion, perception of discrimination may create an enabling environment. More work towards solidifying media ethics with responsible communication through trainings is also required.

In general, the range of drivers is diverse including socio-economic variables, political and cultural factors. The presence of extremist religious ideologies and influences is however key to complete the "puzzle". Poor information about religion especially among converts or people in the first stages of their religion practice are considered a circumstance, which combined with other factors (such as disillusionment, incapable clerics, emotional factors etc.) offer a favourable target for violent extremist recruiters who "sell an alternative model and values for which they invite religious believers to fight".

Due to the complex nature of push/pull factors and their interplay in different environments, profiling of at risk communities becomes difficult and, depending on the level of victims' radicalisation, may sometimes overlap with profiling of recruiters. This study's key respondents report diverse profiles of manipulated religious believers and at risk communities.

- The returnees and other religious believers who have been in contact with extremist ideologies in the so-called illegal mosques still present a concerning at risk community, particularly due to the lack of disengagement programmes and reintegration efforts.

- Inmates in prisons who have contact with religious extremists represent another category of "vulnerable group".

- Young people and the so-called "early phase religious believers" are also a vulnerable category who require guidance and support by relevant religious authorities.

- Lastly, as Albania is the only Western Balkan country with former military professionals who have engaged as foreign fighters in Syria and in other criminal activities in Albania (e.g. bank robbery) it is particularly important to take proactive measures preventing possible violent extremist activity in the future.

Although links between organised crime and violent extremist groups is probable, no such instances have been reported in this research. Periodic reports monitoring Albania's fight against organised crime, money laundering and terrorism have not identified evidence of possible links between organised crime and violent extremism in Albania, despite the very serious concerns over strengthened impact of Albanian organised crime. Similarly, transnational violent extremist groups involving Albanian citizens of acute concern, and Albanian law enforcement and intelligence agencies have stepped up international cooperation on this matter. The Shkodra arrests represent in this regard a successful example of information sharing and action against transnational violent extremist activity. However, many key informants of this report have raised concerns over the "foreign influences" (Turkey's calls to dismantle so-called Gulenist structures) which may interfere with still ongoing differences between various groups within AMC.

Compared to three years ago when a number of analytical reports concluded that the violent extremist phenomenon in the country is still at its early phase, Albania has made great strides to respond to the challenges. While religious authorities were mostly in denial about the phenomenon and state institutions predominantly led by a panic-policy of security dominated response, at present Albania has developed awareness among a broad range of C/PVE players – AMC, state institutions beyond the security spectrum, civil society and academia. It is now time to move from central level awareness towards more community-based actions to prevent religious extremism and other forms of violent extremism continuing. Considering that the Albanian extremism phenomenon is by far less concerning than in the neighbouring societies (e.g. Macedonia, Kosovo and BiH), the C/PVE measures at local level should be streamlined in the context of community policing programmes (involving municipalities, schools, civil society, media, community leaders, religious groups) thus offering more space for local civic, non-state players and reducing reason for public misconceptions that extremism is linked exclusively to Islam and the AMC.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: PROFILE OF KEY INFORMANTS

Affiliation	No of interviews	Profile
Civil society experts & academia	**Eight** key informants	**Four** interviewees (three male & one female expert) working with religious organisations involved in C/PVE actions (Directors and coordinators) **Four** (male) interviewees from the Albanian think tanks and INGOs with experience in C/PVE, religious radicalism and interreligious relations (Researchers and managers).
Academia	**Four** key informants	**Four** (male) interviewees with academic background and experience in C/PVE matters and religions (with MSc or PhD degrees)
Religious communities	**Eleven** key informants	**One** interviewee from the Orthodox community (priest) **One** interviewee from the Catholic community (official) **Nine** interviewees from the Muslim Community (five imams, two muftis and two AMC officials)
Media	**Two** key informant	**Two** reporters (1 male and one female) covering terrorism and violent extremism issues (1 online and 1 print media)
Security institutions	**Five** key informants	**Two** interviewees (senior officials, male) from the Albanian state Police **Two** interviewees (senior officials, male) from the Ministry of Interior **One** interviewee from the intelligence community
Other state institutions	**Three** key informants	Senior officials and experts at different state institutions such as State Committee of Cults, Ministry of education (one female and two male interviewees)

ANNEX 2: PROFILE OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Focus group's info	No of participants	Profile
FGD1 – Elbasan 18 July 2017	12 participants	Women practicing religion, 25 – 45 years old; completed secondary (three) or university degree (nine); with different employment status (three unemployed; one volunteer and eight unemployed)
FGD2 – Tirana, 28 July 2017	Nine participants	Mixed group of male (four) and female (five) participants with completed university education; 25 to 45 years old; practicing (three) and non-practicing religion; all employed (teachers, researchers, social workers, journalists etc.)
FGD3 – Tirana, 24 August 2017	Eight participants	Mixed group of male (four) and female (four) participants from rural and peripheral areas, with completed secondary or university education; 20 to 35 years old; with diverse religious background (practicing and non-) and employment status (three unemployed and others working in public sector – municipalities, schools – or private sector)

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