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TRANSFORMING ALBANIA'S C/PVE EFFORTS INTO COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND DEVELOPMENT MATRIX

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Background

Known as a country of religious tolerance which is a value deeply rooted in the national civic tradition and with fewer than two out of ten Albanians actively practicing religious beliefs and rituals¹, the possibility of radicalising and recruiting Albanian religious believers to wage a war seemed quite remote, if not impossible five years ago. Media reports of Albanian citizens (approximately 144 citizens between 2012 and 2015) travelling to Syria and Iraq to join the armed conflicts there, had stunned the Albanian public and institutions in the late 2013, in the wake of global concerns over the changing nature of terrorist threats and violent extremism.

As a global response to violent extremism and recruitment of foreign fighters was being shaped², Albania adopted amendments to its Penal Code which made it illegal to (1) participate in; (2) organise the participation of; or (3) call for participation in military action in a foreign country.³ The new legislation and the law enforcement agencies' response changed dramatically the Albanian foreign fighters' figures as the Government declared that the number of Albanian citizens joining ISIS in 2015 was close to zero and, as of 2016 none had done so.

Aiming to de-securitise the response to violent extremism by focusing on the root causes and drivers, the Government of Albania adopted the National CVE Strategy in November 2015.⁴ Simultaneously, 2015 marked the intensification of countering and prevention actions carried out by civil society, religious communities and other non-state players with the support of international donors. With little information

¹ Such percentage is confirmed by two studies of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) in 2018: "Religious tolerance in Albania" (IDM, April 2018) and "Violent extremism in Albania" (IDM, October 2018).

² UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) adopted on 24 September 2014. See [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2178%20\(2014\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2178%20(2014)).

³ Law no 98/2014 (entry into force, September 2014). Official gazette no 132, August 2014 http://www.qbz.gov.al/botime/fletore_zyrtare/2014/PDF-2014/132-2014.pdf.

⁴ Council of Ministers Decision (CMD) no 930, date 18 November 2015. See Official gazette no 203 date 25 November 2015 http://www.qbz.gov.al/botime/fletore_zyrtare/2015/PDF-2015/203-2015.pdf.

about the phenomenon in general and almost no contextual evidence for Albania in early 2015, the actions have succeeded to raise public awareness, develop capacities of central institutions beyond the security spectrum. Furthermore, the participatory approach employed by many state and non-state players, succeeded to transform particularly the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC), from “closed” and mostly “in-denial” (about religious extremism & VE) players to one of the key partners for many civil society and state institutions involved in C/PVE initiatives. It is thanks to such efforts that the VE phenomenon in Albania remains a low degree threat.⁵ The pre-eminence of the national identity over the religious ones, as well as the centuries long civic tradition of religious tolerance in Albania further facilitate an environment that has reacted positively to C/PVE actions. However, the range of C/PVE programmes currently under implementation and the new structures being established therein do not match the level of risk and potential threats stemming from religious extremism in Albania. While due attention and resources are undoubtedly necessary to prevent violent extremism, inflated focus may act counterproductively. A number of key informants of the “Extremism Research Forum – Albania Report” inform of C/PVE fatigue and concerns over public misconceptions regarding violent extremism.⁶ These are signs that suggest transformation of efforts – from countering and prevention of (exclusively) religious based VE, towards public safety and community resilience (from all extremist ideas) oriented actions. Such need for transformation is urgently required also in view of the potential for non-religious extremism which has been overlooked by C/PVE stakeholders in Albania.

Key statement

Albania has left behind its third year of proactive engagement in the fight against violent extremism and is increasingly investing efforts to build capacities and PVE framework of measures at community level. In order to sustain achieved results and upgrade future impact C/PVE players and decision makers need to seriously consider the dynamics of PVE, key features of the Albanian context and the recent lessons learnt from CVE Strategy’s implementation. Namely, they all call for a change in the approach – moving from a single C/PVE vertical framework tackling religious extremist ideologies towards multiplicity of community resilience building actions at various sectorial policies. In essence this suggests for a transformation of the current efforts and their integration with existing frameworks of measures and models for public safety and community resilience. The advantages of such transformation rely not only in the efficient use of existing resources and models, but especially in engaging all community stakeholders. Such transformation will reduce space for extremist narratives and groups fuelling perceptions of discrimination, exclusion or even attempts to incite religious hatred. Last but not least important, transforming current efforts is needed to address the relatively high potential for non-

⁵ IDM 2018 study on “Violent extremism in Albania” reveals that one in ten Albanians confirm instances of religious violent extremism in their area of residence. Source: www.idmalbania.org

⁶ Despite the fairly successful de-securitisation of the discourse, C/PVE is perceived by the public as targeted at only one religious group (Muslim Community) and mostly with the purpose of countering terrorism.

religious extremism which is manifested through the relatively high percentage of Albanians justifying action that transcend the limits of the law.

Albania's C/PVE efforts – What is being ignored?

The plethora of C/PVE strategies deployed in many countries worldwide has evolved over the past several years, from security-dominated CT and CVE frameworks designed under a panic approach in the early days of ISIS recruitment power towards more community oriented de-securitised PVE frameworks that increasingly take into account the local context.⁷ Albania's C/PVE approach has experienced such evolution over the past years – from an externally driven process aiming to stop the flow of Albanian FFs, towards an approach that is more focused on internal dynamics and aims to dismantle the radicalisation machinery and to prevent violent extremism regardless of whether it materialises outside or within the national borders.

As Albania has successfully navigated away from the initial “panic response” phase further de-securitisation and secularisation of efforts is required to improve efficiency, support, inclusiveness, impact and sustained added value. The following dynamics and lessons learnt need to be taken into serious consideration in order to diversify the range of sectorial policies with PVE-sensitive measures and models for community resilience as opposed to the current national C/PVE framework tackling mostly violent extremism inspired by religious extremist ideology.

Religious tolerance ...and Albanians' religiosity – Often referred to as a Muslim country, Albania is in fact a country where one should make the difference between religious belief by “origin” and “practice” in order to understand the societal context. Albania is the only country in the Balkan region with a “Western-style” attitude to religion – only 39 per cent of the population consider themselves religious – according to a recent survey based on three WIN/Gallup International polls and published in the UK Telegraph.⁸ However, Albanians have a slightly different definition of “being religious” or of “practicing religion” according to UNDP Albania commissioned research “Religious tolerance in Albania” (2018) – namely, “while 37.3% of Albanians consider themselves to be a person actively practicing religion, only 9.6% describe themselves as someone who believes in God and regularly practices all religious rituals”.⁹ The study concludes that religious tolerance in Albania is “deeply rooted in the Albanian tradition and its civic and moral values [rather] than experienced as a social practice, conviction or policy, that relies upon knowledge of different religions and acceptance of religious differences.”

⁷ Similarly, Mohammed Abu-Nimer describes the development of approaches to addressing violent extremism from counter terrorism, CVE and more recently to PVE frameworks. See Mohammed Abu-Nimer “Alternative approaches to transforming violent extremism”, Berghof Stiftung 2018, page 3-5.

⁸ See “Mapped: The world's most (and least) religious countries” <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/most-religious-countries-in-the-world/>.

⁹ See Vurmo Gjergji “Religious tolerance in Albania”, UNDP 2018 <http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Religious-tolerance-in-albania.pdf>.

While religious education and capacities of religious clerics are important for the rather limited community of religious believers (between 10% and 15%) in Albania, emphasis on civic values and tradition of tolerance remains a key PVE axis for both, the religious believers and the society at large.

Religious versus non-religious extremist ideologies – The above conclusion holds true also in the context of “religious” versus “non-religious” extremist ideologies and the need to address them in a more inclusive “public safety and community resilience building” framework. More than one-third would justify taking the law into their own hands when their rights and freedoms are denied by the state. A similar proportion would justify any economic activity, even illegal, for the sake of everyday survival.” These data speak of the potential for anti-establishment, populist or other political radical narratives to succeed and they urge for actions to prevent narratives that may motivate the eruption of such nonreligious extremism which relies largely upon the socio-economic, and especially the political drivers for violent extremism.¹⁰

The terrorist threat: internal vs. external – The 2017 Global Terrorism Index places Albania among lowest impact countries (rank – 90, shared with Denmark, and a score of 1,487).¹¹ Between 2000 and 2016, the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database numbers a total of 14 (terrorist) incidents in Albania, nine of which between 2013 and 2016. The majority of them are against state institutions, but in no case, a religious motivation was suspected or proved.¹² Albanian intelligence and other counterterrorism agencies remain on high alert for terrorist threats. Nevertheless, as the ERF Report for Albania suggests, terrorist acts with religious background carried out by Albanians in a national territory remain unlikely.¹³ However, there remain concerns over involvement of manipulated Albanian religious believers in terrorist activities outside national borders, as the case of the nine convicted illegal imams has proved. Despite few overlaps (e.g. recruitment, financing) between the National CVE strategy and the updated National Counterterrorism strategy and Action plan 2016 – 2020¹⁴ efforts to address in-house violent extremism must be driven by prevention and community resilience building measures with much more careful articulation about terrorist threats and terrorism which,

¹⁰ See Vurmo Gj. “Violent extremism in Albania – A national assessment of drivers, forms and threats” (IDM October 2018, p. 122).

¹¹ See Institute for Economics and Peace “Global Terrorism Index 2017”, Source: <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2017.pdf>

¹² The database includes an incident with a Kosovar citizen in Vlore (2016) classifying the perpetrator as “Muslim extremist”. See <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?country=5>. However, as police investigation and court case proved, the author was a mentally ill person. See “Dijar Xhema sent in psychiatry” <https://www.vizionplus.tv/dijar-xhema-dergohet-ne-psikiatri/>.

¹³ In November 2016 Albanian and Kosovar police carried out a coordinated action against a group plotting terrorist attack during the Albania – Israel match. A year after (December 2017) the Albanian court released from detention the four Albanian citizens arrested on this case while in Kosovo two defendants plead guilty.

¹⁴ Adopted by CMD no 765 on 2 November 2016 amending the CMD no 663 date 17 July 2013 on the adoption of the Intersectoral strategy of the fight against organised crime, illegal trafficking and terrorism 2013 – 2020”. Source, Official gazette no 215 (2016) http://www.qbz.gov.al/botime/fletore_zyrtare/2016/PDF-2016/215-2016.pdf.

clearly fit in better under CT efforts and the respective strategy. The better delineation between the two would additionally help further de-securitisation of the C/PVE and its clear articulation as a set of community resilience building measures.

Fatigue and the risk of C/PVE Islamisation – While religious communities and particularly the AMC have been vigorously engaged in addressing the concerns over VE on religious grounds, a side-effects of the intensive three year period of C/PVE actions and actors in Albania has been the growing “C/PVE fatigue” and even perception of discrimination among some Muslim believers who report of instances of Islamophobia or discrimination on religious grounds by the public and in the media discourse.¹⁵ Another concern in general, not only in Albania, relates with the so-called “Islamisation of C/PVE” which, as Mohammed Abu-Nimer (Berghof:2018) argues, “*is interpreted as a code for countering exclusively or primarily the discourse of groups affiliated with Islam*” and not other religions or violent secular ideologies.¹⁶ IDM 2018 study found 10.8 percent confirm presence of Christian extremist groups in their area, while 12.3 percent acknowledge this for Islamic groups.¹⁷ While these percentages remain low, it is interesting to note that the small differences from one to the other religion suggest that Albanians see similar level of (relatively low) threat regardless of the religious group. Hence, it is important to engage representatives and clerics from all religious groups operating in Albania, preferably within a framework oriented towards community resilience against all forms of VE. Given the importance of religious stakeholders and also in view of the extent (low risk) of the religious VE phenomenon in Albania, the C/PVE measures would prove more efficient and with sustained impact if streamlined into the existing models that serve to boost community resilience and public safety. Community policing and the model of “School as community centre” are two of such frameworks that have been referred to in the National CVE strategy.

Transforming C/PVE into community resilience & development framework

As Albania is yet to develop disengagement and reintegration structures and step up efforts to deploy at community level concrete measures addressing the VE factors and narrowing the number of at-risk communities, it is of paramount importance to integrate such measures within existing structures of community resilience and models of cooperation between state and non-state players such as the:

1. community policing model,

¹⁵ Although the Albanian Muslim Community has not officially raised concerns over Islamophobia, religious key informants of the ERF country report for Albania have pointed out to this issue. A non-governmental organisation – Albanian Muslim Forum – has emphasised the existence of religious discrimination and islamophobia in Albania (See http://fmsh-al.org/al/html/monitorim_media.html). On the other hand, a recent IDM study on Religious tolerance in Albania confirms instances of discrimination or exclusion on religious ground but they remain sporadic and isolated (2.2% of respondents declared they have witnessed such instances “often” or “regularly” and 8.5% “rarely”).

¹⁶ Mohammed Abu-Nimer “Alternative approaches to transforming violent extremism”, Berghof Stiftung 2018, pp 11.

¹⁷ Vurmo Gj. “Violent extremism in Albania – A national assessment of drivers, forms and threats” (IDM October 2018, page 41).

2. school as a community centre (SCC)¹⁸ and
3. sectorial strategies dealing with youth, civic education, gender equality, training and education and other action plans.

The **SCC model** aims to transform schools (pre-university level) into centres that serve the partnership of school-families-community while its standards cover five areas – ensuring quality education for pupils, their social, emotional and health welfare, community engagement and development, joint decision-making and inclusiveness and respect for the diversity.¹⁹ The potential of this model for PVE measures focusing on community resilience is immense and recognised as such in the national CVE strategy. Its true potential for impact relies in the level of engagement of other community players – local governments, civil society, communities of citizens and other local actors – and the multiplicity of community relevant issues that it can place under its focus. Similarly, the success of a **community-policing** model depends on the multiplicity of players (local government, police / law enforcement and local community / civil society actors) involved and the extent to which it is anchored to genuine community concerns on public safety. The Law on the State Police in Albania stipulates the regional police directorates are in charge of developing annual community policing local plans in cooperation with local government and other community actors. However, as a 2016 IDM assessment has found – such local plans have often been a formal procedure, which has not meaningfully involved the non-security key players, namely local governments and local communities.²⁰

The essence of both models relies on the active involvement of local actors, their mutual trust, community-driven priorities and shared interest to address community concerns. Such frameworks are in fact what is precisely needed for a PVE matrix at local level in Albania aiming to boost resilience of local communities *vis-a-vis* religious and other violent extremism forms.

It is in this context that Albania needs to approach a review of the current National CVE Strategy and its action plan by transforming C/PVE actions into a matrix of measures integrated in respective strategic frameworks targeting community resilience, public safety, training and education, community development, youth and gender equality, citizen participation, rule of law and civil liberties.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or the British Council.

¹⁸ See <https://www.unicef.org/albania/School-as-community-centre.pdf>.

¹⁹ See Guide for schools as community centers, Institute for the development of education (Ministry of education), 2014. Available at <http://myschool.al/resources/programe/doc2.pdf>.

²⁰ See Cami O. (edited by Dyrmishi A.) "Community Policing in Albania 2007-2015: An Assessment of the Community Policing Strategy and Cooperation between the Albanian State Police and Local Government Institutions", IDM 2016. Source <http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Community-Policing-English.pdf>.